

# Vector

The critical journal of the British Science Fiction Association



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# Vector 271

The Critical Journal of the British Science Fiction Association

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## Vector

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# Torque Control

London 2014. As voted on at this year's Worldcon, the World Science Fiction Convention is coming back to London after a forty-nine year absence. This time it'll be at Excel, in the city's often-surreal Docklands, where the Light Rail winds aerially between the skyscrapers of Canary Wharf like a futuristic vision from the '50s. The conference centre is located between compact City Airport and the expanses of the erstwhile docks themselves. In breaks between programming items, attendees of Loncon3 will be able to catch fresh air by the water and watch cable cars transporting people high above the Thames. The Thames Barrier, a feature of any number of science novels, is not far away.

This issue of *Vector* is themed around London and Science Fiction, in honour of Loncon3. The science-fictionality of the city is a rich subject. So much has happened in it, from H.G. Wells' life to the opening chapters of John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids* to the most recent book to arrive in the post, Tiffany Trent's *The Unnaturalists*.

Over the next couple of years, Edward James will be busy cataloguing the geography of London's science fiction connections through his new Fantastic London website, which he introduces in this issue. Perhaps he'll find the rest of this issue useful in helping to track down the breadth of the subject, as that's exactly what the contributors have provided us with.

Paul Cornell was London-conscious, growing up in Wiltshire. It's always been a place to be near and to visit. From Baker Street to Amersham, from pubs to rivers, Cornell considers how the city has inspired him and his new novel which is set there. Bonus: he gives advice on how to locate comics shops.

Philip Reeve, whose spectacular Hungry City London rolled menacingly and complexly through his *Mortal Engines*, explains how he was inspired to write about London in particular. The city loomed over Brighton to the perspective of his childhood, despite containing youthful highlights like zoos.

The harsh geography and impact of social change, as they have affected London's recent developments, are the subject of Sophia McDougall's exploration of its landscape. Here is an unforgiving and underserved London, fraught with the consequences of holding the Olympics. The aftermath of Olympic and Paralympic cheer lingers on, but she quite rightly reminds us of the spectres of well-grounded and related fears which preceded it. (And how appropriate that she in particular do so, whose *Romanitas* sets out from alternate history modern Roman London.)

Tom Hunter gives us London through William Gibson's Blue Ant books, a guide to some of the city's highlights, as seen through an advertising agency's priorities. For

Gibsonian coffee advice in particular, this is the article to turn to.

Another highlight of London with respect to science fiction is Forbidden Planet, the bookstore where Danie Ware works. After years of organising signings with many of science fiction's best-known authors, her first novel, *Ecko Rising*, is coming out. Tom Hunter interviews her for *Vector*, discussing the overlap of science fiction and fantasy, the challenges of time management, and her favourite online tools.

Andy Sawyer's Foundation Favourites column focuses on a 1934 novel set in part in London. In a lovely bit of circularity, the Person in *Proud Man* (identified as a work by Murray Constantine – read the column for an explanation of the ambiguity), having moved to London, spends time reading *Brave New World* there.

In their regular columns, Stephen Baxter discusses Doctor Who, Paul Kincaid examines the logic of "The Cold Equations", and Terry Martin surveys recent and varied intriguing comics. And, of course, there are numerous book reviews to explore in The BSFA Review.

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This is the third and last *Vector* of 2012. Normally, there would be four issues in a year but, as you likely know from the replacement mailing of letter and book, a group of factors waylaid the production of summer's issue. Between giving birth, resigning, and family health issues, three of us who were meant to be working on the magazine were not as available as expected. This issue was originally meant to be in support of the London Worldcon bid; I'm delighted that it won without it, and glad that this issue can now serve the further goal of celebrating and publicising the bid's success.

Thank you very much to the many people who volunteered to help out in the future with both *Vector*, and other aspects of the BSFA more generally, as a result of the replacement mailing. The BSFA is entirely run by volunteers. We have no paid positions, and our success in fulfilling our commitments and expanding our activities, whether one-off booklets or articles, or ongoing work such as producing the magazines or running the monthly London meetings, is at the mercy of available volunteers to do so. Please do enquire about volunteering in the future, should you have the capacity for it, or consider proposing articles for *Vector* or *Focus*, or booklets for publication and distribution to our members, or content for the BSFA's website.

SHANA WORTHEN  
EDITOR

# FantasticLondon.co.uk

## Edward James

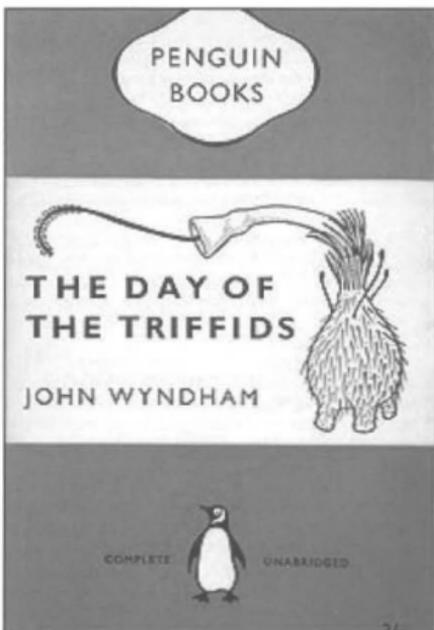
What will Fantastic London be? I intend it to be a website that serves as an introduction to two aspects of London, as a site for the fantastic and the science fictional. It will map, and offer information about, the places in London where SF&F writers have lived and worked; and it will do the same for those sites in London which have formed a setting for SF&F stories and novels. It will, of course, be infinitely expandable and thus never finished: the amount of relevant material is enormous. (Do I want, for instance, to list every science-fictional or fantastic sighting of Jack the Ripper on the streets of Whitechapel? Well, maybe I do....)

I expect many readers of *Vector* saw Mark Slater's wonderful promo video for the London 2014 Worldcon bid, which featured scenes of London from SF TV and movies. (If not, see <http://bit.ly/cS2ry5>.) London was attacked and/or destroyed in numerous imaginative ways; or at least Big Ben was. Why do alien invaders have such a fascination with Big Ben? (And, yes, I know that what I really mean is the Palace of Westminster Clock Tower....) I know the answer, of course; it has an iconic status only distantly rivalled by Tower Bridge, St Paul's, the London Eye and the Gherkin (all of which also featured, usually in the act of being destroyed, on the video). It stands metonymically for London, with the added advantage that it is attached to Parliament itself; which stands metonymically for the UK itself. Of course, any sensible alien would steer its wobbly flying saucer (courtesy of BBC Special Effects) in its direction.

It may have been that video, which I think I first saw at the Radisson Edwardian during the 2010 Eastercon, that gave me the idea for a Fantastic London website. I was, perhaps, looking for retirement projects, thinking (erroneously, as it now turns out) that I might not have enough to do. Well, retirement has dawned, and I am living full-time in London for the first time in my life. Fantastic London is going to provide me with an excuse to get to know the town better (for the moment I still have a Freedom Pass). And the fact that a Fantastic London website could be up and running well before the Worldcon of 2014 made the notion seem even more serendipitous.

I have created websites before, when I was teaching at the University of Reading, and again at University College Dublin. But this site will be rather more elaborate than anything I have tried before, and I am going to be doing a lot of reading about modern web design and construction. I also contemplate calling on the vast deposit of experience available in fandom. Paul Raven has already been very helpful, but he is in the middle of a university

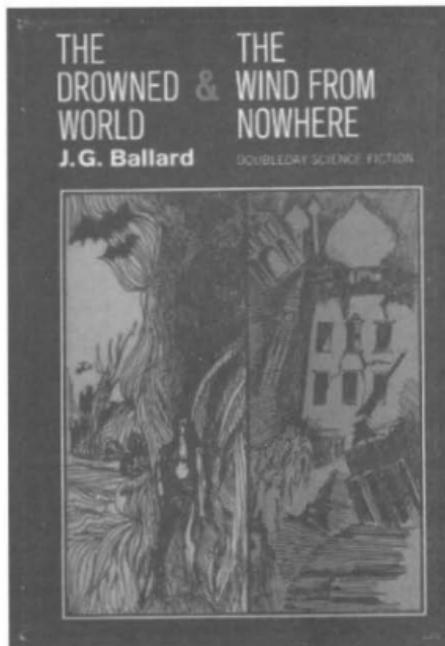
course, so I don't want to bother him more than I have to. And in case any reader of this piece is foolish enough to rush in with offers of help, please hold back! At this very moment I am not doing anything with the project: I am trying to finish a book on Lois McMaster Bujold for the new "Masters of Modern Science Fiction" series published by Illinois University Press. (The first volume to appear is going to be on John Brunner.) But when Bujold is finished, later this year, I shall be working on Fantastic London in earnest. So far I have not got very far in preparing to set it up. In terms of gathering information, all I have done is find out the addresses of every single fantasy and science fiction writer who has a Blue Plaque outside his or her house. That was fairly easy: there are thirty-four, ranging alphabetically from Kingsley Amis (at 194 Regents Park Road) to Oscar Wilde (34 Tite Street, Chelsea). As you might suspect, few of those commemo-



rated in this way are best known for their science fiction or fantasy; mostly, like Amis and Wilde, they were only occasional contributors to the field. But there are plenty more plaques to find, including all those without the official Blue Plaque status, like the one in the City recording where Sir/St Thomas More was born (the first English science fiction writer?). Only yesterday, from the top of a bus, I spotted the plaque to Mary Wollstonecraft in Newington Green – which will merit a mention if I can discover that her daughter (the first English science fiction writer?) lived there with her at any time. There may be some plaques around which mention fictional sites, but the only one I can think of is the one at King's Cross Station marking the likely site of Platform Nine and Three Quarters. That will appear on the Fantastic London site; and so will Eva Ibbotson's Platform Thirteen at King's Cross Station (predating Rowling by three years). Doing some basic research, of course, ought easily to find many addresses associated with writers whom no one has thought fit to honour with plaques.

The sites associated with real people will be easy enough, at least if they are dead. (I am sure living SF&F writers do not want me to map their place of residence.) Fictional people or events will be more difficult. For a start, I literally want to map these things. So if the author just tells me that someone lives in London, or in Chelsea, that is not good enough. I want addresses, or at least streets. And that is problematic too. For instance, Mike Carey tells us at the very beginning of the first of his splendid Felix Castor books that Felix goes to a client in 17 Grosvenor Terrace in Hampstead. As far as I can see, there is no Grosvenor Terrace in Hampstead. But there is a Grosvenor Gardens. Do I put a pin in there? Yes, I think so. And I can certainly place where Felix lives, near where I live myself (in the vicinity of Turnpike Lane Station); and the fictional Bennington Archive, where much of the paranormal activity in the first book takes place, is easily located too, in Churchway, at what used to be the eastern end of Drummond Street, before the building of Euston Station. Some writers (like Mike Carey) have a well-developed sense of place, and they are likely to figure a good deal in Fantastic London. Others, I fear, do not.

I have only begun to collect and list the many fictional appearances of London, from the fantasies of Peter Ackroyd through to the science fiction of John Wyndham. The mention of Wyndham introduces another little problem. So many London sites feature in *The Day of the Triffids*, as Bill Masen walks from Hyde Park Corner to Piccadilly Circus and beyond. Do I pick Piccadilly Circus, where Bill is knocked out by a gang of unpleasantly lower-class people (Wyndham could be such a snob!), or Russell Square, where Bill and Josella practice taking potshots at triffids, or nearby Senate House (the University Tower, as Wyndham calls it), where the resistance sets up its HQ? Perhaps I will be able to show fictional routes on my website map, so that I could show Bill Masen's journey, or the route taken through Peckham by Humphrey Place in Muriel Spark's *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*. But I must mark Senate House; above all for being the model for Orwell's Ministry of Truth, that "enormous pyramidal structure of glittering white [which] towered vast and white above the grimy landscape".



What the site is going to look like will basically depend on my web skills, or the web skills of anyone who is willing to help me. I think there should be a switch, so that browsers can go backwards and forwards from the Real to the Fictional. I think there should be a map of London in both places, into which one can zoom at will; Google™Maps is a possible basis, but there are others. There should be a text column, where one could browse through either authors or places in order to call up pins or markers on the maps. Clicking on a marker should call up a text box giving details about the text or author. I would like to link to photographs of these sites (copyright free, and I will take many of them myself). I have no idea whether all this is possible; but I am going to have fun finding out. As yet, I am unable to distinguish between the easy, the possible, the rather difficult and the just plain crazy. I am only a retired professor of medieval history, after all.

With the maps, of course, it will be easy to see if there would be appropriate Fantastic London walks to do, taking the curious into the realms of their imagination. Farah Mendlesohn's Fantastic London Walks which she used to do for a Middlesex University summer school (this year they are being taken over by Tony Keen) visited some of these resonant sites, but there are many more to find and to plot. First the website. Then an iPhone app. Who knows?

If anyone has any urgently bright ideas, you'll find me at [edward.james@ucd.ie](mailto:edward.james@ucd.ie). But if you don't get in touch with me, you might have me approaching you instead. You have been warned....

# The Shapes of London

Paul Cornell

My favourite place in London is the slope in Baker Street tube station that leads from the Metropolitan Line platforms down to the Eastbound Circle. It passes a monument to the First World War dead of the line. I love that slope because, amongst so much that's paved over, it's a natural, varying incline, that leads to a wide open length of platform. It's like the Tube suddenly found the generosity of character to present us not with a pipe between narrow entrances, but with a hillside. My joy is increased by the fact that if one climbs that hillside, one can step on a train to Amersham, turn left out of that station, and walk down another, this time wooded, hillside, with an outlook on a market town in a valley. The latter is the most perfect shock of the move from urban to rural. The former is a magic echo of it. The artery between them, the brilliant, insane idea that one can move from one genre of existence to another with just a step, doesn't depend on mere physical geography. And the monument attaches a mortician's note to that artery, slightly pointing our imaginations towards young men walking down country hillsides, and the trains that took them to that.

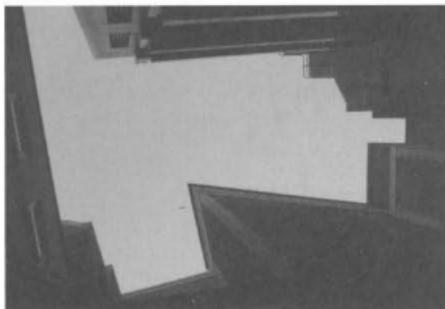
All my life I've been orbiting London, endlessly falling towards it. But the two occasions when I've actually lived in it weren't very pleasurable. So I prefer to keep a distance, fascinated by it, but not buying *Time Out* and listening to Capitol and doing all those other things I deliberately did when I was a kid from Wiltshire, very much trying to be a Londoner. (I used to clip *Modesty Blaise* strips from the *Evening Standard* and put them on the wall of my study bedroom.) But I still look at the small inconveniences that those who live in the capital have to deal with: the window boxes; the shared kitchens; the fire escapes, with a certain associational thrill. I don't want to live here, but I love looking at it.

I think a number of cities have a certain oomph to them, a presence which, humans being prone to assigning personhood to a melon with a face on it, people tend to refer to as character. New York is so what people say it is that it's actually hard to believe when you're amongst it, a forest of tall trees for us primates to scuttle about in ecstatically because we've laid down our grid system and now this forest is ours. Wellington in New Zealand is the sit down anywhere mate we haven't bothered fencing off municipal anything capital of the world, with an Astronomer On Call for all your most urgent questions. The existence of this urban energy is proven by the cities that don't have it: unshaped L.A.; prosaic Tokyo; friggling Adelaide. It's not entirely about liveability. London isn't

a spectacularly habitable city. I think it's about layers. About the continuing presence of historical or mythological detail which adds context to, or undercuts, the surface message of a place. Like when one looks out across Lord's cricket ground and feels that such a big meadow, purely for play, shouldn't be here, but that its presence in a too small space is made possible by the history invested in it; Sachin Tendulkar stood just there. There are a lot of London pubs with detail like that, pubs being machines for sopping up historical context. The Fitzroy Tavern has on its walls portraits of Dylan Thomas and ancient beloved landlords long dead. (Though not the sketch Aleister Crowley presented to one stunned punter, identical to the one he'd been drawing himself.) You can tell a real inn from a chain 'character' pub because the details purchased for the latter, the shiny things pinned to walls to stimulate the parts of the brain that have evolved to contact the numinous, are without context: that's a battered trumpet from someone else's story, not from the one your consciousness is adding to, Londoner.

Until recently, a close tie for my favourite London location would have been the strange gap between mini-Japan-run-by-Koreans at the back of Denmark Street, up High Holborn towards the junction with Shaftesbury Avenue. It was just fifty feet or so, going past St. Giles-in-the-Fields, of No Man's Land, where one felt strangely threat-





ened by the sudden lack of any of the usual supporting forces (money, planning permission, parish boundaries). And it was indeed one of those places where the homeless were (they follow churches, but they're also a fantastic marker of underlying influences, suddenly back now, a pitch at every tube station entrance, meaning precisely that we're historically back where Thatcher once had us). That No Man's Land was the chasm between two tectonic plates of London, perhaps almost literally, in that, since we evolved in the Earth's electromagnetic field, I don't see it as beyond the bounds of possibility that we might sense and even mark said field, and it might be possible that that fifty feet navigates two different sorts of rock, perhaps a river or a sewer crossing. A dowser could tell us. But now they've obscured the gap with big, deliberately colourful new buildings. And here no longer be dragons. So I think perhaps what one felt there wasn't geological, but political (though the distinction is fine). Or perhaps those new buildings have very deep foundations.

I've been writing a novel about these forces that shape London and Londoners, this time including what I tend to call the M word, 'magic' not appearing in the book in the same way that 'Mafia' doesn't appear in *The Godfather*. In my fictional cosmology there is a mysterious aether in Greater London, the flow of which is influenced by the shapes of buildings and the underlying geography, but also by the conscious and unconscious actions of minds. My heroes, three modern police officers and an intelligence analyst, gain the ability to see the effects of this force, and from then on have to approach the metropolis in a different way. They're used, or at least the analyst is, to watching how the forces of capital and society shape people and events. However, gradually, in a very SF way, they adapt to also tracking this previously hidden fundamental principle of London, and work out how a magical city functions from the top down. (My favourite section is where they wonder how there can be ghost ships on the Thames, when they could, in theory, raise and restore the originals to sail beside them.) It's a book about analytical heroes taking a new look at a mechanism they thought they were entirely familiar with, urban fantasy deconstructed in an SFnal way.

It's been interesting writing that novel during its final stages while being once again in a position to head into London at an hour's notice. I liked to walk to the BSFA meeting pub, the Melton Mowbray, up through Holborn and the Inns of Court, passing eccentric little

streets where you can find a cafe in the back of a camera shop that sits next to a magic shop. That indicates a certain level of rents, another hidden force that SF fans are used to seeing the signifiers of. They're why, if you want to find a comic shop in a strange town, you should look for the Games Workshop and the tattoo parlour. (I think it's Alan Moore's presence in Northampton that's gone beyond economics to create a row of four shops all selling comics in different ways, and it's a sign of Oxford rent hikes that, despite a vast student population, it can't support a single one.)

All of the above is, I suppose, psychogeography, the study of the effects of the environment on individuals, and, as coined by the Surrealists, something rather beyond that. ('Underneath the streets, a beach.' I used to say that a lot in the 1990s, often when it looked like I might be about to treat the former like it was the latter.) Iain Sinclair is the master of a genre which includes J.G. Ballard and Peter Ackroyd. (I can't match their quality, but I work in their shadows.) Their versions of psychogeography reflect the fact that the archetypes which sit in the brain of British people are no longer just rural idylls, but now include magic shapes that glow with neon. I think perhaps that's because of the sheer density of experience in cities like London; so much happening in space as well as time can't help but impact on and shape minds that evolved in forests. I also think there are cities that let you off the hook of that. You can map the cities without presence that I described earlier onto those pretty much one to one, I think. The heroes of my novel find that the magic they encounter fades out 'north of Watford'.

I still run back to the tube at the end of a night in London. Missing the last train feels like death. I think I'll always keep the metropolis at arm's length. But that's the proper place for such power.



# Memories of Future London

Philip Reeve

As a children's author, I am sometimes invited to visit schools, where young readers ask me such searching questions as, 'Where do you get your ideas from?' and 'What football team do you support?' But one young lad recently asked something that set me thinking. He wanted to know why the motorised city at the heart of my first novel *Mortal Engines* is London. It's a perfectly reasonable question. I could have told much the same story based around a made-up city, perhaps one rumbling its way across an alien planet. But from the instant the notion of a predatory city on wheels dropped into my mental in-box, I knew it could only be London.

Part of the reason is that London is the only city I really know. (I have never lived there, but I grew up in Brighton and I was always aware of London squatting

just out of sight at the far end of the railway line, frighteningly vast and confusing, but studded with the sites of magical childhood days out; museums; parks; the zoo.) But partly, I think, it's because London is a Science Fiction city; indeed, for British Science Fiction, it's more or less the *only* city. Alien invaders arriving in the US have a wide range of urban centres to park their flying saucers over: New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles and Washington DC all have important landmarks waiting to be death-rayed. For those invading the UK there is really only one destination; they must follow the itinerary of the original alien invaders, HG Wells's Martians in *The War of the Worlds*, and descend on London.

*The War of the Worlds* was one of the first SF stories I ever read. I never forgot its images of a ruined London choked with alien weeds, where the last of the Martians stands hooting mournfully on Primrose Hill, the rubble and the siren blending eerily in my mind with my father's tales of life during the Blitz. And the Martian Invasion was just a taste of things to come for poor old London, which does seem to have very bad luck in SF. If it isn't being trampled by aliens it's being drowned or frozen by climate change, or falling under the jackboot-heel of oppressive regimes. I have a dim childhood memory of more positive visions, where perspex skyscrapers rose decorously around the Palace of Westminster - perhaps it was in *Dan Dare* - but they were far from typical. Most of the future Londons I came across while I was growing up were much darker. *Dr Who* dealt with an infestation of robot yetis in the Underground, while *Quatermass* unearthed Martian spacecraft in South Kensington or dodged warring militias in third-world London suburbs. In John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids* a blinded populace is at the mercy of killer shrubs, and in his excellent alien invasion novel *The Kraken Wakes* the melting of the polar icecaps leads to catastrophic flooding. The journalist narrator, left behind to report from the evacuated capital, lies in bed 'listening to the echoing splash of the wavelets that the wind was driving along Oxford Street'. Similar imagery recurs in a more surreal and dreamlike form in JG Ballard's *The Drowned World*. There the city has become a sun-struck tropical swamp, where hoodlum explorers power their motor launches through the flooded streets while divers descend like astronauts to explore the sunken hulk of the Planetarium.



Of course, many of the writers whose work I encountered in my formative years had spent their own formative years watching civilization collapse for real. Ballard famously passed his boyhood in a Japanese internment camp, but most British SF writers of that generation must have served in the forces or grown up, like my own parents, on the Home Front. I suspect it lent a certain matter-of-fact believability to their depictions of London under martial law, or Big Ben and St Paul's in ruins. And when the invading aliens marched (or, in the case of the Daleks, trundled menacingly) across Westminster Bridge, it was an attack not just on London, but on the fading yet still-potent myth of London as the capital of free Europe, standing alone against whatever the *Luftwaffe* could hurl at it. If Daleks could succeed where even Nazis failed, these images told us, they must be *really* dangerous. (The same myth is up-ended rather more literally in Hilary Bailey's 1963 story *The Fall of Frenchy Steiner*, set in a grim post-war London under Nazi occupation.) Just as elements in *The War of the Worlds* seem to foreshadow World War Two and the London Blitz, much of the post-war British SF that I grew up on reverberates with its echoes.

I think those echoes began finally to fade in the 1980s. London changed enormously in those years too. As a student, I watched Dickensian labyrinths of old warehouses in the east of the city being bulldozed to make way for *Blade Runner*-ish towers far shinier and more brutal than anything *Dan Dare* ever steered the *Anastasia* past. The culture of the place has changed too. That mustn't-grumble, London-can-take-it Englishness which leaches out of wartime Ealing movies to find its way into *Quatermass* and *The Day of the Triffids* seems quaint now. London is a world city, and Londoners are as likely to be poor Somalis or Russian oligarchs as chirpy cockneys.

How well this change has been reflected in Science Fiction, I can't say: I stopped reading the genre around the time those glass towers were sprouting in Canary Wharf, and have returned to it only recently. A few reports from future-London did reach me, emerging out of the shadowy border-zone which separates lit-fic from sci-fi. Ballard's strange imagination continued to transform the city, focusing upon its outskirts, a world of high-rises and slip-roads soundtracked by the thrum of tyres on the concrete overpasses of the westway. Michael Marshall Smith's *Only Forward* takes place in a city called The City, divided into districts governed according to the tastes of those who choose to live in them; the reader recognises it as a future London only when the characters stumble upon the abandoned and derelict Trafalgar Square. Will Self's *The Book of Dave* visited more climate-driven catastrophe on the capital: the plastic-strewn lagoons where his primitive characters live, worshipping a long-dead London cabbie, hark back to Richard Jeffries's *After London*, which predates even Wells and imagines the city lost beneath a toxic swamp. And is Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* set in a future London? It certainly seems to be heading that way, with its sub-plots about terrorism and genetic engineering, and it remains as vivid a portrait of the modern city and its diverse inhabitants as I have yet read.



But when I embarked on the imagining of my own future London it was the SF of my childhood and teenage years that inspired me, so it's scarcely surprising that my mechanised city began as a dark place of clanking machinery and state oppression, motored by memories of HG Wells and wartime. While I was writing it I pinned above my desk a copy of the most Science Fictional of all London images (which also happens to be completely real) - Herbert Mason's famous 1940 photograph of St Paul's cathedral rising from a sea of fire.

I hope it's not too much of a spoiler to reveal that London doesn't make it all the way to the end of *Mortal Engines*: like the Londons in so many other SF stories, it ends up in ruins. But somehow I couldn't quite leave it there. Writing about it had reminded me of all the things I love about London; those parks and museums; the juxtapositions of old and new, rich and poor; the diverse and teeming cast of characters. I had to return to it in sequels and in prequels, in which it has risen again. In my own books, and in Science Fiction generally, I see London as a kind of Eternal City, forever being destroyed and rebuilt in different forms. And I think that in this way SF reflects an essential truth about the place. It may be dirty, absurd, and sometimes violent, but it has a spirit that weathers storms and a complexity of character that attracts storytellers. Long may they continue to project its images upon the future.

# London is Fractal

Sophia McDougall

It's dark and I'm walking a route north from Deptford that I'm sure I've taken before, but this time it doesn't seem to be the same. I feel I'm getting further *inward* rather than further along, *deeper* into one of the city's spirals, rather than closer to the Thames. Between here and the river, there shouldn't be enough room for this many convolutions, this much detail. I recognise that old scrapyard – nothing but trees within the walls – but where did this little garden with its frozen pond come from? Why does the Gherkin, occasionally looming on the horizon, above the lower, closer heights of Rotherhithe, always seem to be apparently in the same place, the same distance away?

London is full of alternate realities: you can't travel through it without brushing against them. In the once-Blitzed streets where 17<sup>th</sup> century livery halls abruptly give way to brutalist concrete, you can see a confluence of Londons conquered, complicit or blissfully untouched by the third Reich. London has time travel: the resurrected Globe; the temple of Mithras dragged up from under Walbrook Street to Temple Court; the anonymous remains of Tudors, Romans, and ancient Britons that the Thames sometimes recedes to show preserved in the mud. From the Thames Path, you can peer through a rank of blackened Victorian arches sprouting buddleias, at the bright, sterile palace of Canary Wharf. A green laser divides the night sky above Christopher Wren's domes, marking the Greenwich Meridian. There's nothing to unite these fragments except the modern heir to the Victorian smog, the ubiquitous fine black dust that coats nostrils, nail-beds, and penetrates even closed and untrodden rooms.

The skyline only began to climb only in the sixties, but now it's hard to imagine it static, London is always climbing itself up the ladders of swivelling cranes, always tinkering with itself. Very tall buildings are, apparently, a reliable indicator of an economy approaching crash. Just completed, the Shard shimmers above the recession it predicted. Below, the beggars that faded from the bridges and underpasses for a decade or so are back in force.

London is a godawful mess. It offers beauty only in patches and shifts of light, rarely in steady, reliable expanses. It's no surprise that its masters have never been quite satisfied with it. The city owes itself now not only to disasters overcome but to endless attempts to make it more like somewhere else. More like an ancient Greek agora, more like a continental cafe culture, more like a monolithic fortress on a distant planet... architects have shuttled it back to a romantic past or hurried it into an imaginary future.

The Olympics are only the latest attempt to shift the place's identity, to tidy it up a bit; there's an iron fence, bristling security cameras, ringing the Olympic park, and chunks of Soho have been carved away for Crossrail. In the long term, London can probably stand the loss and the waste: it has absorbed far worse, and you can't ruin a city this jumbled. Still, the spectacle of a government amusing itself by writing dystopian sci-fi into the actual city: that missile-bearing warship moored in the Thames and criminal sanctions for using the words "Twenty Twelve" the wrong way on pub signs or on the internet.

London has something dreamlike encoded into it. It will readily lend itself to visions of Hell, and it will never credibly give you Utopia, but it has infinite room for the weird. Shelley and Eliot saw the abyss in its massive, relentless busyness, Dickens imagined dinosaurs roaming up the Strand. Virginia Woolf gave Clarissa Dalloway a perfect summer's day in a London at its freshest and most glittering, but always on the point of hallucinatory metamorphosis: a London populated, in the visions of a shell-shocked war-veteran, by dogs about to turn into



men, birds singing in Greek, while even the ostensibly sane wonder if perhaps at midnight the city reverts to the ancient landscape the Romans saw. Arthur Conan Doyle subtly inserted imaginary squares and stretched Baker Street more than double its length to accommodate Sherlock Holmes (The street numbers only went as high as 85 in the 1890s, it was only extended up into the 200s later.)

London imitates fiction imitates London. The city lives and breathes – sometimes literally – its own mythology. Once a huge slab of fog settled on the Thames as I was crossing Tower Bridge. Suddenly this truly was Unreal City – landmarks were reduced to transparent outlines, people to spectres – and they *loved* it: every cluster of people I passed was happily chattering of London's legends and how *this was just like them*; they were delighted by the heightened sensation of walking from a workaday pavement straight into story. Does anywhere else open so *many* portals back, forwards and sideways across time and into? Other cities are grander, many are a fusion of ancient and modern, but are any so varied as to allow for the underworlds of Neil Gaiman and Ben Aaronovitch, and Philip Reeve's ambulatory predator-city, and Mary Gentle's magical Tudor capital, and Susanna Clarke's Regency scientist-magicians, and Anthony Burgess's ultraviolet wilderness, and J.G. Ballard's submerged ruins?

But are we getting to know the multiple Londons too well? It's been joked that adding "in London" to the blurb

of a book has become the genre equivalent of adding "in bed" to the prediction of a fortune cookie. *For instant awesome, shake freeze-dried werewolves and vampires, and just add London!* Are London's dark places – abandoned tube stations, ancient catacombs, labyrinthine sewers – becoming too frequented? Need we fear that the shadows and ghouls that live down there are growing exhausted by the number of visitors?

It's true that there's more to the world of the strange than London. Lauren Beukes gave us a brilliant, grimy, complex Johannesburg whose traumas haunt its residents as a fantastic menagerie of animal familiars. Anil Menon's *Beast With Nine Billion Feet* is set in a 2040 Pune whose citizens exploit advanced genetic engineering and escape their dissatisfactions into "Illusion" pods. Ekaterina Sedya's *The Secret History of Moscow* explores a world of folklore beneath the gloomy post-Soviet streets. And the Anglophone writers have also explored the fantastic side of Venice, Paris, Istanbul... but so little of the world's modern literature is translated into English that it's hard to know, from here, what else might be out there.

But while I hope more of the outer world flows at last into this country and this city, I don't think writers need to worry about digging too deep, or loading too much into London. London can take it. London always has more.



# The future of London is already here, it's just not evenly distributed

## A user's guide to William Gibson's London

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Tom Hunter

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“London is one of the capitals of my imagination. It elected itself. Tokyo and New York are some others, and I have a hunch that Berlin is on the way. London was the first European city that I ever visited, when I was 23. It's so different now that sometimes I can barely believe it's the same place. There used to be gaps in the buildings on major streets filled with wild flowers, and enormous timbers bracing buildings up, that had been there since the Blitz. That was arriving very much at the tail end of hippy London – after swinging London. There was a kind of bubbling thing that would turn into the Bowie glam rock, but that just consisted of people wearing what I considered were absurdly comic-strip like clothing in public. I had that first glimpse, and then in the mid eighties I started coming back on publishing business. I was having a very different sort of career here. Initially in the United States because I was writing science fiction I received no serious attention: the *New York Times* didn't mention me for the first decade of my career, yet *Neuromancer* was reviewed favourably in the *London Times*. I've been a more regular visitor to London than to any other country on this side.” William Gibson, interviewed by Wired UK

Welcome to London.

More specifically welcome to London as portrayed as a major setting, some would say character, in William Gibson's linked series of novels *Pattern Recognition*, *Spook Country* and *Zero History* – known informally as the Blue Ant trilogy.

Blue Ant is the high-speed, low-drag, advertising agency with a penchant for sending Gibson's protagonists off around the world cool-hunting for various neat MacGuffins like viral filmmakers, secret jeans brands and mysterious cargo containers. In other words, the kind of specialist contracting role you're unlikely to find advertised on Monster.com anytime soon.

While firmly post-geographic in its staffing policy, we all know secretly that Blue Ant's real base of operations is in London..

Rumour has it that a hapless intern accidentally left their copy of the agency's own staff guide to London on an iPad in a cab somewhere between Soho and Portman Square after an unsuccessful Olympic Legacy pitch meeting with LOCOG, and now through the strange and secret back-channels of the science fiction community we can share that copy with you.

Here then, exclusive to *Vector*, is a choice selection from Blue Ant's own travel guide to William Gibson's London – a mirror world city so close to our own you could almost think his books aren't really about the future at all.

### The Blue Ant Guide to Bill Gibson's London

#### Camden Market

Blue Ant does a lot of its cool-hunting here, and it's a great spot to do a little clandestine people-watching if you're of that persuasion.

The area can get incredibly crowded though with what Gibson calls *The Children's Crusade* – the weekend swelling of Goths and Punks who habitually descend on the markets in search of new tattoos, bootleg music and the kinds of leather jackets made popular by Keanu Reeves in *The Matrix*.

The astute watcher of people will notice that many of the young rebels are actually not that young anymore. Loudly pointing this out to the people involved though is a mistake akin to wearing your studded leather jacket inside out, and thus not recommended.

#### London Taxis

William Gibson characters don't do public transport unless they absolutely have to.

It's hard to imagine a properly Gibsonsque protagonist heading to some cool Shoreditch media-haunt via the 214 bus from St Pancras International.

No. The only way to navigate London while simultaneously conveying the proper sense of urban alienation is to travel everywhere by cab.

For extra points you should try and avoid the standard issue black cabs from central casting and look out for ones like this from the beginning of *Zero History* instead:

“Pearlescent silver, this one. Glyphed in Prussian blue, advertising something German, banking services or business software; a smoother simulacrum of its black ancestors, its faux-leather upholstery a shade of orthopedic fawn.”

That’s the kind of cab a William Gibson character makes sure to travel in.

Oh, and don’t forget to get a receipt so you can claim on expenses.

#### Coffee

Caffeine is essential if you’re to experience London the William Gibson way e.g. dark, textured and slightly gritty. The best place to get a coffee in *Pattern Recognition* is definitely the espresso bar on the top floor of Harvey Nicks, however if you’re under deadline it might not always be possible to expense a cab across town just to get a shot, and anyway, while Gibson takes artistic license and portrays the space with an ennui-inducing sense of emptiness, our own experience is that it’s usually rammed, especially at weekends, which makes it hard to recommend unless you happen to be in the area.

This is one of the main reasons Blue Ant installed its own permanent barista in the reception area of its office, but as every employee knows one of the rules of working for Blue Ant is you should try and spend as little time actually in the office as possible. This is why, by the time Gibson reaches *Zero History*, large parts of the action take place in various branches of Caffè Nero.

No, we don’t know why Gibson picked this particular chain over, say, Starbucks either, but he did and so it must be important and we’ll be camping out there every opportunity we get until such as time as its semiotic codes are revealed to us.

#### Harvey Nichols

Shopping in London? You need to head to Harvey Nicks.



Image courtesy of Gary Northfield

Now, as noted above, your real-life chances of getting a decent coffee here in a hurry are rather limited, but if you want to have your central character wander about the aisles to make a cryptic point about 21<sup>st</sup> century consumer society this is the place for you.

Exhibit A: William Gibson on Tommy Hilfiger:

*“My God, don’t they know? This stuff is simulacra of simulacra. A diluted tincture of Ralph Lauren, who had himself diluted the glory days of Brooks Brothers, who themselves had stepped on the product of Jermyn Street and Savile Row, flavoring their ready-to-wear with liberal lashings of polo knit and regimental stripes. But Tommy surely is the null point, the black hole. There must be some Tommy Hilfiger event horizon, beyond which it is impossible to be more derivative, more removed from the source, more devoid of soul. Or so she hopes, and doesn’t know, but suspects in her heart that this in fact is what accounts for his long ubiquity.”* *Pattern Recognition*, Chapter 3

Our advice is, that on leaving Harvey Nichols, one is careful to avoid the slow slide down Knightsbridge to-

wards Sloane Square. Laura Ashley is down there, and that can get ugly.

### Soho

Media territory. London's home of the high concept, the elevator pitch and the long lunch.

Some people still mutter into their flat whites about how the edge is now moving eastwards towards Old Street's Silicon Roundabout where the rents are cheaper and the graffiti is less manufactured, but the smart money knows that this is surely just a temporary fling, not a permanent outpost, and Soho's gravity will ultimately win the day.

As with Camden, Soho is ripe territory for people watching, only here the prey of choice is the creative director, the graphic designer and the trend-setting secretary hoping her self-published *50 Shades of Grey* knock-off will propel her to international stardom.

If you feel so inclined you might want to keep an eye out for Blue Ant's own Bernard Stonestreet. A chameleon-esque creative who rebrands himself every time he flits between the London and New York offices:

*"In London his look seems to be about wearing many thousand pounds' worth of garments that appear to have never been worn before having been slept in the night before. In new York he prefers to look as though he's just been detained by a tight scrum of specialists. Different cultural parameters."* Pattern Recognition, Chapter 2.

### Tottenham Court Road

*"My first impulse, when presented with any spanking-new piece of computer hardware, is to imagine how it will look in ten years' time, gathering dust under a card table in a thrift shop."* William Gibson

Tottenham Court Road is the happy hunting ground for anyone equipped with some spare hours, a fully charged credit card and an unbridled tech-lust.

Here you will find a long parade of computing, photography and hardware shops, all pushing the kind of offbeat also-ran technologies you'd more usually expect to find in a low-end Chinese marketplace for quasi-legal knock-offs.

One of our fondest memories of Tottenham Court Road was the time we recently spotted the fading box of a first generation iPad sitting quietly gathering dust in the corner of one shop window. The pristine white glow of its Apple branded box slowly wilting to a deadened yellow in the sunlight while the ghost of Steve Jobs hovered futility nearby, hurling empty invective at the hapless shopkeepers.

This not only neatly crystalizes the truth of above quote, it also leads us neatly on to...

### The Apple Store, Covent Garden

No modern Gibsonian hero should venture forth without a full complement of Apple products to assist their mission.

Such was the ubiquity of brand mentions in the Blue Ant trilogy that some reviewers even began to speculate that Gibson might even have been receiving some kind of kickback for product placement.

The real answer is somewhat more prosaic:

*"...some people are quite pissed off about the ubiquity of Apple products. I got going with it purely out of a literary naturalism; it's the choice of the milieu of the people I'm trying to depict. Then I sort of rolled with that because I wanted to capture the tedium of the ubiquity of a given brand."* William Gibson interviewed by Wired UK

### Forbidden Planet

And finally, if this mini guide to all things Gibsonian has properly whetted your appetite, we thoroughly recommend at least one research trip to the Forbidden Planet Megastore on Shaftesbury Avenue to pick up supplies and seek out further information; and indeed here's three suggestions for future reading you might want to seek out -

*So Yesterday* by Scott Westerfeld: Hip YA thriller full of brand-name intrigue, hyper-cool trends and the downfall of consumerism as we know it.

*Halting State* by Charles Stross: Shows us that Edinburgh is quite possibly even weirder than London. Warning: Contains internet porn, spam marketing and second person prose.

*Distrust That Particular Flavour* by William Gibson: The first collection of William Gibson's non-fiction includes his classic travel essays on modern Singapore, *Disneyland with the Death Penalty*, and *Tokyo, Modern Boys and Mobile Girls*.



Image courtesy of Gary Northfield

# Danie Ware Interview

Tom Hunter

If science fiction was a country, the Forbidden Planet Megastore on London's Shaftesbury Avenue would be one of its embassies, and Danie Ware one of its favourite ambassadors.

Already well known to the science fiction community as a regular panellist at SF conventions and a regular blogger and early adopter of all things social media, Danie is responsible for luring some of the biggest names of SF&F into the store then making them sign stacks of books for fans until the small hours.

Now with the release of her first novel, *Ecko Rising*, the tables are turning and it's *Vector's* turn to ask a few questions (and to stand patiently in line to get our copy inscribed).

**Vector:** *Ecko Rising* is described as a mix of science fiction and fantasy - did you set out to deliberately blur up the genres or is this more a case of the story finding its own voice as you wrote?

**Danie Ware:** A little of both! When I started writing, I wrote for love and curiosity, to see where it would lead and because I was fascinated by the concept - what a cynical, hard-bitten SF character would make of a fantasy world.

When I came back to the project, that concept was so much a part of the narrative that I made a conscious choice to leave it as it was. At the risk of wandering into the 'it's speculative fiction why can't we speculate?' question, sometimes genre, by its very definition, won't break its own boundaries - and as *Ecko* grew from 'what-if' to 'mash-up', so breaking those boundaries became one of the central themes of the book.

**V:** Can you tell us a bit about the plot, and especially the main character, without straying too far into spoiler territory?

**DW:** *Ecko's* a misfit - he's damaged and difficult and dissonant. He's that part of all of us that rebels when given an order, that refuses to do what we're told. Thrown from one reality into another, he believes he's plugged into a program, a fiction, and that nothing around him is real. In turn, this means that nothing really matters, and he has no reason to pick up the sword of prophecy and champion the good guys.

*Ecko's* given me the opportunity to look at fantasy through darker eyes, gleeful and sarcastic eyes, to give it a savage new point of view - and it's been a lot of fun!

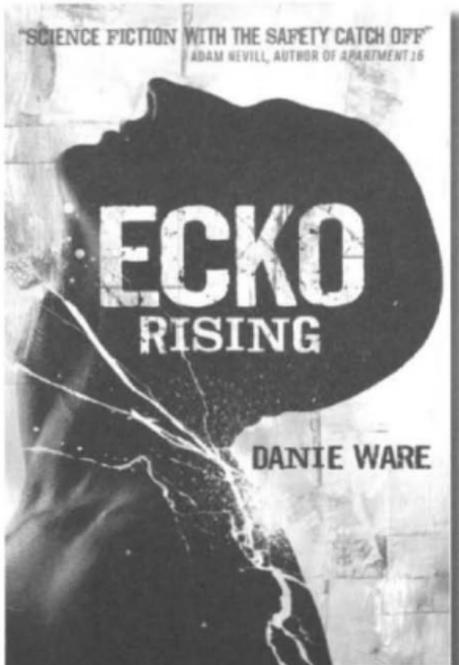
**V:** Although this is your first novel, you're already well known on the science fiction circuit through

your work for Forbidden Planet. Did you find this was an advantage to you, or conversely was there more pressure in some areas as a known face as it were?

**DW:** A little of both, I think. Almost all of the top genre authors in the UK have been guests at FP at some point; I'm known to them, and that's a difficult thing to try and live up to.

More than anything, though, being immersed in the community is a creative encouragement in its own right. I had stopped writing for eight years - just gave up - and it was returning to the support and friendship of the environment that catalysed me finding my confidence - just that little bit I needed to start again. And really, everything's snowballed from there.

**V:** Was there ever a moment when you thought about writing outside the SF&F genres, or has it always



**been Sci-Fi first for you?**

**DW:** I have an urban fantasy (ish) novel written and sitting with my agent, but as to writing outside the larger inclusive circle of 'genre'... well, I enjoy making stuff up, it's fun. Research is essential, but like crossing the genre-streams, it's about taking those building blocks and making something new, something distinct and a little unexpected. Making my own something.

**V: What have you learned about being an author from all of the writers you've met and organised events for?**

**DW:** Simply? That it's hard work, and comes with precious little glamour!

It's given me a more realistic expectation – certainly I hope so. The bad reviews will happen, the empty signings will happen; I've honestly seen it happen to the best. And while your book may be a piece of your soul, fought forth from darkness and lovingly crafted and all of that malarkey... at the end of the day, both you and beloved masterpiece are just product.

And yet, the funny thing? Sell-by date or no, the authors I've met still do it for love. And though always unvoiced, that's the greatest encouragement of all.

**V: Do you have any specific strategies for fitting writing into your day, or is it more a case of fitting the rest of the day around the writing?**

**DW:** I'm a working single parent, with a daily commute. I get up at six in the morning to be out of the house by seven, and don't usually stop until eight at night. Trying to shoehorn time to write is less a strategy, more a question of just grabbing moments when I can. If I'm really disciplined, I get up very early and write in the morning, and I can use the time when my son is visiting family.

Because of this maniacal juggling, research and structural planning are essential, though occasionally a character will wander off and do their own thing. I just don't have time to be constantly redrafting stuff!

**V: In between all of the writing, promoting and the phenomenal amount of time we believe you spend on social media, what do you do to relax? We hear a rumour about sword fighting...**

**DW:** What is this 'relax' of which you speak? I spent a dozen or so years in Dark Age and Medieval re-enactment, a hobby I gave up (more by necessity than desire)

when I moved to London. I've missed it very much for any number of reasons – and one day, I really want to go back to bashing people with swords...

In the meantime, any spare moments are usually given to my bicycle or to the local gym. If I'm going to pick up weapons again, then I should probably keep in training!

**V: You're a well known presence / pundit on social media - is this something that has directly helped with the writing, and are there any particular sites, online tools etc you've found indispensable?**

**DW:** Evernote is a thing of wonder – you can record those Muse-like flashes, whenever and wherever you are. One day, I'll even master the art of understanding my own shorthand when I come back to the damned things three months later!

I also use Pinterest, the picture-sharing site that's recently become hugely popular – it's like an Evernote for imagery. I can hoard pictures of characters, of locations, illustrative plots of story arc or narrative inspirations – all of them easy to file and remember.

Just be wary – there are times I've seen a particular picture show up repeatedly on my friends' pinboards, and I do wonder if we're all writing the same thing after all...

Social Media is a wonderfully nebulous thing. Twitter can be invaluable for research, for networking, for selling (just don't overdo it); both Twitter and Facebook are important for belonging to a community, and for knitting that community closer. Both can throw up random wonders that startle and inspire, and both can equally be Dread Thieves of Time.

In my experience, Social Media its own karma - you'll get from it exactly what you put into it. And when you're writing, turn it off!

**V: And finally, the title *Ecko Rising* suggests we might well be seeing more in the series...?**

**DW:** I've just finished the first draft of the sequel, out next September from Titan Books. After that, we will have to wait and see!

*Ecko Rising* by Danie Ware is out now from Titan Books  
Follow Danie on Twitter at [Twitter.com/Danacea](https://twitter.com/Danacea)  
Make Danie happy and buy stuff from [ForbiddenPlanet.com](http://ForbiddenPlanet.com)

# recurrent: FOUNDATION FAVOURITES Andy Sawyer

## Proud Man by Murray Constantine

The name "Murray Constantine" is perhaps best known for *Swastika Night* (1937), one of a number of novels published under this or her real name by Katherine Burdekin (1896-1963). In *Swastika Night*, Burdekin presented a future in which the Axis powers won World War Two and, several hundred years later, Hitler is worshipped as a god, Jews have been exterminated, Christians are persecuted, and women are kept as breeding stock in concentration camps. Reprinted early in the War as a Left Book Club selection, *Swastika Night* surely must have been read by George Orwell (several critics have noted remarkable parallels between Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and the earlier book), and its republication by the Feminist Press in 1985, with a scholarly introduction by Daphne Patai, marked the novel as one of the most important feminist dystopias.

Patai and the Feminist Press have also reprinted *Proud Man*, an earlier (1934) novel by "Constantine", whose feminist message made (or so some internet sources say) some contemporaries look beyond the androgynous pseudonym to suggest that the author was a woman, although the definite identification of Burdekin and "Constantine" was not made until the 1980s by Patai. *Swastika Night* extrapolates the potentialities of fascism to envisage a future where it has "won", although the novel also establishes a suggestion that, through the critical intelligence of the Englishman Alfred and the survival of a book which counters the myth propagated by the worshippers of Hitler, it also suggests a counterpoint of resistance in face of the regime's increasing decadence. In *Proud Man*, Burdekin employs another science-fictional technique, the description of contemporary society by a visitor from the far future.

As with Olaf Stapledon's *Last and First Men* (1930), the novel's narrator is a human from the far future who by some means is able to contact and understand the "present" in which the book is written. Unlike Stapledon's "Eighteenth Men", the narrator (usually referred to, from the title of the first section of the novel, as "The Person") is what they (gendered pronouns are always difficult

here, so I will use the English ("singular they") see themselves as a "true human being": androgynous, vegetarian, and far evolved from the subhuman-ness of people like us. In what seems to be a dream, the Person decides, or is chosen, to investigate these subhumans, and wakes in an island called England, where they discover that one of the major characteristics of sub-humans is that they are divided into two sexes, "like animals, birds, fishes and insects" (p. 22) and that this separation is "perhaps the root cause of all the subhuman wretchedness" (p. 23). They are taken in by a farming family.

At first, the Person wears female clothes, because presenting as physically female, because of the smoothness of their skin and the length of their hair, seems easier, and they are not used to dress conventions which as which garments it is proper to reveal ("upon subhuman males, particularly of the class to which this family belonged, female undergarments have a maddening influence, driving them to commit follies or even crimes". (p. 81) They move in with a priest, Andrew Gifford, who though still one of us subhumans is wise enough to understand that there is something singular about the narrator, who in turn sees him as a particularly perceptive and evolved character. Debate between the two sheds much light on human gender and sexuality (more so as, because he is a priest, Gifford is not himself particularly sexual). However, because he is a priest, living with someone who seems to be an attractive young woman causes social tensions, and Gifford has also been wrestling with his understanding of the nature and existence of God and the discussions between him and the Person bring his doubts closer to the surface. In the end, Gifford decides to emigrate and join his brother in Australia, settling enough money on the Person to allow for an independent existence for a year.

The Person takes lodgings in London, and continues their education about the subhuman race by reading in the British Museum.

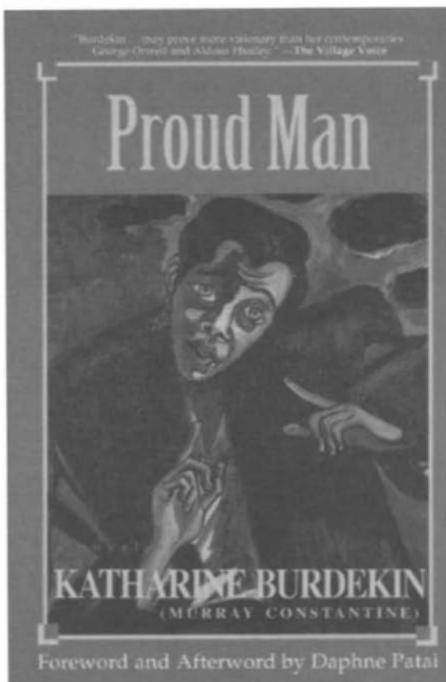
There, they meet Leonora, a struggling writer who be-

1 As in "Someone called you on the phone but they didn't leave their name."

comes fascinated with the Person's enigmatic difference. They move in together and Leonora takes the Person to a party where they meet Philip Mitchell, a renowned artist, whose genius cloaks a dismissive attitude towards women: "he tried to recollect what women generally said to him, but discovered that he rarely listened to what they said." (p. 205) Conversations with Leonora and her social circle teach the Person much more about the (sub) human race; a visit to the British Museum's collection of Egyptian antiquities shows both Leonora and the Person (and, perhaps, us) that differences between them are not necessarily that of superiority or inferiority. To the Person, the Egyptian sculpture is, simply, dead. Figurative art is a closed book. The Person's semi-telepathic abilities, which enable the thoughts and feelings of the subhumans which surround them to be read, preclude any exercise of the imagination: "If you know what a person is thinking you don't have to imagine it." (p. 221) Wanting to find out what subhumans think of the future, the Person reads science fiction, in the shape of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, which had been published in 1932. By setting his characters in a remarkably different world, but making them exhibit "nothing but common subhuman characteristics", Huxley displays "intelligence, clarity, coldness and no imagination" (p. 227) – whose very characteristics shown by the Person in their dealing with subhumans. The Person's charity – shown throughout the novel – is a chilly one; a natural reaction caused by a sense of duty rather than empathy.

The Person encourages Leonora to complete her novel, which is accepted for publication by a major publisher. When the father of her dead child comes back into Leonora's life, though, the Person decides to move on – this time as a man. "You can have," they are told, "a much fuller, freer, and more interesting life as a man than you could while you were still being a woman, because you'll be more acceptable to everybody." (p. 249) This turns out to be less true than Leonora thought, because many of the men The Person meets are either sexually attracted (we are directed back to the Person's androgynous beauty) or damaged in their self-esteem by the superiority and self-confidence shown by the Person, which confirms the ordinary male's doubts of their own excellence. However, they meet Gilbert, a psychologically damaged rich young man who, the Person's telepathic power reveals, is a murderer, a killer of young girls, tormented both by his crimes and the probability that he will kill again. The Person helps Gilbert to understand the cause of his mania and, with his new self-knowledge, Gilbert decides to confess to his crimes. On the way to the police station, Gilbert and the person are involved in a traffic accident; Gilbert is (very probably) killed, and the Person awakens from their dream back in their own time.

*Proud Man* is an odd novel – half tract, half psychological thriller, and much more of a unified whole than that description suggests. At times, it reads like the Katherine Burdekin has read *Last and First Men* and noticed (as did Stapledon's friend Naomi Mitchison) that while that epic future-history had much to say about human evolution



it had little to say about gender tensions. While much of *Proud Man* is concerned with the relationship between the genders in the mid-twentieth century (and these aspects of the novel are still relevant today), part of its appeal is the way Burdekin has (very successfully, I think) created a viewpoint figure who points out contemporary human frailties without being piously superior. The final section, involving Gilbert the serial killer, could have been excruciating tasteless and full of cod-Freudianism. Instead, it leaves us with a sense of atonement and understanding. The psychology is, perhaps, not the most accurate part of the novel, but there is genuine tension here – one of Gilbert's servants has a nine-year old daughter who becomes friendly with him – and the melodrama about Gilbert's apparent hatred of women ends with his realisation that "It goes on and on until someone can end it" (p. 313) and his decision that it can indeed be ended. The Person's final meditation suggests that, in the three individuals encountered (the Priest, the Woman, and the Man), a germ, at least, of true humanity can be found. But such a germ can only be nurtured in individuals rather than mass movements, and will subhumanity learn to jettison its sexual/gendered "guilt-feeling" and evolve towards the true humanity of the Person's species?

For the Person, and for us, the jury is still out.

# recurrent: KINCAID IN SHORT

## Paul Kincaid

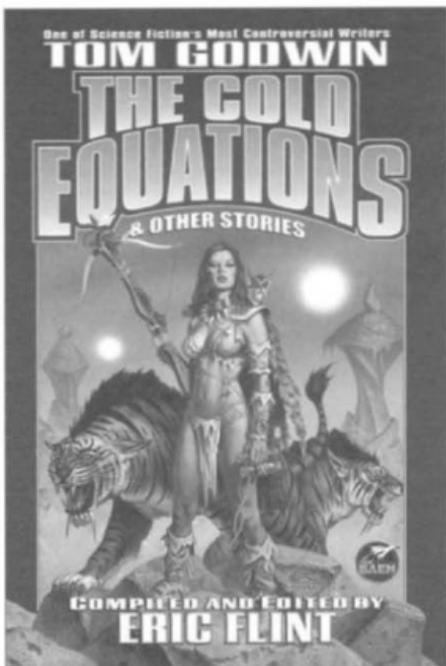
### The Cold Equations, by Tom Godwin

And so we come to the story that virtually defines hard sf. Which means, in turn, that for many people it virtually defines science fiction. As James Gunn declared: 'If the reader doesn't understand it or appreciate what it is trying to say about humanity and its relationship to its environment, then that reader isn't likely to appreciate science fiction' (*The Road to Science Fiction Volume Three: From Heinlein to Here*). It is a story that, for much of its history, attracted little but praise, and yet it has become, over the last decade or so, highly controversial. Within the pages of *The New York Review of Science Fiction* a fierce argument pro and con the story raged over several issues. In 'There is no such thing as science fiction' (*Reading Science Fiction* edited by James Gunn, Marleen S. Barr and Matthew Candelaria), Mark Boulton and Sherryl Vint use a close analysis of reaction to the story to undermine the notion that there is one readily identifiable thing that is science fiction. After all of that, what more can there be to say?

Tom Godwin's 'The Cold Equations' was first published in *Astounding Science Fiction* in 1954. Godwin had begun placing stories with John W. Campbell only the year before, so this was a very early work; but though he would go on writing into the 1970s, he never again achieved either the affect or the renown of 'The Cold Equations'. But then, no-one else ever wrote a story that so perfectly encapsulated what hard sf was all about.

It is a story that has been anthologised so many times that it is probably safe to assume that anyone with an interest in the history and development of science fiction will know it. It is quite simple in structure (which is part of the point). Our protagonist, Barton, is the pilot of an EDS (Emergency Dispatch Ship), ferrying urgently needed medical supplies to a remote outpost, when he discovers a stowaway. The stowaway's extra weight means that the ship will use up too much fuel and therefore will not be able to reach its destination. The stowaway, however, turns out to be an innocent young girl trying to reach her brother. Nevertheless, she must be jettisoned, or the medical supplies will not reach their destination and too many other people will die. There is, in this, a sort of perverse form of Utilitarianism, the greatest good for the greatest number; but it isn't this that makes it the archetype of hard sf.

Hard sf is, essentially, a right-wing form. By that, I mean that the underlying principle of all hard sf is that the law is



all, the law of nature is inflexible and must be obeyed at all times. There is no appeal; Marilyn must die, because absolute and unquestioning obedience to the law is the be-all and end-all of existence in a hard universe. The relationship between humanity and its environment that James Gunn talked about is one of subservience, the individual, one's self, does not matter in this universe, ignorance of the law is a capital crime. Although 'The Cold Equations' is one of the very few hard sf stories that makes it explicit; more usually some competent man (and it is invariably a man) will find some way to bend the law, like a cosmic Dirty Harry. But when it comes right down to it, for most people you either

do as you are told, or you die. And in this instance, it is no coincidence that it is a girl who must die.

The equivalence between the law of nature and the law of man is made explicit right at the start of Godwin's story: 'It was the law, stated very bluntly and definitely in grim Paragraph L, Section 8, of Interstellar Regulations: *Any stowaway discovered in an EDS shall be jettisoned immediately following discovery.* It was the law, and there could be no appeal.' (443, Godwin's italics) And, even though 'she could not be blamed for her ignorance of the law' (445), the consequence is made explicit when the girl learns her fate: "'You're going to do it – you're going to make me die?'" "I'm sorry." He said again. "You'll never know how sorry I am. It has to be that way and no human in the universe can change it." (447)

All of this is established in the first few pages, and that is the entire story. The piece actually continues for another 10 pages before the girl dies, pages of delay, pages of trying to find some other solution, pages of gathering resolution. All of this is futile, we know right from the start that there can be no exception. The law is the law. The rest, in a very real sense, is just aftermath. And when, at the end, Marilyn walks into the air lock 'with her head up and the brown curls brushing her shoulders, with the white sandals stepping as sure and steady as the fractional gravity would permit and the gilded buckles twinkling with little lights of blue and red and crystal' (458), we know that she has accepted the law also. She has, in James Gunn's terms, understood her relationship with the environment. We may regret the necessity – 'You'll never know how sorry I am' – but when it comes down to it, we are all subservient to the cruel dictatorship of nature. And of course it is right and proper that we obey without question the great lawmaker.

Or so Godwin would have us believe. Or perhaps it might be more appropriate to say that so John W. Campbell would have us believe.

Because 'The Cold Equations' isn't really a story, it is an expression of formal logic:

$$A \rightarrow B, B \rightarrow C, A \therefore C$$

(If A then B, if B then C, A therefore C.)

We are swept along by 'The Cold Equations' because the logical structure is so simple and seems unassailable. Let us put in the values for A, B and C that constitute the story.

For A, Godwin tells us that the EDS is so finely calibrated that it carries only enough fuel to get the pilot to his destination.

Consequently, B, any stowaway would use up too much fuel and prevent the pilot completing his mission of mercy.

Thus, in turn, C, any stowaway must be removed from the ship.

Accept those simple propositions, and Godwin states them so firmly and so quickly right at the start of the story that we do not think to question them, then anything else is merely window-dressing. Godwin makes the stowaway an innocent young girl to play on our emotions, but in fact you could substitute any number of others in that role without changing its basic shape one iota.

Consider, for example, how the story would read if the stowaway was Barton's wife or mother. What about an innocent young boy? Or a doctor who may have discovered a better cure for the sickness than the serum Barton carries? Or the first and only alien being humankind had ever encountered?

You can go on playing this game ad infinitum. Each variation on the character of the stowaway gives a slightly different emotional charge to the story, but the logical structure, which is the whole point of the piece, is not affected one bit. The resolution is known before we have the slightest inkling of who or what the stowaway might be, and the sense of the story is such that the identity of the stowaway cannot have the slightest effect on the inevitable sequence of events. The iron law of nature, and the even more rigid law of 'Interstellar Regulations', could not demand our unquestioning obedience if they could be circumvented to suit the individual. (Actually, John W. Campbell clearly understood the logic of the story, but it is possible that Godwin did not. The legend has it that Godwin re-wrote his story time and again to try and find a way in which the girl might be saved, but each time Campbell insisted that she must die. This may go some way towards explaining why Godwin never achieved the same success again.)

Of course, the fact that the victim is a girl – and Godwin goes to considerable lengths to emphasise her youth and her innocence – is clearly sexist and leaves an unpleasant taste in a more modern mouth. Especially as she is without agency throughout the story. The only active thing she does is to stowaway on the ship before the story opens, and even that is curiously passive: 'I just sort of walked in when no one was looking my way' (445). She is oddly inert even after being told she has to die; though she protests to the end – 'I didn't do anything to die for – I didn't do anything' – (458, Godwin's italics) – she doesn't act. In the end she simply accepts her fate. Of course, the logic of the story demands that she should, because if the laws are all powerful then we must accept their decree. She is a 'girl who had not known about the forces that killed with neither hatred nor malice' (458), but once introduced to those forces she can do no other than bend her knee before them.

However, to protest that the story is sexist, to attack it because it is a girl who must die, to argue that she might be saved by throwing out the furniture or some such, is to miss the real fundamental problem with 'The Cold Equations', which is that its logic is faulty. Let us go back to that quotation from James Gunn: 'If the reader doesn't understand it or appreciate what it is trying to say about humanity and its relationship to its environment, then that reader isn't likely to appreciate science fiction'. The simple truth of the matter is that Gunn is wrong, because the story is absolutely nothing to do with humanity's relationship to its environment. Everything that conspires in the death of the girl is directly traceable back to human agency, not to the law of the universe.

Value A in the logical statement that is the structure of 'The Cold Equations' – the EDS is so finely calibrated that it carries only enough fuel to get the pilot to his destination – is the least questioned part of the story. Godwin passes over this point in less than a paragraph. We accept it because it is stated so simply, as a given: 'The cruisers were forced by necessity to carry a limited amount of the bulky rocket fuel and the fuel was rationed with care' (443). Who would question that? It is the key point upon which we suspend our disbelief in order to accept the rest of the story. And yet it is upon this precise point that the story stumbles and falls.

Let me make this absolutely clear: it is human agency that designed and created these ships; it is human agency that decided the ships should operate this way; it is human

agency that wrote the computer program that rations the fuel for each ship; it is human agency that wrote the Interstellar Regulations that govern the ship; it is human agency and human agency alone that determines the situation in which the girl must die. This has nothing to do with the law of nature, nothing to do with our relationship with the environment.

If hard sf has one characteristic hero, it is the competent man, and that competence is most often displayed in a knowledge of engineering or of science. And yet the thing that lies behind this situation in this most archetypal of hard sf stories is incompetence. Because the EDS is a prime example of bad engineering, and if the engineering wasn't bad there wouldn't be a story.

The ships are deliberately designed to have no provision for anything that might go wrong. If this truly were a story about humanity's relationship with its environment, then humanity should show a damned sight more respect for the dangers of cold, hard vacuum. If you were to design a ship that had one shot, and one shot only, to meet life-threatening emergencies across the universe, would you make certain that any slight variation in the original plan would doom the ship, the pilot, the cargo and, of course, those waiting at the other end? Of course not, that would be to display such a cavalier attitude to the laws of nature as to amount to criminal negligence. But that is what we are asked to accept as the basic premise of this story.

There are other oddities in the situation Godwin presents. 'Each cruiser carried four EDS's and when a call for aid

was received the nearest cruiser would drop into normal space long enough to launch an EDS with the needed supplies or personnel, then vanish again as it continued on its course' (443). Think about what that implies. The amount of 'bulky rocket fuel' the cruisers carry must be finite, but it can't be that limited if they are to be able to respond to any emergency, no matter how far the EDS will have to travel or how much it will need to carry. And there is no obvious provision here for the EDS to rejoin the cruiser. The cruiser continues on its way through non-normal space driven by its nuclear converters, but it surely cannot scatter EDS's and pilots carelessly across the universe, particularly if it only has four EDS's to start with. So, once the mission of mercy has been completed, however long that might take, the pilot faces a long and fuel-costly chase in order to catch up with the parent cruiser. This is not a situation in which a Spartan attitude to fuel is desirable, or even possible.

In contrast to what James Gunn says, therefore, I cannot help but feel that 'The Cold Equations' is, however unintentionally, a story about inhumanity used to disguise a failure to relate to the environment. The laws of the universe may be rigid, but in this story humanity has not learned how to live within the law.

Quotations taken from 'The Cold Equations' by Tom Godwin in *The Ascent of Wonder: The Evolution of Hard SF* edited by David G. Hartwell and Kathryn Cramer, London, Orbit, 1994, pages 442-458. The quotation from James Gunn is cited in the introduction, page 442.

# New year, new home

The monthly London BSFA Meeting has moved. From January you'll find us at: The Cellar Bar, The Argyle Public House, 1 Greville Street (off Leather Lane), London EC1N 8PQ

Gathering from 6pm, interview at 7 pm.

- |                     |   |
|---------------------|---|
| 23rd January 2013*: | Dave Hutchinson, interviewed by Ian Whates      |
| 27th February 2013: | Elizabeth Hand, interviewed by Farah Mendlesohn |
| 20th March 2013**:  | BSFA Awards discussion                          |
| 24th April 2013:    | Lavie Tidhar, interviewer TBC                   |
| 22nd May 2013*:     | Aliette de Bodard, interviewer TBC              |
| 26th June 2013:     | Catherynne M. Valente, interviewer TBC          |



\* Note that this is a month with five Wednesdays. The meeting will be on the fourth, not the last, Wednesday of the month.

\*\* Note that due to the proximity of Easter to the fourth Wednesday of the month, this will be held on the third Wednesday.

# recurrent: PICTURE THIS Terry Martin

## No Marvel or DC

I can understand why there was a call to review more mainstream comics, particularly if, as supposed, the readers of "Picture This" weren't necessarily that interested in comics (but then why read this column at all) – but I believe the readers of *Vector* have a far broader and more inquisitive mind than certain people give them credit for, and even if they aren't great comic lovers, they are interested in what's happening in the world of sequential art. I might not always be right, in fact my percentage in that respect is probably quite low, but at Alt. Fiction this year a couple of people told me they were enjoying this column, so maybe I'm on the right track. To them, thanks.

So, I'm not going to start with a DC or Marvel classic, or something bright and sparkling from the 52s, but a couple of sci-fi one-shots from Markosia. Who? you might ask. Well, Markosia is a prolific UK comic publisher (I've previously mentioned Scar Comics, another UK company) who are arguably one of the most successful. I don't know if this success is financial or purely perceived, but they do seem to have a good following amongst those looking for something that the big boys aren't producing, although DC's adult imprint Vertigo did go some way towards changing readers' expectations nineteen years ago. That's not to say superheroes haven't a place any more – the box office says they have – just that most people seem to have realised that comics are a great medium for fantasy, in its all-encompassing capacity.

What surprises me a little is that many small-press publishers still try to emulate the big boys' spandex characters, when these long-established companies have already flooded the superhero market. In my mind the smaller publishers should be edgy and pushing boundaries rather than thinking they can do spandex better. Generally they can't, which leads me into *The Dark*, my first graphic novel review from Markosia. It is, on the surface, a superhero story from Chris Lynch, who had two comic shorts published in *Murky Depths* and, I'm privy to know (of course) that he had another story accepted for a future *Murky Depths*, which sadly won't now see the light of day.

The Dark, that's the superhero's name, has a butler, or as near to a butler as you could get without it actually being Alfred (that's Bruce Wayne's butler – just in case

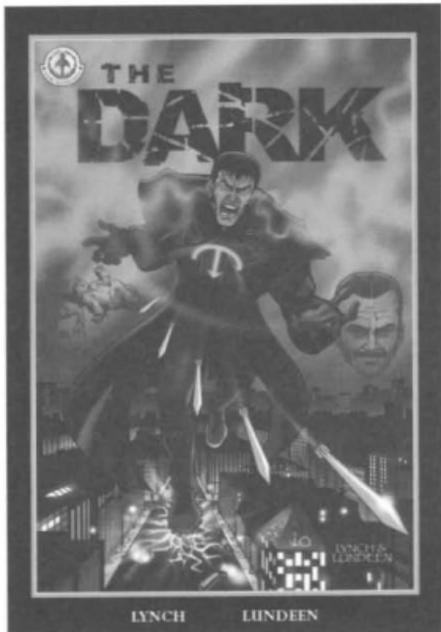
you don't read comics or watch films and know nothing about Batman – it's possible!). The Dark is in constant contact with Howard, the butler, but Howard is actually an embodiment of the computer system used by The Dark, who also has a cloak that feeds him painkillers and gives him his superhuman powers. So far this all sounds like a stereotypical super hero. But I'll quote some blurb from the cover, "As a wave of drugs [with a collective name of Memetech] that create living stories sweeps his city, one man fights back as The Dark. A vigilante who wields fiction as a weapon [shades of Mike Carey's *Unwritten*], he is the last hope for a city where nothing is what it seems," and suddenly this all starts to become interesting. There are some journeys back into the past to show us how things became as they are in the present, which become increasingly more difficult to fathom as the timelines converge, but this is an intentional part of the plot. What's dream and what's reality, who is The Dark? I suggest you read it and find out. Do I have any criticisms? Nothing that detracts from the story. The art by Rick Lundeen is clear enough – in fact Rick was artist on "The Escape Artist" in issue #9 of *Murky Depths* – though sometimes I found the lettering a little tight within the bubbles, but then I am a bit of a perfectionist.

When I asked Harry Markos, the powerhouse behind Markosia Comics, what science fiction graphic novels he'd recommend from his titles, he suggested the above and *The Indifference Engine*. No, not Babbage's *difference engine* but it is more likely inspired by William Gibson and Bruce Sterling's classic. Just the title. There's no Victoriana here. It's an enjoyably narrated romp of multiple universes that have been created by the said engine, the engine being created by one Alan Blake, who is also the narrator. The whole story, a flashback, in effect, is told as he tumbles to earth from a skyscraper office. The change of character from a laid back slob to, well, something else, is executed well. Blake is an "ordinary twenty-something suburban slacker", as the blurb says. His wife has just left him in favour of the cat and he loses his job, which is hunting out technical bugs in the engine. It's a four-comic collection of 100 pages written by Cy Dethan. Don't expect the slick artwork of the big boys – although even they don't get it right all the time, and in any case it can be argued the art is always relative to the likes of the

reader – but Robert Carey’s pencils are nicely coloured by Mel Cook; clear enough and suiting the story. There are moments of excellence that help to bring the story up to a standard that makes it worth hunting out.

While the two comics above were suggested to me, I’ve had my eye on *Hope Falls* for a few years and decided that, as it’s also from Markosia, I’d give them a hat trick of reviews. *Hope Falls* is from the duo of Tony Lee and Dan Boulwood. They’ve worked quite a bit together and had a series in the original DFC comic (re-launched recently as *The Phoenix*, couldn’t they think of a more original title?) called “The Prince Of Baghdad”. At the time, Dan’s art really suited the age group of DFC so I was a little unsure how it would work with a more mature story. I needn’t have worried. With this dark tale of vengeance that Tony conjures in *Hope Falls*, the name of the town where the action takes place, it makes you think more of Mike Mignola’s art and the likes of *Hellboy*. This is a very accomplished piece of plotting from Mr Lee and I can understand why a film might well be in the pipeline. Yeh, sure, we’ve heard it all before, and Tony has never been afraid of talking up an opportunity, but watch this space. I’ve already mentioned that Dan’s art works very well with this story, but not that he drew it four years ago and his style has developed, nor that Tony not only wrote *Hope Falls* but lettered it too. What’s the story about? On the surface it’s a story of revenge. A girl is raped and murdered and someone wants the culprits to pay, but who’s actually pulling the strings? Would God really be this vindictive? You most definitely need to find out. I totally recommend this one.

There’s another one I totally recommend, *Morning Glories* from Image. I mentioned it at the end of the last “Picture This”. As a punter of books and comics I’m a mug for a good cover and during a browsing session in my local Waterstones (my nearest comic shop is a good forty-five-minute’s drive away – in case I haven’t mentioned that before) the first collection caught my eye with cover art by Rodin Esquejo. I was intrigued from the start and when I turned the last page of the first comic in the collection I was hooked. It starts by introducing the reader to six young, and good looking, teenagers who have been accepted into a prestigious school called Morning Glory Academy that has some unusual teaching methods (a massive understatement!). The mystery continues to build with few answers being revealed. I’m terrible with remembering names and in this instance I found the characters drawn by Joe Eisma, and I do love his art, to be very similarly depicted. Maybe they are supposed to look alike. Their hair colours are different and one of them is Japanese but I had to read the whole collection again (and still referred to it) before and while I was reading the second collection. Oh yes, I couldn’t wait to get my hands on *Morning Glories 2*. This collection delves into the pasts of the teenagers. The last comic in that collection is a big reveal about where the school is. It makes you un-



derstand why, in the first comic of the first collection, all the kids fall asleep in the car that comes to pick them up to take them to the school. If a comic shop was nearby I’d probably be buying the comics before the next collected works was published... but as I think that might be in the next month or so....

Vertigo time. Paul Cornell time. *Saucer Country* time. When I saw Paul at Alt.Fiction he told me he was currently putting the finishing touches to part seven of *Saucer Country*. At the time of writing this, only two parts had been published. I’d already decided it was about time I picked up on something more current and being a follower of Paul’s Tweets I downloaded *Saucer Country: Run, Part 1* the day it appeared on Vertigo’s hit list and am currently awaiting the third episode after finding myself more than a little interested to know where it’s going. The story? Well, if you were standing for the US presidency would you tell your voters you’ve just been abducted, and returned, by aliens? Would you want to know what happened or just pretend it didn’t? Governor Arcadia Alvarado is sure the aliens aren’t benign and feels that if she can become president she’ll be in a better position to resist them. I’ll be following this.

# recurrent: RESONANCES Stephen Baxter

## Where exactly is Zoe Heriot's Wheel in Space?

Having grown up with *Doctor Who*, and having enjoyed the current revival, I have now committed my own tie-in novel, *The Wheel of Ice* (BBC Books, August 2012). Featuring the Second Doctor with Jamie and Zoe, it is both a prequel and sequel to (that's time travel for you) 'The Wheel in Space', the 1968 serial written by David Whitaker from Kit Pedler's story, which introduced super-brainy astrophysicist companion Zoe. As a consequence I've had to immerse myself in Whovian lore past and present.

And I have become aware of one aspect in which the current incarnation of *Who* arguably suffers compared to the past, which is the lack of a science advisor.

For example, as Kim Newman remarked to me after watching 'The Hungry Earth', broadcast in May 2010 (the one where a drilling operation in Wales bothers the Silurians): 'Didn't the contrivance required to limit the guest cast stand out as strange – here's a village with a church, a graveyard and a major scientific project that still consists of five people who are related to/intimate with each other, whereas in 'Inferno' (1970), the deep-boring drill was a huge project with a vast complex of support staff.' *Who* was always at the fantasy end of scientific plausibility, but I do think that in the past we used to see more fleshed-out and realistic depictions of science and engineering.

It was so in 'The Wheel in Space', in which the Cybermen attack a deep-space station. Granted, there's plenty of technobabble and scientific nonsense, such as a nova hurling meteorites down on the solar system, and communications with Earth without any light-speed time-lag... And that's even before the Cybermats get going.

But still the Wheel itself

has clearly been thought out. It contains sensible-sounding chambers including a control room, an ops room, a loading bay and a power room; it has well-defined functions including managing deep space traffic control, issuing space weather alerts, serving as a 'halfway house for deep space travel' and as an early warning system for those pesky meteorites. And just as with 'Inferno', it was staffed by a large guest cast, twelve in all to my count, all with specialised roles, including one unlucky actor called Freddie Foote who played a servo-robot.

Where did this detail come from? Surely from the head of Kit Pedler. 41 years old when 'Wheel in Space' was broadcast, Pedler was a bona fide British scientist; he was head of an electron microscope department at the University of London. He became an unofficial science advisor on *Who* in the mid-1960s, hired to inject a bit of scientific credibility. He wrote three serials in which he introduced the Cybermen, and provided the storylines for three more, including 'Wheel in Space'. Later he created and co-wrote *Doomwatch* for the BBC.

I'm all for science advisors. Of course in the Pertwee years the Doctor himself was a science advisor for UNIT, on and off; I imagine that Pedler got shot at, tortured and blasted into space rather less often than the Time Lord. Nevertheless his contribution was invaluable in providing a certain basic credibility.

But where exactly was the Wheel in Space? For a space cadet like me, when listening to the serial (only the audio is available; four of the six episodes were tape-wiped) the strongest clue comes in a spectacular bit of hard-science dialogue given to Zoe. Here's a brief excerpt:

**BILL DUGGAN:** And this is my little kingdom. Here, how do you like the Greenhouse?

**JAMIE:** Oh, do you collect these?

**BILL:** No, they're floating seeds. The only place they flourish is down here in the power room. Of course, the old man kicked up a mad dust storm at first but now Doc Corwyn said they was good psychology or something. Anyway I just like flowers. Hey... That one



comes all the way from Venus. Imagine that. All that millions of miles away.

ZOE: 24,564,000 miles at perihelion and 161,350,000 miles at aphelion.

JAMIE: Oh, I was dying to know that...

Wow! Boffin terms like perihelion and aphelion, and numbers to five decimal places! So *that's* where the Wheel is – to within a thousand miles! Zoe's statement is very precise, and sounds convincing, and makes scientific sense... Well, almost.

The lines seem to imply that the Wheel in Space follows a highly elliptical orbit around the sun (unlike the planets' orbits, which are almost circular). 'Perihelion' refers to an orbiting object's closest approach to the sun; 'aphelion' means the furthest distance from the sun. These 'peri' and 'ap' terms have very precise meanings, and are based on the name of the body at the centre of the orbit. 'Helion' refers to the sun; if the Wheel was orbiting Earth for example the relevant terms would be 'perigee' and 'apogee'.

But what does Zoe's sentence mean? Since Venus follows its own orbit around the sun, it isn't very meaningful to say how close the station gets to Venus when the station is at aphelion; it would depend entirely on where Venus is in its own orbit at the time.

If you forget about Venus for the moment and take Zoe's numbers as referring to the station's perihelion and aphelion themselves, what you get is a sensible picture. An orbit spanning 25 million miles to 161 million miles would take the Wheel from inside Mercury's orbit to outside Mars's, so nicely crossing the whole of the inner solar system, a useful patrol for a station like the Wheel.

But that's not what Zoe actually said. She was saying something about the station's proximity to Venus. You can spin a lot of theories about how maybe Zoe's number about perihelion refers to the closest the station ever gets to Venus, when Venus happens to be close to the station's perihelion point... or something.

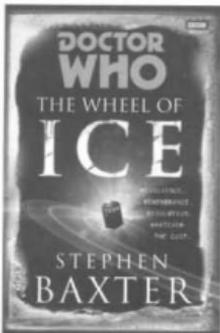
Consider this, however. Earth's orbit is 93 million miles in radius; Venus's is 68 million miles. So the closest Earth ever gets to Venus is when the two planets are on the same side of the sun, and sun, Venus and Earth are all in a line. And that closest distance is  $(93-68=)$  25 million miles. Similarly the furthest Earth gets from Venus is when the two planets are on opposite sides of the sun, and the separation is  $(93+68=)$  161 million miles. And these two numbers, you will observe, are precisely those quoted by Zoe.

So her statement would make perfect sense if the Wheel is in Earth orbit! – save that the technical terms for closest and furthest approach of Earth to Venus aren't 'perihelion' and 'aphelion' but 'inferior conjunction' and 'superior conjunction'. But the Wheel being so close in makes no sense for other reasons; it wouldn't be much use as a 'halfway house' for ships heading for deep space if it was stuck in Earth orbit.

Sigh. The little scene I quoted above is nice for other reasons; Zoe's clinical logic is contrasted strongly with the image of the interplanetary flowers. But the dialogue, while it might have originated with something Pedler

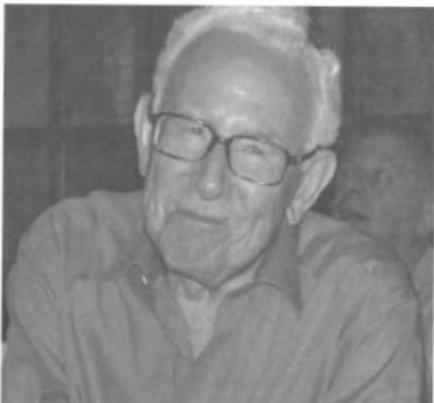
provided, is in fact gobbledegook, perhaps a result of a final round of script-editing. And after all that we don't know where the Wheel in Space is, and never will.

Never mind! This was a good serial, and it introduced in Zoe one of my favourite companions, which is why I've been writing about her now. And I still believe the new *Who* could benefit from a science adviser, just to provide a foundation of plausibility, even if the odd bit of gobbledegook still creeps through.



\*\*\*

I was sorry to hear of the death in February 2012 of Sam Youd, best known for his work under his pseudonym of John Christopher. His *Tripods* YA trilogy was memorably televised in the 1980s, and I recall being scared out of my wits as a teenager by his unflinching catastrophe tale *The Death of Grass* (1956), and impressed later by his *The World in Winter* (1962), a tough account of another apocalypse, the coming of a new Ice Age. Now there's some good sf backed by rigorous science. He was involved in fandom before his wartime military service, and was a correspondent of Arthur C Clarke for most of his life; after the war he was part of the 'White Horse' London circle, and indeed he has cameos in the *Tales of the White Hart* stories. And Sam Youd was born in 1922 in Huyton, now in Merseyside, only a mile from Roby where I grew up; in fact strictly speaking it's a combined township, known as Huyton-with-Roby. Evidently a hotbed of British sf. I regret that I never met him.



# THE BSFA REVIEW

This issue of the BSFA Review is something of a science fiction special and covers the whole spectrum of SF. I am also pleased to welcome several new contributors to these pages: Alison Page and Finn Dempster covering recent novels and Roger Luckhurst and Aishwarya Subramanian discussing a pair of academic volumes. Oh, and just for good measure we have Tricia Sullivan writing on Greg Egan too.

In keeping with the overall theme of Vector, the BSFA Review opens with LJ Hurst's review of *London Peculiar And Other Nonfiction* by Michael Moorcock and Allan Kausch: "If Moorcock's London were an organism, I suggest it would be either a chameleon or an amoeba. An amoeba because the city grows and absorbs what it grows around, a chameleon because it takes on appearances, possibly intentionally, becoming something else." This quote gave me the impetus to read the only one of China Miéville's books which I hadn't read yet, *Looking For Jake and Other Stories*, off the shelf.

London has been a looming presence in all Miéville's work since his debut novel, *King Rat*, a shoddy attempt to fuse folk mythology with the its street culture. It was also re-imagined for the Bas-Lag novels that made his name as the violently febrile New Crobuzon and is there in his standalone works, above or below ground, for adults and for children. It also recurs again and again in this collection and, to someone who has made his home here, there is something transfixing about his ruined, post-collapse capital:

"Primrose Hill was continually tunneled through by some great maggoty imago; Kentish Town was a wasteland of heat and burnt-out houses that smouldered endlessly, in some arcane transmirror pyrosis. But Camden, where they had to go, was the running ground of apocalypse scum, the worst spivs from the dead market's stall-holders, the least politicised of its punks."

It is an acquired taste though, saltier than his novels; his stories are more out of kilter, *weirder* than his novel and the hand of M John Harrison hangs heavy. They are also more personal and funnier: "I know I never came to you. You lived in fucking Barnet. I'm only human."

Miéville lost out on the BSFA Short Fiction Award to Paul Cornell this year and those two stories as well as the other shortlisted works were collected in a booklet that was sent to members with the last mailing. This is becoming an annual tradition and one we are keen to continue. In our final review, former Vector editor Kevin Smith reviews the booklet and finds nothing to entice him back into the world of science fiction. As he puts it: "Have the authors lost the wow factor or have I?" Since nominations and votes come from the membership, I would hope people found something in the shortlist to excite them, but I'd be interested in comments from those of you who didn't take part in the selection process itself and for whom the booklet was your first exposure to the stories. And I'd certainly encourage you all to start thinking about your nominations for next year now; the more people take part, the stronger the award is.

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**London Peculiar And Other Nonfiction by Michael Moorcock and Allan Kausch (PM Press, 2012)**

Reviewed by L J Hurst

If Michael Moorcock's London were an organism, I suggest it would be either a chameleon or an amoeba. An amoeba because the city grows and absorbs what it grows around, a chameleon because it takes on appearances, possibly intentionally, becoming something else. The twenty page memorial which begins this book, 'A Child's Christmas in the Blitz', exemplifies these tendencies: the title itself an echo of Dylan Thomas (who probably drank in the Soho bars in which journalist Moorcock himself would drink ten years later), the text revealing that Moorcock was brought up not in London at all but in Croydon, miles south of the city, and the Blitz recalled is not the Blitz of 1940-1 but the later bombardment of the V-weapons in the last year of the War, the euphemistically named "Little Blitz", when Moorcock, who was born in 1939, was just reaching school age. Later, Moorcock would discover that Croydon suffered when false intelligence was fed back to the Nazis, telling them that their missiles, which were successfully falling on London, were actually falling beyond. As the V-aimers recalibrated, the consequence was that London was saved from a second devastation but Croydon and the southern suburbs suffered badly. Moorcock and his school friends played among the mounds of rubble which sprouted red weeds as the summer came.

This is not to suggest that that Moorcock was not aware of what was happening elsewhere – he had an uncle who worked in 10 Downing Street, whom he visited on trips into town, though the principle reason for the family visits was found in Hamley's and Gammidge's, the great toy shops of the capital, where he added recruits to his army of lead soldiers. Many years later, Moorcock would use a contemporary quotation from the journalist HV Morton as a preface to *Mother London*, speaking of the great air war of 1940 as the "Battle of London". Morton would not have been alone in that phrase but Winston Churchill probably wanted to be more inclusive as well as more alliterative when he renamed that struggle the Battle of Britain, one of the few times that London lost out. Answering a later question, Moorcock's mother told him that his memory was not false, when he was only months old she had held him up to the window to watch – to the south-east – the Battle of Britain being fought in the air.

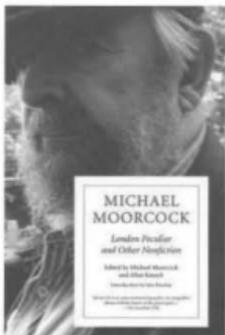
The other reason that Moorcock would have been aware of events was that he was an early reader and an autodidact. By his mid-teens he was publishing his fanzine *Burroughsiana*, had an office job which sent him out of the office and walking through the East End to the docks yet still let him read and then an editorial position with Fleetway Publications. It was presumably a little later, after his first marriage, that he made his home in Ladbroke Grove. 'Jack's Unforgettable Christmas' recalls Jack Trevor Story's visit and his subsequent breakdown following a disgraceful arrest by the Notting Hill police as Story and his partner tried to make their way home in 1969.

After *Into the Media Web*, an enormous volume from Savoy which collected Moorcock's non-fiction from 1950 to 2006, this book attempts to collect the rest. It is divided

into six sections: 'London', 'Other Places', 'Absent Friends', 'Music', 'Politics' and 'Introductions and Reviews'. 'Other Places' features accounts of Moorcock's life now that his homes are in Texas and Paris, while 'Absent Friends' includes accounts of his friends and influences including J G Ballard (from 'The Voice', a seminal article in *New Worlds* to a posthumous memorial in *The Times*), Ted Carnell and many other authors associated with the New Wave of the Sixties. Those London pseudopodia reaching out can be seen when you realise that Jack Trevor Story spent his last two decades in Milton Keynes, that Barrington Bayley died in Telford New Town and that J G Ballard himself moved out of London to Shepperton, allegedly because he had heard Frank Muir describe the town as "the Malibu of the Thames Valley". Beyond sf, Moorcock's absent friends were Andrea Dworkin, Angela Carter, Angus Wilson (sexual rebels) and Arthur C Clarke (included, though too egotistical to be a friend).

Sections are porous and non-definitive. Many of the articles in the sixth section include autobiographical reminiscences and, while Ballard's name occurs throughout the book, other names seem to be held back. You will not find Moorcock's account of the works and his memories of Mervyn Peake until you're five-eighths of the way through *London Peculiar* and among the reviews, for instance.

A fascinating discovery is Moorcock's acquaintance with a man who brought more than another suburb into London: R C "Bob" Sheriff, who first brought war to the London stage as "Journey's End". Ten years after that, with an intervening period in Hollywood, he brought the moon to earth in his novel *The Hopkins Manuscript* (1939). Hopkins goes up to town to attend the meetings of the Royal Astronomical Society in Burlington House, Piccadilly, gaining early knowledge of the cataclysm to come, yet as Moorcock points out, returns nightly to a village where they calmly play cricket in the light of the falling satellite. The long Sheriff review links back to the comparatively short "Politics" section, where Moorcock or his co-editor Allan Kausch have placed the introduction to *Before Armageddon*, his 1975 anthology of Victorian and Edwardian catastrophe fiction. Other appreciations included here are Conan The Barbarian, Sexton Blake, and Edgar Rice Burroughs, while individual authors include William S Burroughs, Aldous Huxley and Alfred Jarry. One cannot help thinking, though, that he wishes he had known W Pett Ridge or Gerald Kersh, two authors he covers in the 'London' section, regretting that he could not have called them absent friends. *London Peculiar*, like a great city, contains much, can still be explored and – as a quick exasperated re-reading of that first 'London' section has revealed – has more to yield.



*Reflections On The Magic Of Writing* by Diana Wynne Jones,  
 edited by Charlie Butler, (David Fickling Books, 2012) and  
*Enchanted Glass* by Diana Wynne Jones (HarperCollins Children's  
 Books, 2010) Reviewed by Jessica Yates

Last April the family of Diana Wynne Jones held a celebration of her life and work in Bristol at St. George's, a concert hall converted from a church. In this suitably formal setting a solemn yet consoling event took place. As well as some fifteen speakers, there was a musical interlude from the ballet of *Black Maria* played by her nephew, and excerpts from the screen versions of *Archer's Goon* and *Howl's Moving Castle*. As the afternoon progressed, those who had come as fans and did not know more than what had already been published of Diana's personal life came to see the complete portrait: a mother who put her family first; the connections between people and dramatic events in real life and the characters and events in her writing; her travel jinx; and her excellent cooking. She was a "real witch", loved to laugh and write scenes which made her laugh.

It was especially fascinating for me to see and hear her family reminisce, and all were enthralled to hear Ursula Jones reading from Diana's last, unfinished novel. This was our first opportunity to buy *Reflections On The Magic Of Writing*, containing nearly all her major articles of literary criticism and work on the craft of writing fantasy, which grew out of the work she did, after her fatal diagnosis, to sort and pack up her manuscripts for Seven Stories, the museum of children's books. She chose the running order, and her Preface is dated November 2010, four months before she died.

Some of these essays have been available on her website for several years so we already know about her unconventional childhood, her battles with her domineering mother, her struggle to get to Oxford and her love story, all from the essay 'Something About the Author'. We also have 'The Heroic Ideal' about the allusive structure of *Fire And Hemlock* and her tributes to JRR Tolkien and CS Lewis, whose lectures she attended in Oxford (unlike some other children's fantasy authors, she was very generous about their virtues).

The majority of essays, long and short, are about how and why she wrote and include many arguments in defence of the genre of fantasy. 'Two Kinds of Writing?' stems from editorial criticism of her first adult fantasy *A Sudden Wild Magic*, in which she defends her decision to blend elements from fantasy and SF. (Now we find bookshops labelling their all-through SFF sections as 'Science Fantasy' – Diana pioneered the blend, along with Anne McCaffrey.) She also writes powerfully of the responsibility of authors to their child readers and I found this opinion particularly valuable:

"...if you ask ten adults which book they remember best from their childhood. Nine of them will certainly name a fantasy...they acquired many of the rules they live by from this book that so impressed them. This may not necessarily mean rules of morality – though it may – but wider things like what ways of behaving are wise, or unwise... The book endowed them with experiences which they could not get any other way."

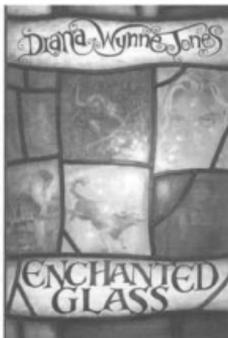
The book concludes with a conversation between Diana and the editor Charlie Butler from just a few weeks before she died and two extremely moving tributes by her son. This book is an essential purchase for her fans and for literary critics of the fantasy genre as well as for public and school libraries.

At the celebration, although we learned of a full life, we regretted so much that she could not go on to give more to her family, and to her readers. In the conversation with Butler, Diana revealed that she kept a drawer stuffed with beginnings which did not develop into full and finished novels. Her last full-length fantasy, *Enchanted Glass*, came from that drawer years later and what we would have missed if she hadn't given it another chance! If only the original reviewers had not given away the main source of the literary allusions, I could have enjoyed guessing it myself until the big reveal arrives two-thirds through. I will just give you the clue that the fantasy is a tribute to a dramatic masterpiece which also inspired Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman.

Our hero Andrew Brandon Hope, an unmarried and slightly absent-minded academic, inherits a large country house from his magician grandfather, as well as the "field-of-care", the area in a ten-mile radius around the house, described as a "ragged egg-shape" and "a large oval". As Andrew meets the eccentric servants and local villagers, a twelve-year-old boy called Aidan turns up. His grandmother, a magic-user from London, told him to go to Melstone Manor after she died if he needed help. Pursued by supernatural spirits, he needs a refuge. Like Andrew, he wears glasses, and points out to him that they can both do magic when they take their specs off.

Andrew and Aidan set out to discover the boundaries of the "field-of-care" and to find out who threatens Aidan. The "enchanted glass" is a clue and source of power: six coloured panels set in the back door, depicted accurately on the book's cover, gradually come into focus to reveal six helpful magical characters from the village who support Andrew and Aidan against the power who wants to take over the village. The climax is a grand village fête which descends into chaos as good and evil fight it out, and Andrew finds the supernatural authority within him to win the battle.

This standalone fantasy is a sheer delight, mixing inventive magic (such as foretelling the future by the racing results) with the latest technology: "You'd better give your wards a boost. You can do it on the computer these days." Diana pays tribute to her craft when writing about Andrew's recognition of his power: "magic was one of the great forces of the universe... it was a great power, to be used with great care".



*The Last Werewolf* by Glen Duncan

(Canongate, 2011)

Reviewed by Dan Hartland

In Bret Easton Ellis's 2005 novel *Lunar Park*, his dog takes a chunk out of his thigh. The book is a gruesomely playful fictional autobiography, in which elements from Ellis's storied real and fictional pasts come back literally to haunt him. The dog has worried at Ellis-the-narrator throughout the novel and in its final pages, in a kind of vicious climax, turns demonic: "Its eyeballs bulged until they were pushed out of their sockets and hanging down his muzzle on their stalks. [...] And, effortlessly, a mouthful of teeth sank into my right thigh again and bit down."

Ellis's encounter with a demonic canine is a fitting jumping-off point for Glen Duncan's *The Last Werewolf*, a horror so indebted to the American's particular brand of post-modern schlock that his most famous novel gets its own prominent reference. "Poor Haris," sighs Duncan's narrator, the titular lycanthrope, of his bookish sidekick: "He hadn't much liked *American Psycho*. Savage satirist or twisted fuck? he'd asked me, when he'd finished it. Both, I'd said. It's a false dichotomy." It is a self-referential moment of considerablechutzpah in a book sometimes literally crammed with cojones.

Duncan's novel tells the story of Jake Marlowe (his Canadian name merely the first of many such thefts and references), a 200-year-old werewolf who for much of the month lives a blessed lifestyle on the back of centuries' worth of shrewd investments but on one night of every thirty viciously dismembers another human being for food. The text is littered with casual bon mots such as, "Two nights ago I'd eaten a 43-year-old *hedge fund* specialist," and Marlowe's dark humour comes to predominate – in large part because, unusually for his kind, he feels the pangs of conscience.

As Duncan's title gives away, however, Jake's kind is a dwindling species. As the novel opens, the only other living example has been hunted down and killed by WOCOP (the World Organisation for the Control of Occult Phenomena). Werewolves are no longer reproducing – a virus has rendered it impossible for victims to survive their bite – and, hunted as symbols of evil, they are on their last lupine legs. This gives Jake's curiously literary interests – his narration, a palimpsest of references from Shakespeare to *Lolita*, is ostensibly a copy of the diary he keeps – a crucial importance. "I'm talking about testimony," enthuses a character fascinated by and attracted to werewolves, a species not most widely known for their lunatic eloquence. "I'm talking about *bearing witness to yourself*. What is this – what are the journals – if not the compulsion to tell the truth of what you are? And what is the compulsion to tell the truth if not a moral compulsion? It's perfectly Kantian."

That Duncan can have his characters throw around Immanuel Kant in one paragraph and do bloody battle with vampires and witch-hunters in another is a sign of the pop culture abandon with which he writes. Jake's narration is replete with references to how it would continue were it a screenplay. Here he is considering ducking into a nightclub to lose a tail: "In the movie version I'd go in and

sneak out of a toilet window or meet a girl and start a problematic love affair that would somehow save my life at the expense of hers." Here he is falling in love: "For her as for me there was a vague awareness of all the things we didn't, in our perfect certainty, need to say, as if pages of TV movie script – *I can't believe this is happening ... I knew from the first moment I saw you* – were scrolling on an autocue both of us were ignoring." This trick is probably over-used but it emphasises Jake's jaded sense that our contemporary culture has become flattened by over-narration: "The Old World snob in me," he grumbles about a victim, "thinks he screamed – or rather went *maaah!* in falsetto – because he was Americanly conditioned to do so by lifelong over-ingestion of television and movies."

Jake's werewolf hindbrain has a mantra – fuckkilleat – which governs its monthly perambulations and this victim's death is quickly followed by some athletic weresex. That more graphic violence and copulation can be found in other books – not least of all Ellis's – would be less of a problem if Jake didn't seem so keen on convincing us of how depraved he is. Ultimately, however, the source of Jake's self-revulsion is less the nitty-gritty of his monthly dirty deeds and more in the horror of his first kill: "I killed and ate my wife and unborn child. I killed and ate love." In the course of *The Last Werewolf* he finds love again and learns some rather heavy-handed lessons about "the thing that wasn't God but the aspect of him that was ours, and in which infinitely generous archetype there was neither her nor me but only the rapture that calls you home to unity."

Duncan can get carried away with himself, then – in particular, with WOCOP and werewolves, vampires and conspiracies all jostling for time amidst the jack-knifing plot, the book becomes a game of one-upmanship, with cliff-hanger after cliff-hanger resolved by the sudden appearance of another dimly-remembered character to tip the balance. With flashbacks and even a bold turnaround in the novel's final furlong, *The Last Werewolf* begins to look over-stuffed.

Fortunately, Duncan's other project is achieved far more elegantly. The novel refigures the werewolf as a literary id and horror as the place where influences can be blitzed together into new shapes and odd juxtapositions. At one point, Jake envisions himself as an "objet d'une voyeuse" but the abyss also looks back: "in the post-everything world," he remarks, perhaps with one eye on Ellis's occasionally featureless satires, "it turns out humans can't kick the story habit." If so, this is a hedonistic over-dose for the inveterate addict – and of a high, witty grade at that.



## The Godless Boys

by Naomi Wood (Picador, 2011)

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

If I were to say that this novel is set on an island off the English coast it would be true and misleading.

In her first novel, Naomi Wood has changed a lot of things to set up her story. She has changed the country's geography (no comparable island exists where she places it); its political structure (she talks only of England, never Britain); and, most significantly, its history. At some point in the 1940s a religious revival took root in England, almost immediately taking over the government and, in the 1950s, exiling troublesome atheists to the island. In the Forties, of course, Britain had just fought a world war which had left the country exhausted and broke but since there is no mention of either war or austerity in Wood's novel we are left to ponder just when history changed. (We are similarly left to ponder whether the Christian revivalism was Protestant or Catholic and what exactly might have happened to Jews, Moslems or followers of any other religion; but such nitpicking might be to do the novel a disservice.)

The fact that we find ourselves inevitably raising such questions indicates that there is a certain thinness in Wood's creation. The prose and the story seem similarly lacking in substance at the start. Early in the novel there's an exchange between Eliza and the undertaker she works for in which Eliza denies she is being bothered by Nathaniel's gang, "wondering why she had so quickly lied". And we wonder, too; there's no reason for it and we know too little of Eliza's character for this to make sense; indeed, even later in the novel when Eliza's character has been much more, and more sympathetically, developed, the lie makes no sense. In response, the undertaker says, "Who out of any of us would want union with England?", but this is Wood telling us how the islanders feel, she does not show it. In fact, we are never entirely clear on the legal status of the island and other than this statement we see nothing to suggest that other islanders share the gang's belief. One of the incidental pleasures of reading *The Godless Boys*, however, is watching Wood acquire confidence as a writer and the consequent increase in the solidity of story and character as the book progresses.

After another upsurge in anti-religious activism in the mid-1970s, another bunch of troublemakers were dispatched to the island, and now, in the novel's present of November 1986, Sarah Wicks has just discovered that the mother she thought had deserted her ten years before was actually involved in an arson attack on a church. Assuming her mother was sent to the island and full of the naïve bravado of a fifteen-year-old, Sarah smuggles herself onto the island.

What she finds there is not what she expects. The islanders, living on a restricted diet (the mainland will not export meat to them) and with limited provisions, have become narrow in their focus. There is no way off the island so there is no aspiration open to them. This closing in of mental horizons has had a particularly devastating effect upon the children born on the island. A handful of teenage boys, led by Nathaniel Malraux, have,

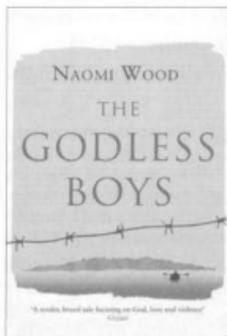
out of boredom, formed themselves into a violent gang, the Malades. With tight jeans, red braces and shaven heads, they seem like a belated manifestation of skinheads, though they might owe rather more to the droogs of Alex Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*, with their

uniformity and their curious language. The Malades are convinced that English spies are constantly trying to infiltrate the island to convert the people to religion so they see themselves as the island's last line of defence. (There is mention of an island police but no sight of them; another way in which we don't seem to be getting the full picture.) In the main, gang activity consists of throwing stones at the houses of anyone they suspect, on the flimsiest of evidence, of holding pro-English sympathies but as the novel progresses their violence becomes more overt and more dangerous.

When Nathaniel encounters Sarah, therefore, it is far from a meeting of minds. She has no conception of the narrowness of island life or of the barely contained violence implicit in the Malades. He sees her as the English infiltrator he has so long predicted but at the same time as the exotic outsider that his narrowing horizons have craved. She innocently sees Nathaniel as a route to finding her mother; he plots to trap her on the island as a collector might trap a butterfly. Out of these unpromising beginnings, a romance begins to develop that is tender and convincing and that, in its very ordinariness, throws into sharp relief the extraordinariness of both their lives.

Meanwhile, around them, we witness vignettes of island life. Eliza, whose every avenue of love and hope seems to have been shut off, and now works as a prostitute while island life closes around her like a prison. Nathaniel's mother, whose horizons have narrowed to her chair and her television since the death of her husband. The once-fervent atheist who finds himself turning back to religion in old age. The fishmonger who feels he has lost his one chance of romance with the prostitute. And Nathaniel's malign lieutenant who craves ever greater violence against a world in which he has no place.

The stories intersect, building towards a tragedy that is both inevitable and surprising. By the end of the novel characters who, at the beginning, had seemed like little more than rough sketches have become people whose elusive and complex emotions are very real to us. And the contrivance of the setting is all but forgotten as we become caught in the tangled human story that Wood has to tell. This is not a great novel, the awkwardness of the beginning counts against that, but it is a novel that grows and develops as we watch. The result is tender, humane and memorable; I wonder what Naomi Wood might turn her undoubted talents to next.



*The Clockwork Rocket* by Greg Egan

(Gollancz, 2011)

Reviewed by Tricia Sullivan

“It was the day my grandfather exploded”, might have been a catchy beginning for this novel, the first in Greg Egan’s new *Orthogonal* trilogy and set in a finite, torus-shaped universe in which light travels at different speeds according to its frequency and the past and the future are destined by cosmological topology to collide. Here we are on page one:

After squeezing and prodding the old man all over with more hands than most people used in a day, Doctor Livia announced her diagnosis. ‘You’re suffering from a serious light deficiency. The crops here are virtually monochromatic... a man of your age needs umber and gamboge, saffron and goldenrod, jade and viridian.’

The nature of light is critical in this story, though at first we don’t know why. We meet Yalda as a young, alienated individual in a society of predetermined sexual pairs. Her father’s love coupled with her desire to comprehend the world propels her out of a life of farm labour and into education, where she excels. Through mathematics Yalda discovers that her planet is in danger of annihilation, until one of her students dreams up a foof’s quest: a space voyage that will exploit the singular nature of their universe to allow infinite-velocity travellers to spend generations working on science while only four years pass at home. The novel is first book in the *Orthogonal* trilogy follows Yalda from youth to professor, activist and ultimately the leader of the *Peerless*: literally a mountain launched into space as a laboratory.

If extrapolation were an extreme sport, Greg Egan would be the Evel Knievel of science fiction writers. In *The Clockwork Rocket* his worldbuilding begins at the level of physical law and moves through chemistry and biology but not in the same order or manner as in Earth’s cultural history. A peculiar superimposition of Earth-like proto-industrial society upon alien biology features in a way that both departs from Egan’s usual rigour and comments upon matters here at home with a distinct political thrust. The departure from rigour occurs in the absence of explanation about the development of a civilization whose members have the innate capacity to reshape their flesh yet rely on technology familiar to humans. There is a notable absence of the religious and the imaginal. And no time is spent on the drivers of socio-intellectual evolution in a species who avoid the primate large-brain/childbirth dilemma by having no mothers at all. On mating, females divide in four and are annihilated, leaving fathers to raise the young. This has enormous social consequences that are critical to the plot. As Yalda says to a female colleague, ‘Nature wants to split your body in four and pulp your brain. We should be aiming higher.’

After I got done laughing with appreciation at the beauty of this metaphor for *human* reproduction, I began to appreciate the seriousness of Egan’s approach, its depth and ambition. This is a novel that takes issues of power, equality, class and reproductive freedom very seriously. It is not merely an engineer’s fiction written in ignorance of personal or social concerns.

Yet, at heart *The Clockwork Rocket* is an engineer’s novel, one which revels in problem-solving in all its intricacies and

critical details. The greatest difficulty here lies in the fact that the reader is only just learning how this alternate universe works when the drama Egan has imagined for it comes onto the stage. Keeping hold of the story’s premises while following its trajectory demands hard graft. Events unfold through argument and discovery and trial and error, the convolutions of scientific progress. The narrative is often didactic, with a fair amount of ‘as you know, Bob’ explication and even more examples of on-the-fly problem-wrestling like this:

‘There’s a maximum frequency of light,’ Giocondo began tentatively. ‘In the equation of light, the sum of the squares of the frequencies in the four directions must equal a fixed number – so none of the individual frequencies can have squares that are bigger than that number. If a luxagen is moving back and forth with greater frequency than that... it can’t create light in step with its motion, because there’s no such thing.’

Yalda said, ‘That’s correct. And eventually we’ll work through the calculations for the amount of true energy that an oscillating luxagen passes to the light field, and we’ll show that when the frequency crosses the threshold Giocondo’s just described, the energy flow drops to zero.’

Readers bored by physics and by the drama inherent in scientific progress probably won’t get past any of this, much less the diagrams that litter the pages of the novel and are necessary if one is to have a hope of grasping this business. Some freakishly difficult concepts are on offer, probably best served to those with a strong background in physics. I’m not ashamed to say that I tried but lots of the ideas roared right over my head leaving the tips of my ears tinged and I suspect that even the well-educated among the SF readership will find that this novel makes demands on one’s mental *ginástica*. And yet the scope, the heart, the wit and the moral substance of the work are driven by its difficult ideas.

...Yalda put out the lamp and sat in the dark. The only certainty lay with the waves that wrapped the cosmos like the wrinkles in her prison sleeve: they would come full circle in agreement with themselves, along with everything they’d built. Nothing else could be relied upon. No one truly controlled their own body; no one ruled over the smallest part of the world.

And in the end, *The Clockwork Rocket* is a novel that comes together beautifully, synthesizing narrative from the cosmic, the personal, the social, the political and the philosophical. It seems churlish to complain about a little clunkiness in the delivery when the sum total of a story is as magnificently ambitious as this. I look forward to the next book.



**Machine** by Jennifer Pelland

(Apex Publications, 2012)

Reviewed by Ian Sales

Celia Krajewski has a fatal genetic condition. Since it's unique to her it will take some ten years before a cure is possible. Unfortunately, by that point she will have suffered irreparable brain damage. Happily, in the USA of the late twenty-first century, it's possible to put Celia's body into stasis until the cure is ready. So that she does not miss out on her life during that period, her mind can be uploaded into a bioandroid body which mimics her appearance in all particulars. This decision has unintended consequences: Celia's wife leaves her, convinced that the bioandroid Celia is not the real Celia. There is a great deal of popular support for this position – so much so, in fact, that those in the bioandroid programme must keep their participation secret or they might be subjected to violence.

It comes as little surprise, then, that Celia begins to doubt her own humanity. She cuts herself, but beneath the skin is some sort of ceramic surface. Unwilling to accept that her identity is unchanged, Celia feels a need to explore her machine self. She visits online clubs where "bot freaks" hang out, and so meets the Mechanic, a hacker who can give her what she wants. Through him, she meets a group of "mechanicals" who have altered their bioandroid bodies such that they no longer resemble their biological originals. One in particular fascinates Celia. 1101 has changed its bioandroid body to resemble an artist's dummy; it recognises no gender, nor its previous humanity. Another, Gyne, has a body that can morph between male and female.

It is the fetishistic side of Celia's situation which occupies much of the story of *Machine*. At one point, she accompanies two of the mechanicals as they act as "love doll" prostitutes. Later she plays the part of a love doll herself. *Machine* is at its best when it's exploring this response to Celia's machine identity. In contrast, the exposition explaining the origin of the bioandroid programme is inelegant and unnecessary. The popular reaction to bioandroids is clearly based on the US's anti-abortion movement, but still feels a little too arbitrary to convince. In fact, the world-building throughout feels a little too light but this is a minor quibble.

*Machine* is skillfully done but Pelland has chosen an odd way to explore her theme and it's not an approach that will appeal to everyone. There's a disturbing prurience to the mechanicals and the changes they've made of, and the uses to which they put, their new bodies. Rather than explore how her new body makes her stronger, harder, or no longer requiring food or oxygen, Celia chooses not to make herself more than human, but instead less than human. That she does so by changing her appearance to look more robotic, and through participation in the sex trade, seems only fitting.

**vN: The First Machine Dynasty**

by Madeline Ashby

(Angry Robot, 2012)

Reviewed by Andy Sawyer

The robots in Canadian author Madeline Ashby's novel are self-replicating artificial humanoids designed by a "global mega-church" as post-Rapture "helpmeets" for those humans left behind after the ascension of the just. Why, it's not clear – though given what we learn about how these robots are conditioned to engage with humanity, something beautifully ironic and poignant could have emerged. That is not what we get but *vN* is an interesting though flawed work.

Amy is one such construction, the daughter of robot Charlotte and flesh-human Jack. *vN* robots like Amy and her mother eat special robo-food and are fitted with a "failsafe" – a kind of First Law which not only prevents them from harming humans but actually causes them to shut down if violence is observed. On Amy's graduation from kindergarten, her grandmother Portia turns up and attacks Charlotte. Amy eats her in her furious attempt to defend her mother but Portia somehow survives as a consciousness linked to Amy's. Fleeing, Amy encounters Javier, a "serial iterator" who has given birth (*vN* reproduction is not gendered and *vNs* exist in networks of identical clades) to a dozen unauthorised copies of himself and becomes involved in a rather hazy political plot. The revelation that in her failsafe has broken down is key: each side, human and *vN*, sees her as a potential weapon to be used or destroyed.

The novel only takes us so far and like many sf futures, *vN* suffers from something of a lack of focus. The robot-world is well evoked, with *vN* vagrants living off junk and tensions between *vNs* and humans. There has been a violent quake on the USA's West Coast and, somewhere, a (semi?)-autonomous city-state of Mecha exists as a possible sanctuary. But is this culture all world-wide? Does every country in the world "have" *vN* humanoids? All this may be explored in subsequent volumes but some generic flattening undermines the interesting things Ashby is doing with the "robot" icon.

Still, there are fascinating things here in what is implied about families here – notably the relationship between Amy and her artificial-humanoid mother and human father and between her and Portia, the predatory grandmother. There's also a skilful creepiness. It's clear that these robots are – as 'real' robots may well be – used as sex toys. The term helpmeet does not necessarily have (in its original Biblical context) a sexual implication but it certainly derives this as a term for marriage partners and, equally certainly, New Eden Ministries, Inc. means this. The ungrown "child" *vNs* are of course tempting for those whose interests lie that way. The development of the ability in Amy's clade to overcome their failsafes is ingeniously linked to her family history and the darker side of desire for robot sextoys that will *do whatever you want*.

There is, though, a lot about the nature of *love* (not all sexual) in the novel: obsessive love, the kind of love that may be simply exploitative. And here the most interesting figure may be Jack, Amy's father: "Charlotte didn't do drama . . . now he suspected he'd find human women too warm, too loud, too mobile." Or, on the same page, "at one point [Amy] and Charlotte would be indistinguishable. Jack worried about that sometimes. What if one day, years from now, he kissed the wrong one as she walked through the door?"

**Rocket Science**, edited by Ian Sales

(Mutation Press, 2012)

Reviewed by Alastair Reynolds

Ian Sales has firm ideas about science fiction. You can't make it up as you go along, we're sternly informed – everything we write, we should research. This is such a finger-waving, puritanical outlook that it's tempting to bin the book before you get to the first story. That would be a mistake, because there's much to enjoy in *Rocket Science*. What Sales has done here is to assemble a selection of entirely new fiction and non-fiction pieces, with a loose but not exclusive focus on near-future space exploration. He has cast his net wide and there are many new authors here, with an impressive mix of genders and nationalities. It bodes very well for the future.

Proceedings kick off with Leigh Kimmel's brisk 'Tell Me A Story', a series of vignettes of Lunar colonisation from one generation to the next. It may sound like faint praise to say that a story is charming but that's exactly the case here. I also enjoyed Bert Ellingsen's surreal but note-perfect 'Dancing On The Red Planet', which is pretty much exactly what you'd expect from the title.

There's darkness here, as well as light. Stephen Palmer's grimly sardonic 'A Biosphere Ends' documents a robotic investigation into the failure of a human Mars settlement. CJ Pagel's 'The Taking of IOSA 2083' is a gritty slice of deep-space warfare in a solar system constrained by plausible physics and nasty geopolitics; it reminded me of Paul McAuley's *Quiet War* series. Iain Caim's 'Conquistadors' seems to be building to a celebration of gung-ho capitalism, before throwing in a brutal lesson about the costs of winning, and Martin McGrath's bleakly clever 'Pathfinders' pulled a fast one on me.

Despite Sales's foreword, there isn't actually a huge amount of science in the fiction. Plenty of accurately portrayed stuff about the mechanics of spaceflight, to be sure, but less in the way of genuine speculation. The human adaptive mutation described in Deborah Walker's 'Sea of Maternity' may or may not be plausible but it's bolstered by reference to real fungal biology and (for me, at least) the necessary conviction to carry the story. There are no bad stories here – even the clunkiest, Philip E Kaldon's 'The New Tenant', has the saving grace of being likeable, which is no mean achievement. But perhaps the best story in the book, and the one that closes the volume, is the piece most clearly fixated on the past, Sean Martin's 'Dreaming at Baikour'. Despite treading some of the same literary territory as Andy Duncan's 'The Chief Designer' – both stories concern the turbulent life of the Soviet rocket engineer Korolev – it is very much its own achievement, and contains some extremely effective writing.

As for the non-fiction pieces, I'd quite happily read a whole book of them. Karen Burnham's 'The Complexity of the Humble Spacesuit' is the best of a generally excellent bunch. Duncan Lunan's history of 'waverider entry spacecraft', clotted with footnotes, is interesting enough but seems like an eccentric choice for a book presumably aimed at a wider audience than astronautics enthusiasts. But Sean Martin's elegiac story rounds things off handsomely and Sales is to be congratulated on his initiative in assembling this anthology.

**Adrift On The Sea Of Rains** by Ian Sales

(Whippleshield Books, 2012)

Reviewed by Jonathan McCalmont

Stranded on the moon, a group of American astronauts watch with horror as the Cold War turns hot and the Earth begins to tear itself apart. Painfully aware that reserves of food and good will are running low, they begin experimenting with a new technology in the hope that it will somehow allow them to find a new home.

First in a series of four self-published novellas, *Adrift On The Sea Of Rains* offers an unusual but compelling combination of immaculately researched hard sf and literary fiction. Central to the book's strangeness is that, despite drawing on two very different literary traditions to tell his story, Sales makes no attempt to integrate the prose styles associated with these traditions. This collision of styles results in a series of arresting passages where beautifully formed and intensely poetic images loom up unexpectedly from a fog of numbers and acronyms. Initially quite unsettling, this discordant style proves highly effective once Sales begins exploring similar tensions within his characters. By juxtaposing the inhuman and technical elements of hard sf with the humanistic and lyrical elements of literary fiction, Sales suggests that his characters may well be burying themselves in the technical aspects of their jobs in order to escape from feelings which, though perfectly human, have no place amidst the square-jawed heroism of the American space programme. This ambivalent attitude towards the character of Apollo-era astronauts also provides the basis for an unflinchingly brutal assault on the myth of the 'right stuff'. In fact, it is hard not to think of science fictional archetypes like Robert Heinlein's Capable Man when Sales takes all the machismo and patriotism of a Sixties astronaut and forces it to decay into a hideous radioactive sludge of pride, resentment and petulant sentimentality.

Though packed with invention and fleeting displays of true literary grace, *Adrift On The Sea Of Rains* is a somewhat unbalanced piece of writing. For example, while the experimental juxtaposition of different prose styles is successful on the whole, Sales does occasionally lose himself in technical detail, resulting in readers having to pick their way through needlessly dense thickets of acronym-studded exposition. This sense of imbalance is also evident in his tendency to lavish attention on world building while expecting readers to fill in the gaps when it comes to characterisation. Particularly annoying is the way that Sales ends the book with both a bibliography and a potted history of his fictional space programme when those pages might have been better put to better use unpacking the human elements of the story. Thankfully, though undoubtedly a source of frustration, these imbalances prove relatively unproblematic when weighed against the scope of Sales's ambition and the adroitness of his execution. *The Apollo Quartet* promises much but in order to deliver on this promise Sales must learn to trust his instincts as a literary stylist as the muse of technological correctness is only holding him back.

***Pandemonium: Stories of the Apocalypse*, edited by Anne C. Perry and Jared Shurin**

(Jurassic London, 2011)

Reviewed by Maureen Kincaid Speller

Why are we so obsessed by the thought of the world ending? For those of certain faiths, apocalypse is not so much an ending as a new beginning, the revelatory lifting of the veil, at which point they, as believers, will finally see what the rest of us cannot. For others, the thought of the world ending is so incomprehensible, they have to keep pushing at the idea, trying to imagine what it might be like. They make elaborate plans for coping with every possible eventuality, enjoying the exquisite thrill of horror this provokes, before comforting themselves with the fact that it hasn't happened yet and probably won't. Some people, like me, suspect that the apocalypse has either been quietly underway for years already and has already gone too far to be stopped or else that it will quite end suddenly, in a breath.

Most apocalypse scenarios assume that people are significant participants in it yet what struck me most forcefully when I saw John Martin's apocalyptic paintings at the Tate Gallery's recent exhibition was how insignificant humanity was to the whole business. Tiny figures crowded round the edges of the paintings, almost tumbling out of the frames in some instances, but it was the huge boiling skies, the volcanic eruptions, the floods that were the stars. This apocalypse seems to be an intensely visual experience so how might one write about it? *Pandemonium: Stories of the Apocalypse*, a collection of short stories partially inspired by the exhibition, takes on this challenge with, I have to say, mixed results.

Several stories are directly inspired by Martin's work but none are entirely satisfactory. David Bryher's 'Architect of Hell' features the correspondence of Mulciber, architect of Pandemonium, to Martin, to whom he has turned for inspiration. Bryher seeks to account for Martin's extraordinary vision of the world but the story seems slight, perhaps because Martin himself is never present. Scott K Anderson's 'A Private Viewing' is a more harrowing story of revenge, suggesting not only that last year's riots were harbingers of the end days but that Martin's paintings themselves might have the capacity to provoke madness. Archie Black's 'Sadak in Search of the Waters of Oblivion', its title taken from one of Martin's most famous paintings, leads the reader into a hideous post-apocalyptic future as a group of explorers travel south through the former United States. Both are well written but felt more like exercises in craft than attempts to stir up genuine emotion.

In fact, deeply-felt emotion is something this collection seems to lack. Instead we see superficial people behaving badly when the end times arrive and a parade of the selfish and clueless pass by, from Lauren Beukes's overweening 'Chislehurst Messiah' to the guests of the ghastly dinner party disrupted by the end of the world in Magnus Anderson's 'Another Abyss', not forgetting the survivors of Andy Remic's 'Ἰανδαμειον'. It appears this time around that the bastards rather than the meek will inherit the earth.

Curiously, it is assumed for the most part that this apocalypse will be a Christian one. This allows for a certain amount of poking fun at those who sincerely believe in the Rapture (such as in Chrysanthy Balis's 'The Harvest') but also

permits a deeper questioning of faith, present in Jonathan Oliver's challenging 'The Day or the Hour', Tom Pollock's nicely observed 'Evacuation' with its conflicting love stories and, less successfully if more polemically, SL Grey's 'OMG GTFO', the only story to touch on the other Abrahamic faiths. By contrast, Kim Lakin-Smith's 'Deluge', Charlie Human's 'The Immaculate Particle' and Jon Courtenay Grimwood's 'The Last Human' eschew the contemporary world for fantastical settings but while all are competent stories they sit oddly in a collection which, for the most part, focuses on the familiar. The apocalypse seems to prefer to stay close to home.

Inevitably, the fictional equivalent of the terrible desire to laugh at a funeral comes to the fore a number of times, as authors try either to treat the End Times with a light touch or else reinvigorate the trope with a new twist. Den Patrick's 'The End of the World' seems to fall into this category, as does Lou Morgan's 'At the Sign of the Black Dove' and, much more successfully, Sam Wilson's 'Postapocalypse', which sets science and belief against one another in a very entertaining way. I have mixed feelings about Osgood Vance's 'Closer', not because it isn't well written and in its way touching but because apparently we can't even manage the end of the world without an sf baseball story!

Which brings us finally to Sophia McDougall's 'Not the End of the World', the last story in the collection and by far the best. It unfolds slowly, as we meet the inhabitants of Frau Holl's boarding house, situated somewhere in wartime Germany. The various inhabitants go about their war work, worry about the possibility of being called up, are fearful without being clear what it is they are frightened of. Time hangs heavy, the days run into one another. Only gradually does it become clear that something strange is happening, starting when Elly sees a stream of soap bubbles float past her window, something almost unimaginable in her austere world. This story dips deep into the well of emotion without ever becoming sentimental; the dignified composure of those who know what is happening is set against the blissful ignorance of those who don't but who are safer than they can possibly imagine. In its understated way, this story says more about the nature of endings than all the other stories put together.

What this anthology demonstrates is that apocalypse itself is a very slippery concept. We think about it probably more than we care to admit, particularly given the present state of the world, but it is difficult to find anything to say about it without resorting to well-worn tropes and images. With single stories we overlook this so it is only when an anthology brings together a group of stories on the same subject that we realise just how difficult it is to encompass the nature of apocalypse. We are too small to see the whole picture. We can only ever experience it in fragments and those individual pieces don't always fit well together because our personal visions of the final ending are so different. We joke to keep it at bay, or we torment ourselves with the emotional horror of it all. Only rarely can we find the grace to simply accept whatever comes, as and when it arrives.

**The Broken Universe by Paul Melko**

(Tor, 2012)

Reviewed by Finn Dempster

**T**he *Broken Universe* is the second book in a series and this flawed but undeniably likeable novel begins directly where the first book ended. Thus we join John, Henry and Grace amidst the blur and noise of gunfire and dimension-hopping; the young group teleporting from Universe 7651 to Universe 7650, engaged in a dramatic, multi-dimensional battle. Their adversaries are the villainous Alarians – a marooned race of dimension-hoppers with a loathing for mere “dups” (a derogatory term for non-Alarians like the protagonists who are each just one of an unlimited number of duplicates existing across multiple universes).

Stumbling somewhat to keep up with this full-tilt narrative, we learn that the trio, whilst seemingly of our time, are in possession of a technology that allows them passage between the multiple universes, endless versions of Earth where the differences can be minute or vast. The Alarians, rich and powerful but stuck where they are, are murderously determined to get their hands on this technology and regain the ability to travel between universes and dominate worlds. Both groups have been exploiting small differences between slightly differing universes to their financial advantage; John and his friends had been satisfied by the modest income generated by their pinball machine company Pinball Wizard but even this small anomaly was detected by the watchful Alarians; Grace had the misfortune to be captured and tortured by the Alarian leader, whom she killed upon her rescue by John and one of his doppelgangers, the amoral John Prime. Somewhere in this mix, hiding in the shadows, is the mysterious organisation called the Vig, seemingly responsible for policing multidimensional travel. Can these friends continue to keep this technology out of the Alarians’ hands, even as they explore further versions of Earth recruiting ever more doppelgangers to the cause? Can Grace, unhinged by her ordeal, be helped back to normality before hunger for revenge consumes her? And can John Prime be trusted at all?

This novel has its problems. Backstory is certainly a necessity here but often isn’t handled very well, Melko simply serving up the facts we need to know in slabs of prose which are rich in information but unappetisingly bland and undramatic:

Visgrath and the Alarians were marooned universe travellers. Decades prior, they had been trapped in Universe 7650 by an organisation of multiverse police called the Vig. They had had no transfer gates nor the ability to build one and had been forced to make the best of it.

However, whilst we might have hoped for something more elegant than this, these passages serve their purpose. Later chapters will show both that Melko can deliver backstory with flair and that the simple, unadorned language style he uses throughout this novel can be an asset: “Bullets slammed into the barn wall, making holes of sunlight.”

Pacing is another problem. Having thrown us into the middle of an action-packed thriller involving multiple universes, kidnap and murder, pan-dimensional fascist colonisers and transfer gates, we are then introduced to

the rather more sedate world of the group’s import/export company Pinball Wizards, an abrupt slowing of pace which involves a significant receding of any real sense of menace, although it is good fun watching the gang importing, say, a crate of comics each worth a fortune in their current universe. Life and death conflict gives way to a lengthy battle over corporate ownership rights, with the Alarians and their new leader Gesalex (already saddled with rather stagey monikers), reduced to blustering, contract-waving buffoons, easily thwarted. We watch with an impatient sense that bigger things should be happening as the group busy themselves ordering spare parts for pinball machines, hustling for bank loans, organising payrolls, and other workaday concerns. (It is also noteworthy that company members are frequently referred to as ‘Wizards’; the transfer gates are indeed essentially magic portals, John’s portable device a magic talisman. Those looking for hard SF are thus advised to look elsewhere.)

This section of the book has its purpose – with whole pages given over to dialogue, we do become acquainted with the characters – but much of this we just don’t need; Melko has yet to master separating the wheat from the chaff. This flaw is also apparent in the dialogue itself. Much of the story is told via conversation and this does succeed in lending the narrative a sense of immediacy; a moment-by-moment spontaneity which neatly reflects the chaotic, catch-as-catch-can story through which these characters hurtle. But again, too much chaff gets through:

“I don’t know,” Grace said. “Or rather, I have no plan. What better evidence than myself?”

“When?”

“Now.”

“How about tomorrow?”

“Fine,” Grace said.

If only more of the conversations had been condensed to their essence and repackaged as a tidy little line of prose. In a similar vein, I respectfully suggest to Mr Melko that the numerous and annoying interjections and filler sounds (“Uh”, “Umm”, etc.) – presumably included in the dialogue for realism – be removed. The drag factor of all this is considerable; the 100<sup>th</sup> page is receding in the rear view mirror before events pick up speed and the novel gets into gear.

But I’m happy to say that for all its flaws (and contrary to the title) *The Broken Universe* actually works – and works well. Melko’s sequel may be a diamond in the rough but it is a diamond for all that. His biggest strength is his characters, his ability to fill the pages with guys and gals we care about. There are the occasional weak characters – backroom technical expert Henry and his doppelgangers don’t really bring a bottle to this party, particularly as the theme is not reality science – but happily, these superfluous cyphers are eclipsed by several genuinely compelling individuals: John the young, idealistic, likeably flawed

everyman; the emotionally damaged Grace with her internal struggle to maintain a hard, protective shell about herself; and, perhaps most compelling of all, the sinister John Prime who, although not evil, has a pathological self-interest which is almost as bad. The on-going tension engendered by the uneasy alliance between Prime and the conscientiousness 'original' John (who in the previous novel was forced to watch as Prime successfully claimed much of John's own life – including long-term girlfriend Casey – for his own) is as taut as piano wire, all the more so because John feels an unwelcome fascination with his dark reflection, a reluctant admiration for John Prime's egocentric, guilt-free quest for acquisition and power. This plot line is a fizzing fuse; what will happen when it runs out?

As with the pacing, the structure of the story can be challenging as the freewheeling plot is rather eclectic. Melko bravely eschews the safety net which a tighter central narrative might have provided, preferring to throw believable characters into strange realms wherein their existing moral compass spins uselessly and letting their flawed decisions lead the way. In keeping with this spirit of realism, he allows his characters, sympathetic and otherwise, to fail, to make the wrong decisions; no idealised heroes here, just ordinary people doing their best. (Ironically, some of the more problematic areas of the plot are those where the courage Melko has in his convictions temporarily fails him and he briefly retreats to the shelter of convention, as with the contrived resolution to the dynamic between John and his first Casey, now with Prime, and the identical Casey he is with by the start of this novel.) This approach results in a tangential plotline but one that is more believable for that very reason. Events unfold as chaotically as we might expect with real twenty-somethings who are gifted with intoxicating power to exploit, unknown adversaries to contend with and the more familiar but equally pressing issues of love, lust and money to negotiate. There is a price to pay for this realism; we must accept the presence in the text of half-explored concepts and narrative cul-de-sacs, with some plotlines and ideas under-developed or dropped altogether (there also remains a curious fixation with finances, long after events would seem to have evolved beyond the accountancy books). For example, raised but regrettably forgotten is the intriguing notion that the group might identify murderers caught in one universe with doppelgangers still at large in others and then nudge the authorities in the right direction.

But the price is worth paying. In return we get moments of drama that are more intense because they feel natural, the group arriving at these moments through a believable process of trial and error. Besides, even when only partially formed, those unexplored ideas add unpredictability, keeping us guessing which of the many open doors the characters will choose... or be pushed through (they also serve as tasters, prompting us to follow where Melko might lead us with other books in the series). Accordingly there is genuine drama when John, having become aware of the group's lack of direction, decides to make a declaration of intent, proposing the group turn their attentions to more philanthropic, charitable aims: "I want to do good. I want to do things with this technology that will better people's lives. I can't even get my mind around the human suffering in any one universe, let alone an infinite number of them." The anticipation and excitement engendered by these lines is heightened by the knowledge that whatever is to follow will be anything but predictable; expectations which by the end of this enjoyable novel are amply fulfilled.

## *In The Lion's Mouth* by Michael Flynn

(Tor, 2012)

Reviewed by Duncan Lawrie

From the back cover, this book appears to be the third in a series, though it isn't reliant on any prior knowledge on the part of the reader. The ending, however, is beautifully designed to encourage you not to stop here.

*In The Lion's Mouth* is space opera written as a club tale; it is told through a wary interview between Ravn Olafsdottir and three other women and the framing device has a dynamic of its own, powered by Ravn's confidence in her material and the desire of the others to hear the whole story. She is an agent of the Shadows, an organisation modelled on medieval chivalry, which maintains order across a Confederation of many solar systems. The Confederation itself seems to encompass the larger part of a humanity which has lost understanding of the technology of its ancestors. Even without comprehension, though, enough is replicated to allow a space opera to operate. Ravn tells how she kidnapped a man called Donovan and of her attempts to turn him into her ally in a secret war. He is the father of one of the interrogators, with another being the mother and all three interrupt to reinterpret the tale, thereby providing further background information.

The voice of the book is a self-amused melding of the languages of romance and saga with echoes of Nordic and Celtic, of medieval French and the formal English once used to translate the Great Works of Eastern cultures. The blend feels cloth-eared at first, as though the author has no understanding of the culture he is attempting to replicate. As the novel goes on it becomes clear that this is no accident, that the far future setting is a messy blend of Earth cultures and that the language reflects their imperfect knowledge of their heritage. The flowery flavours are those of pseudo-courtesy speech that medieval re-enactors might spout today. This language is further bent by misunderstanding of the lost sciences of the Commonwealth. They speak poetically of "quondam states" but adding the word entanglement lets us see what is intended.

The novel's voice draws the reader into conspiracy with the author, in enjoying the book as a light hearted presentation. With such adornment, the story itself feels at first something of a frippery with Ravn acting the bumpkin, unlikely to be a serious participant in the story. As the novel progresses, though, it is clear that the telling intentionally undercuts the seriousness of the tale. The Shadows are split by a rebellion against the Confederacy's ultimate rulers. It is a small scale, knightly war, fought out of sight of the common people. Each death or survival matters. Flynn's mastery over his writing is revealed in the breathless action writing of the climax. His control is maintained by the recovery of a lighter tone with the merging of plot and frame at the conclusion. Further misdirection winds down the story whilst setting a hook to pull you on into the next volume.

*The Troupe* by Robert Jackson Bennett  
(Orbit, 2012)

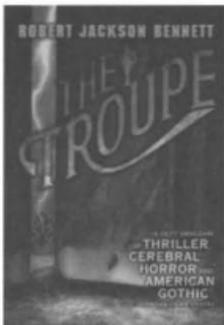
Reviewed by Jim Steel

Nostalgia ain't what it used to be. Ray Bradbury was writing for readers who could remember the first half of the Twentieth Century or, at the very least, remember older folks' firsthand reminiscences of the time. Robert Jackson Bennett is writing for people who can remember reading Bradbury when they were younger. The difference is important. And while the first chapter or so of *The Troupe* reads like a weak pastiche of Bradbury – *Something Wicked This Way Comes* is the obvious touchstone – it soon becomes clear that the novel is merely building up speed before take-off. Once it is in the air, we can see it for what it truly is and it is something that has its own shape and direction.

George is a sixteen-year-old piano player and a precociously good one at that. He joins a local vaudeville troupe as a pit musician and seems perfectly happy with the position. His timing and playing are so good that all of the acts are enhanced and the takings rise. Then, after six months, he announces his departure. It turns out that George has been looking for news of another vaudeville ensemble: the Silenus Troupe. Silenus passed through George's town around sixteen years ago and had a fling with his mother. He is, quite obviously, George's longest father.

Silenus's travelling troupe is much weirder than George's first one and is soaked in magic: a puppeteer with strangely life-like puppets; a strongwoman, wrapped in bandages, who can also predict the future (but no longer does so as an act since it encourages undesirables); a beautiful Persian dancer; a right-hand man who only communicates through a slate and chalk; and Silenus's office, which appears in every hotel they move to. The troupe is also being hunted by dark creatures and it becomes apparent that our mundane reality is merely a veil that covers the true condition of the world. There is a Gnostic struggle being waged. Silenus, despite his underhand ways, is on the side of good – if only because he has no real choice in the matter.

This is a perfectly-paced novel and Bennett thoroughly deserves his growing reputation. The troupe – Silenus and his silent lieutenant at any rate – are attempting to assemble a secret song that will end the cosmic conflict. They already have some of the parts and this quest provides the narrative drive. The small cast of the travelling party also leaves Bennett enough room to explore their characters through the innocent eyes of George, and they are all haunting creations. It's no golden age fantasy; Colette, the singer, has to repeatedly point out to locals that she is, in fact, Persian and not 'coloured' in order to avoid race bars. It is something that the troupe gives no thought to, immersed as they are within their own era, but it is a condition that reminds the reader that there are all sorts of horrors and not all are imaginary.



*The Kings of Eternity* by Eric Brown  
(Solaris, 2011)

Reviewed by Gary Dalkin

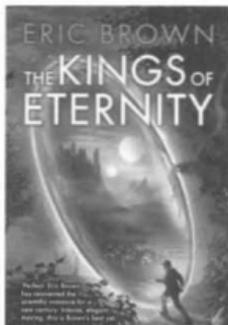
*The Kings of Eternity* is a novel with one foot happily in the mainstream and one in the genre. As such, it is a book which may baffle those who don't get it, a novel unapologetically for us – us being those who have grown-up with genre fiction but have also read and appreciate literary fiction.

Eric Brown's novel is about writers. In 1999, Daniel Langham is living in self-imposed exile on the Greek island of Kallithéa. An acclaimed literary novelist, he is troubled that the success of his books has attracted the attentions of an unofficial biographer who may have blackmail in mind. When we meet Daniel he is in the midst of a nightmare, hunted by a reptilian alien assassin; on the next page he uses his mereth to determine that the "Englishwoman was, then, what she claimed to be". After these hints of the fantastic, Daniel's story unfolds for a long time as a tentative love story. The Englishwoman is Caroline Platt, an ex-patriot artist, and, coincidentally or not, she owns first editions of all Daniel's novels. Can Daniel trust her and, equally, can Caroline trust him?

Alternating and rather longer chapters, take place in 1935 and later years. Jonathon Langham, Daniel's grandfather, is a young novelist patterned after Lawrence Durrell. At the beginning of his story he is worried by the lack of success of his first three books and involved in an affair with a French actress, Clara DeFries, a relationship made difficult by his jealousy. Worst of all is the news that Jonathon's father is terminally ill.

Welcome relief from all these troubles comes with an invitation to his country manor by old friend and editor Jasper Carnegie. Also invited is the science fiction writer Edward Vaughan and soon the intrepid trio is investigating a mysterious blue light and strange figures in Hopton Wood. Of course, at this point one might think of Ryhope Wood from Robert Holdstock's *Mythago Wood*, while the very name Edward Vaughan summons the essence of 20<sup>th</sup> Century English pastoral romance in the figures of Edward Elgar and Ralph Vaughan Williams.

To say more would be to spoil the immense pleasures of discovering Brown's ingenious and very English plot. *The Kings of Eternity* is a scientific romance in every sense; a homage to classic pulp science fiction; a melancholy exploration of the British artistic soul (readers of Brown's *Meridian Days* and other novels will be familiar with his colony of ex-patriot artists); a tender love story (or even two); and, in the final chapters, an exciting thriller. Brown most affectingly manages the difficult feat of fusing a realistic novel of character with some joyfully retro genre tropes. The result, minus a couple of continuity errors which should have been caught in the edit, is a thoroughly entertaining, civilised and gripping read.



**Random Walk by Alexandra Claire**

(Gomer Press, 2011)

Reviewed by Anthony Nanson

**D**o you ever feel oppressed by the relentless coercion to spend ever more of your time online, staring at the screen, jumping through the hoops imposed by organisations of every kind? Do you detect the synergy between this and the interests of big business allied with government to control and exploit us as compliant worker-consumers and at the same time to distract us with a barrage of images and words from the ongoing demolition of our economic security, our health and the beauty of our physical surroundings?

*Random Walk* extrapolates all this into a future-primitive dystopia in which an all-powerful company, e-Tel, manages the population of a flood-ruined Welsh city by means of a tracking chip implanted under your skin at birth, a Receiver that floods your perception with virtual-reality Xperiences, a Box that runs your home, satellites able to detect the heat of living bodies from space and ruthless Guards who'll kill anyone who tries to steal from the polythene-tented Food Fields outside the city because they lack enough work credit to buy food. Not everyone is compliant, however. Remi spends his nights running across rooftops on a mission to disable e-Tel's information transmitters. Eight-year-old Osian has thrown his Receiver in the river because he couldn't bear the noise in his head. Lisa has come from the wild countryside where people grow their own food outside e-Tel's control. Only now she has the chance of a privileged position inside the company machine.

In this world, information technology has ceased to have any positive aspect. It serves only tyranny. Sites of resistance must be found elsewhere: in the physicality of bodies able to leap across rooftops and of minds able to pick a 'random walk' to dodge surveillance computers seeking predictable patterns; in the bonds of affection between people, expressed in the touching of bodies and the speaking of Welsh words – 'bach', 'cwtch', 'calon', 'fy nghariad' – redolent of endearment.

Sadly, the novel's execution doesn't match the cogency of its insights. I found the prose rather flat and monotonous and more imaginative work is needed to evoke a convincing future world, beyond the basic apparatus of e-Tel and the circumstances of the protagonists. The city is supposed to be burdened with teeming masses but the presence of other people is referred to so rarely that in most scenes my mind's eye saw the characters moving through what seemed an empty city. Moreover, there's no sense of how the situation there fits in with what's going on in the rest of the world – and the story doesn't really work as what Ursula K Le Guin calls a 'psychomyth', isolated in its own pocket universe, since it's explicitly set in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Wales. The part I enjoyed best was, in fact, the self-justifying speech by e-Tel director Oswald White, the equivalent of O'Brien in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. There's a telling irony in his insistence the Random Walkers must not be allowed to become a critical mass that would cause the social order to change.

**172 Hours On The Moon by Johan Harstad,**

translated by Tara F Chace

(Atom, 2012)

Reviewed by Anne F Wilson

**172 Hours On The Moon**, a Norwegian Young Adult space horror novel, is a puzzling book. The premise is that first moon mission since the Seventies – which includes three teenagers as a publicity exercise – wakes a Resident Evil and people start dying. Will any of them get home alive?

It's puzzling for a number of reasons. Firstly, the basis for the teenagers being on the mission is shaky. The idea is that they will generate publicity to secure funding for a second, more serious mission. The ostensible reason for the initial mission is to find rare minerals for use in computers but the real reason is that a signal has been noticed for the first time since the Seventies. NASA knows that this is incredibly bad and dangerous and yet they send a team to investigate it with three teenagers on board.

The teenagers are the winners of a worldwide lottery and the first part of the book deals with the lottery, introduces us to the teenagers and describes their training as astronauts. I didn't find the characters very interesting: Mia, a Norwegian, was entered into the lottery by her parents and doesn't really want to go; Antoine is French and has recently been dumped by his girlfriend; Midori just wants to get out of Japan. If I were running a lottery to choose three teenagers to go to the moon I wouldn't expect the first three names out of the hat to be suitable, actually prepared to go or necessarily to have parental permission. Here the first three picked turn out to have compliant parents and they all agree to go. The training seems to be conducted in English but they take intensive scientific training in a foreign language in their stride. We aren't even told if they have any aptitude for maths or science.

The novel does, however, pick up when we get into space. We are briefly introduced to the adult characters and then they land, find the secret lunar base and shortly thereafter people start dying. The gripping question is who, if any, out of the original group of eight characters will make it back to earth. At this point I was rather glad that I didn't much care for any of them. Unfortunately, the adult characters do not put up much of a fight, preferring to take refuge in drugs or suicide when they perceive everything is lost. Again, this was frustrating; I wanted them to try harder to survive. Aren't astronauts chosen for resilience and ingenuity in the face of improbable odds? We also never find out anything about the Resident Evil, except that it (they?) enjoys killing humans. People mutter various things about the moon being hell, abandoned by God or a home for fallen angels but none of these ideas are explored.

The novel won the prestigious Brage Prize in Norway when it was first published in 2008. I'm not sure why, unless some of its excellence has been lost in translation or perhaps because of the final twist, which is not signalled and is more confusing than scary. To be honest, I much preferred *Alien*.

**Manhattan In Reverse** by Peter F Hamilton

(Pan MacMillan, 2011)

Reviewed by Martin Potts

The release of *Manhattan In Reverse* is significant as this is Peter Hamilton's first short story collection in thirteen years (following 1998's *A Second Chance At Eden*). As an author renowned for his huge word count, it is refreshing to have an opportunity to read his shorter fiction. The seven stories – all but the title story previously published – inevitably dip into his *Night's Dawn* and *Commonwealth* universes and as such will be of great interest to fans of these series. The collection reflects Hamilton's oft visited combination of the theme of the evolution of humankind and with a murder mystery plot, all delivered with his consummate storytelling skill. For myself I was particularly drawn to the two Paula Myo stories which ticked all these boxes and like the rest, they do not fail to deliver.

The longest story is the first, 'Watching Trees Grow', which follows an investigation by Edward Buchanan Raleigh which spans over 200 years (1832 to 2038, hence the title). Set in an alternative history where the Roman Empire never fell, the mystery thread presents a timeline with fascinating conjectures in human longevity and societal structure dominated by family membership. This is followed by 'Footvote', set in the *Night's Dawn* universe, which tells the backstory of a family attracted to colonisation and the political and social pressures which push a family into a new life. Indeed, Hamilton has said he enjoyed parodying the European Constitution which was being published as he wrote it. Of course we are aware of the cataclysmic consequences which follow, which adds to the enjoyment of the read.

'If At First...' is a very short genetics story with a nice sense of humour and is followed by the even shorter 'The Forever Kitten'. These work very well in a collection such as this where they can be read together and both make their points very well.

The collection then turns to the *Commonwealth* universe for its final three stories. The first is 'Blessed by An Angel' which I would suggest is an essential narrative for anyone who enjoyed the *Void* trilogy and indeed will have maximum impact only if you have read those three novels. Stylistically this story instantly has the feel of the *Commonwealth* and the clash of competing ideologies, in this case the "Higher" group which pursue immortality via a shared existence and the "Advancers" which attempt it individually via achievements in drugs and technology. An important story (it was originally in *The New Space Opera*, edited by Gardner Dozois and Jonathon Strahan), its inclusion certainly adds gravitas to this collection.

'The Demon Trap' and 'Manhattan in Reverse' superbly use the popular character Investigator Paula Myo, who first appeared in *Pandora's Star*, to unravel new mysteries and all her abilities (physical and mental) are called upon. 'The Demon Trap' is the longer of the two and, for me, is the stronger, a 'Howdunnit' puzzle of greater complexity and scope which plays with perspective and viewpoint. I feel both benefit from being adjacent, allowing the reader to submerge into Myo's character and are an absorbing way to end the collection.

Very enjoyable for Hamilton fans, this collection could also provide a representative introduction to his style and themes for those new to his writing and perhaps daunted by embarking on the longer novels and should certainly be enjoyed by all who support the SF short story.

**Final Days** by Gary Gibson

(Tor UK, 2011)

Reviewed by Stuart Carter

Shouldn't the end of the world be a bit more terrifying? Lord knows other science fiction doomsayers have kept me awake at night long after reading of humanity's umpteenth destruction so why did I sleep so soundly after reading *Final Days*?

It's an intriguing question because the cover blurb of Gary Gibson's latest novel reads like SF crack cocaine. We're talking advanced alien wormholes leading to Cthulhu-esque pyramids in a dimly glowing universe billions of years into the future. We're talking interstellar human colonies joined to the homeworld but then cut adrift by terrorist attacks on the wormhole portals. And, most terrifying of all, a wormhole-driven excursion into the near future which reveals a burned and dead Earth. Just one human being is discovered alive, albeit frozen in a cryogenic facility on the moon. Brought back to the present, a desperate race ensues to discover what he knows and how to stop the end of the world. An end which is already beginning...

Doesn't that sound like one hell of a book? I want to read that book now!

Sadly, this book isn't *that* book. After a promising start that involves a tense undercover sting operation on an off-world colony and chillingly claustrophobic exploration of those far-future pyramids, *Final Days* somehow dissipates its tightly-wound energy to become a rather listlessly generic chase novel.

The opening deep future sequences and discussions of advanced physics behind them seem to augur well. Gibson's writing here is reminiscent of Stephen Baxter at his punishingly realistic best: evoking the horror of a dead, dark universe and the inexplicable remnants of civilisations so distant in time from us that we can barely even imagine it.

Some interesting ideas and technology are introduced in this future before, back in the present day of the book, characters and situations are set up with a slick noir tension that Richard Morgan would be proud of. Crikey, imagine that – the bastard child of Baxter's hard science and Morgan's hard, er, physique! And so we follow Saul, the good cop who has lost his family (with the twist that they're not dead, just trapped at the other end of a broken wormhole) simply trying to hold it together against an uncaring world, and Jeff, the witness from the end of the universe, who discovers the remnants of his exploratory team have all died to protect the biggest secret of all time, and that someone is now looking for *him*.

Then all that energy is lost with a too-soon reveal of the big secret – the end of the world – that is utterly lacking the necessary punch and horror. It *should* jump out and scream in your face "Everyone is going to die!!!" but ends up feeling more like a PowerPoint presentation, "World, End Of – Some Thoughts." It's a shame because, as I said, both the jacket blurb and the first few chapters show a great deal of promise. Unfortunately *Final Days* slowly morphs into the novel adaptation of a Hollywood blockbuster, complete with big explosions, lots of guns and no apparent heart.

*Champion Of Mars* by Guy Haley

(Solaris, 2012)

Reviewed by David Towsey

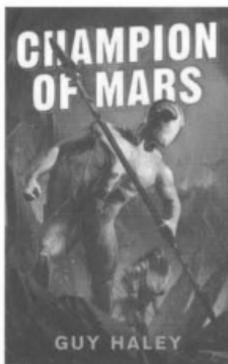
**M**ars and science fiction have had a long relationship – sometimes fruitful, sometimes rocky (if you'll forgive the pun). I can't read a novel that involves the red planet, or even hear it mentioned, without childhood memories being triggered: "The chances of anything coming from Mars are a million to one," he said..." Into this arena steps *Champion of Mars*, Guy Haley's third novel.

Haley's is a varied Mars; the novel jumps between numerous different times in the planet's future. The reader

is shown the beginnings of a terraforming project, the start of large scale migration and many illustrative moments of cultures that span thousands of years. There are some who might find this constant jumping distracting or disorientating. Others might quickly establish favourite story threads and be disappointed when they have to leave them. I found the obvious sense of manipulation unsatisfying – as a reader I don't want to feel prodded or poked into a specific response. Changing from one time to another was often utilised to create a cliffhanger moment and I quickly became aware of this technique in *Champion of Mars* which distanced me from the story. Regardless, this is certainly a pacy and action-orientated novel and Haley manages to combine large theoretical ideas with a fast moving plot.

The novel is tied together by the constant presence of one character (who bears many names) and his companion AI (who progresses from being called Cybele, to Kybele, and finally Kaibelli). In this future, human souls are backed-up like hard drive data – reminiscent of Richard Morgan's *Altered Carbon* – and reincarnated into new bodies at the whim of a group of controlling artificial intelligences. It is the combination of this central conceit and the resultant human-AI relationship that provides the most interesting element of this novel. Kaibelli's love for her human charge – including the physical, thanks to the use of "sheaths" – is a complicated and well-explored idea. Anyone who is familiar with Haley's work will appreciate the subtlety, integrity and care with which he characterises artificial life.

However, there is one significant problematic area in *Champion of Mars*: the prose is largely stuttering and disjointed and this became particularly apparent when read aloud. Words such as "jollity" and "deliquesced" simply don't scan well. Intriguing and unique scenarios are often described in a clichéd manner such as a futuristic fight scene that is "both terrible and beautiful". If I see another author liken combat to dancing I will be sorely tempted to wear a tutu to a karate class. Still, whilst *Champion of Mars* isn't the smoothest of reading experiences, there are enough exciting ideas and characters to compensate and I would recommend it to anyone interested in the exploration of AI.

*Age of Aztec* by James Lovegrove

(Solaris 2012)

Reviewed by Sandra Unerman

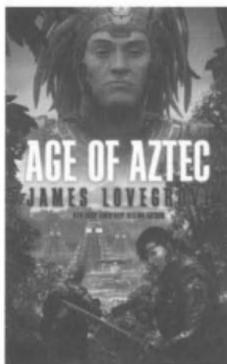
**T**his is an action adventure set in a 2012 in which the Aztec Empire has achieved domination of the Earth. Although it is the fourth novel in the *Pantheon* series, I read it as a standalone.

In London, a human sacrifice is disrupted by a terrorist, the Conquistador, who kills several priests and escapes. A female detective, Mal Vaughn, succeeds in identifying the Conquistador as a wealthy business man, Stuart Reston. He escapes from her trap with the help of Mayan guerrillas who smuggle him out of the country. He joins their plot to assassinate the Great Speaker, the head of the Empire, in Tenochtitlan and Mal follows in pursuit. But Stuart's plans are overtaken by the appearance of new enemies of the Empire as the Aztec gods return to earth. He and Mal join forces when they meet the Great Speaker and discover he is not what they expect. In the battles that follow, the future of the Earth is at stake.

Lovegrove has worked through the implications of his alternative history with convincing detail. The police force are Jaguar warriors who expect to be summarily executed if they fail. Many victims at the regular blood sacrifices are volunteers, eager for martyrdom. The brutality and oppression of the regime is all the more powerful because of the casual way it is taken for granted. A businessman in Sicily treats as unremarkable the comment that "nothing worth obtaining comes without loss of life."

Stuart's adventures are fast-paced and lively but I found his character difficult to grasp. As the Conquistador, he behaves as a sort of deadly Errol Flynn, fighting impossible odds at public spectacles. But once he leaves England, he becomes a pragmatic man, reactive rather than an initiator, who judges other people's behaviour by rational standards. These contrasting sides to his personality did not add up to an effective whole for me. Mal is more interesting; the good child who has been brought up to believe in the worth of service as a Jaguar warrior. She is haunted by her betrayal of her brother, a petty criminal destroyed by the Jaguars, and the more doubts she has about her mission, the harder she pushes herself.

The world of the novel is not a primitive one; the Aztecs can control the climate and travel by air. But their most impressive technology has been used to trigger the eruption of volcanoes and to develop weapons which have led to the destruction of most of North America. When the gods appear, their technology is even more advanced but their behaviour has not matured. Battle seems to be their way of life, as it is for the Empire. The novel implies that humans would have a better chance of creating a worthwhile civilisation left to themselves but events move so fast and the battle scenes are so dominant that there is not much room for exploring this theme.



***Girl Genius Omnibus: Volume One – Agatha Awakens* by Phil and Kaja Foglio**

(Tor, 2012)

Reviewed by Glyn Morgan

It is an interesting experience, reviewing a graphic novel which was originally a web-comic and so has been in the public domain for quite some time, then to open this hardback volume and see the legend on the inside of the dust-jacket: "the acclaimed, multiple Hugo Award-winning steampunk fantasy adventure." So not only is this a review of something that's technically old, it's also of a work that has already been acclaimed and won awards. All of this only adds to my embarrassment when I confess that I'd never heard of *Girl Genius*.

It's not as if I'm under exposed to comics either and yet somehow *Girl Genius* has completely passed me by. What a shame because what I've now discovered is a colourful, entertaining and compulsive world that I was so eager to revisit that the moment I finished this omnibus I went straight to the website and continued reading from where the omnibus ends at the end of volume three of the ongoing saga.

*Girl Genius* is a tongue-in-cheek romp through a world that span out of control after the Industrial Revolution turned into an arms race fuelled by MAD SCIENCE! (capital letters are apparently mandatory). Most of this madness comes in the form of standard airships and gyrocopters, mechanoid constructs and clockwork helpers, but it also covers genetic engineering and the occult. Amongst all of this chaos there are those who have a particular aptitude, a gift known as 'the Spark.' Given the title of the work it should come as no surprise to learn that the protagonist, Agatha Clay, is herself a Spark – and quite a strong one at that. The crux of the plot centres on Agatha's attempts to avoid the influence of the Machiavellian Baron Klaus Wulfenbach who has imposed his rule over Europe in an attempt to bring order to the chaos which had been left behind by the most recent conflict.

The art in *Girl Genius* is probably the most divisive issue faced by anyone who comes to read the comic: it's bright, colourful and normally succeeds in the delicate balance between detail and blank space which can be the difference between clutter and sterility. It's also odd. I'd hesitate to call Phil Foglio's art unique but it is certainly an unusual blend of styles. There's a definite manga influence, especially in the characters: the variation in their features, particularly the eyes, as well as the proportions of their bodies with fists the size of heads and overly broad shoulders. It might also be my imagination but I think I detect a hint of influence from the art of Franco-Belgian comics such as *Asterix*. I was particularly struck by a resemblance between the Baron and the way Albert Uderzo used to depict Julius Caesar, which given the European setting of the comics and the nature of those two characters might not be an accident. Regardless, the art style can take a while to get used to and when I showed it to some friends whilst reading for this review, more than a couple were instantly turned off by it. Personally I found it grew on me, particularly once the narrative gets up to a good pace.

The world that the Foglios have created is certainly an interesting one, with varied and multifaceted characters. Most of the supporting cast refuse to be pinned down into any sort of good/evil moral dichotomy and eccentricity appears to be endemic. The Jägermonsters are a particularly amusing addition, although sometimes it can take a while to decode the unique speech patterns of these clinically insane, comic-relief killers. Another favourite character is Krosp, emperor of all cats, who no doubt has contributed significantly to the webcomic's popularity given the internet's fascination with all things feline. Agatha herself is a great naive protagonist; she begins ditsy and detached enough from reality that the Foglios are able to introduce key concepts to both her and the reader without it seeming forced yet she is also a strong female character often capable of getting herself out of trouble (although the trouble is quite often of her own construction) using her own insight or skill. Simultaneously, although there are many strong male characters and the comic cites romance amongst its triptych (alongside adventure and, of course, MAD SCIENCE!), she is never subservient to anyone and remains a strong individual even when embroiled in relationships with others. All of that said, I did wonder whether she needed to be found in her underwear quite so many times in the course of the omnibus. I understand that it becomes something of a running joke and that plenty of strong female characters, from Lady Godiva to Ellen Ripley, have appeared in similar states but at the same time when coupled with the art's body style of ample bosom and a rear-end that seems to stick out amazingly far, it sometimes seemed to border on the gratuitous; another influence of manga perhaps.

There's much to love in *Girl Genius*, although when writing this review I did a quick re-read and it surprised me to find that many of my favourite moments were in fact ones that I'd read online beyond the contents of this omnibus. Perhaps that's inevitable; this is the setup, the introduction to the characters and the world, and it does a fine job in all regards. It achieves what must surely be its primary aim, to leave us wanting more, and thank goodness there is already so much more online because I certainly wanted to know where Agatha was going and what the fates of herself, Krosp and the rest of this ensemble cast were going to be. Yet it's hard to say who this volume has been printed for: newcomers from traditional graphic novels might be put off by the hefty price tag (£24.99) and I've often wondered how many fans of a webcomic series are actually willing to invest money in buying hard copies of something they've already read and can access for free online. But however you're going to discover *Girl Genius*, I would encourage you to do so (even if it takes a while for you to warm to the art style) because you'll be glad you did. I know I am.

*Girl Genius* can be read online at: [www.girlgeniusonline.com](http://www.girlgeniusonline.com).



**Doctor Who and the Daleks** by David Whitaker, with an introduction by Neil Gaiman

**Doctor Who and the Crusaders** by David Whitaker, with an introduction by Charlie Higson

**Doctor Who and the Cybermen** by Gerry Davis, with an introduction by Gareth Roberts

**Doctor Who and the Abominable Snowmen** by Terrance Dicks, with an introduction by Stephen Baxter

**Doctor Who and the Auton Invasion** by Terrance Dicks, with an introduction by Russell T Davies

**Doctor Who and the Cave Monsters** by Malcolm Hulke, with an introduction by Terrance Dicks

(BBC Books, 2011)

Reviewed by Tony Keen

In 1973, Target Books decided to launch a range of *Doctor Who* novelisations, starting with three books originally published in the Sixties and featuring the First Doctor (William Hartnell). To further their range, they commissioned additional further books from the original writers and Terrance Dicks, then script editor of the television show. This was an extremely significant moment for the history of the show as, over the next twenty years, Target managed to novelise almost every story broadcast (and a few which weren't) and demonstrated that there was a market for *Doctor Who* in print. With the material running out due to the show being cancelled in 1989, Target's then-owners Virgin began the *New Adventures* series in 1991. This kept the show alive and gave early opportunities to writers such as Paul Cornell, Mark Gatiss and Gareth Roberts, who would all be significant to the

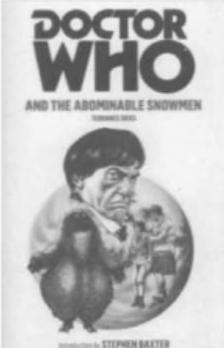
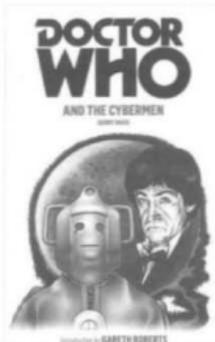
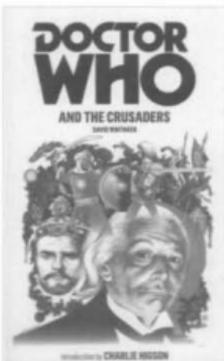
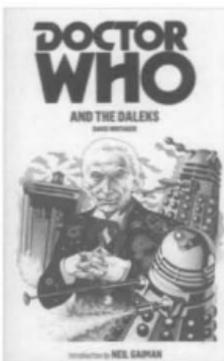
show when it returned in 2005. In a very real sense it can be argued that without the Target series, there would not be *Doctor Who* on television at the moment and recent audio book releases of the novelisations have shown that there is still a market for these.

BBC Books, who took the license back in 1997, have now republished six of the early novels: the two First Doctor novels written by original script editor

David Whitaker, the first two new novels Target published (*Auton Invasion* and *Cave Monsters*) and the first two they published featuring the Second Doctor (Patrick Troughton). All have their original Chris Achilleos covers (generally considered superior to later covers that replaced them) and are accompanied by additional material including new introductions, extra background and the differences between screen and novel versions of the story. With the exception of Charlie Higson, whose introduction to *Crusaders* indicates that he's not sure why he's been asked, the introductions are excellent. Neil Gaiman, Stephen Baxter, Gerry Davies and Roberts all expand on why these novels were important to them when they were young whilst Dicks writes with typical British understatement in a manner which is quite moving about his friend and mentor Mac Hulke. All the original illustrations have also been retained, though the captions – which were always lines taken from the novels – have gone.

It is impossible to respond to these novels as I and many others once did in the Seventies. These days, *Doctor Who* episodes are shown, made available on iPlayer, repeated on BBC Three, then later on Watch and then come out on DVD in a few months. In 1974, none of this existed. As Gaiman says, if you missed an episode, it was missed forever, unless you were lucky enough that the particu-

lar story got a repeat in the summer. There were occasional references to past adventures of the Doctor but you couldn't, as you can now, order those on DVD or CD. The only access to what the Doctor had been like before and to any of his past adventures was through the Target books. These books shaped the way fans in the Seventies viewed the Doctor's past. The romance between the Doctor's earliest companions,

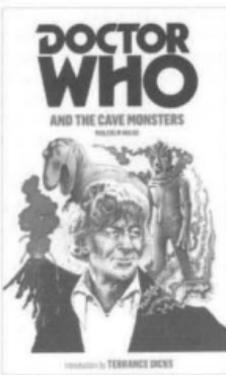
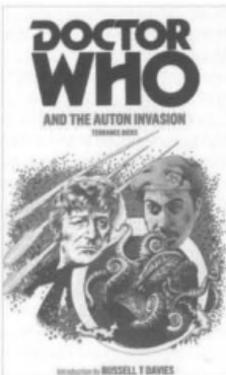


lan and Barbara, was not, in fact, much in evidence in anything broadcast between 1963 and 1965 – it was the creation of Whitaker in these two books. Sometimes the impression given by the books was so effective that, when we finally got to see the original screen versions again, we were disappointed (I had this experience with *Day of the Daleks*, not included in this set but reissued in 2012; a friend also had it with *The Daemons*).

Of course, pure nostalgia is unlikely to be enough to keep these books coming out on a regular basis, they need to be worth reading in their own right. Which they are. Perhaps they are not as sophisticated as readers expect now but they are not too long and easily accessible; a voracious teenager could consume one of these novels in an afternoon and not feel bored.

Whitaker was a fine adapter of his source material. In *The Daleks*, he blends in elements from other stories as he introduces the cast as well as giving the characters more depth (the relationship between Ian and Barbara has already been mentioned but the Thals are also made believable individuals) and fixes the narrative problems of the anticlimactic television story. He does the same in *The Crusaders*, which is more sadistic than one might expect from television now. Davis gives the Cybermen a distinct sense of menace that the men in the rubber suits in screen with electronic voices never quite have and Dicks is here in his strongest writing period, before the demands of writing most of the novelisations and restricted page counts forced him to rely on stock phrases and minimal additional characterisation. Finally, Hulke seems to have been most aware of the freedom that the novelisation gave him to improve on his original screenplay and takes serious liberties with it, all of which benefit the final result.

I would consider these books perfect for any child interested in *Doctor Who*; after all, they never did me any harm. They are also still a nostalgic pleasure for grown-ups and it is excellent news that a further six novels will follow this summer.



**Shada by Gareth Roberts, adapted from a script by Douglas Adams (BBC Books, 2012)**

**Reviewed by Alison Page**

There's a common trope in the work of Douglas Adams: a gap in things shows where the real thing is. The thing you can't remember is the most important thing of all. Absence of evidence is evidence of something so awesome and mighty that it can erase its own trace. The most interesting thing about *Shada* is the missing thing behind it: it is the novelisation of a multi-episode Doctor Who serial scripted by Adams which was partially filmed and never shown.

There are many absences in the story. The meaning of 'Shada' itself has been forgotten by the Time Lords. There are several spaceships cluttering up Seventies Cambridge and, for different reasons, none of them can be seen. The goodies and baddies are all hiding in plain sight and the most important events have been erased. The most intelligent man is one who can make himself forget. The most powerful book is one which cannot be read.

And there are many absences in the story behind this story. Adams wanted to write a different script which was rejected by the BBC and wrote *Shada* as a hasty substitute. Filming was abandoned because of a long-ago technicians strike, one of the last union actions of the Seventies. In the hiatus, Adams stopped working on Doctor Who altogether because it was eclipsed in his priorities by something more powerful – *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. The story behind *Shada* is a story of things that were not to be. The filmed sequences are available online, strung together to make some kind of narrative with missing scenes recited over rudimentary animation. It's not Adams's best work, though it has some good ideas – ideas which he extracted and reused in other, superior works.

The novel has a simplistic rather childish plot. It is a Romana-and-K9-era story with a sprinkling of Time Lord history and Gareth Roberts has done the best he can with the material. He achieves a soft Adams-lite prose, faithfully recounts the individual scenes in order, corrects some problems and even tightens up the story a little. He has peppered the story with some clever little references to the culture of the 1970s and the 2010s. He has salted it with a gay pickup and a computer orgasm but it's basically a kids' book. The most vivid descriptions in *Shada* are of the physical presence of Tom Baker as experienced by the other characters and as I was watching the filmed sequences I was similarly struck by the Baker's energetic intrusion into the scenes. TV novelisations would be quite different if they were evocations of the emotional experience of watching a program.

But that's not what Roberts was asked to write. The novelisation of science fiction television is a thankless subgenre where the poor writer is not delivering their own vision and must not let the story fly. Novelisation, however unsatisfactory the concept, is justified in the case of *Shada* because of its existence as an absence and in response to the continuing interest of fans but the full story is the least interesting thing in the constellation of missing things which are 'Shada'.

**Maps Of Utopia: H. G. Wells, Modernity,  
And The End Of Culture by Simon J James  
(Oxford University Press, 2012)**

**Reviewed by Roger Luckhurst**

Simon James is a Senior Lecturer in Victorian Literature at Durham University as well as a stalwart of the HG Wells Society where he is currently editor of their journal, *The Wellsian*. At £50, this slim hardback volume has the eye-watering price tag common to university presses with small print runs: there are no economies of scale anymore as libraries cut their budgets and the open access movement gathers pace. Yet James's book is definitely worth tracking down by anyone who wants a rare rounded view of Wells that extends across his whole career, from the early essays and reviews in his student journalism of the 1880s to the late, ill-tempered, end-of-tetherish rants from the 1940s. Wells's career was so diverse, capacious and full of so many odd, unclassifiable things that we still need these exercises in mapping. Too often, SF critics concentrate on a handful of scientific romances from the 1890s and the increasingly didactic utopias he penned after *Anticipations Of The Reaction Of Mechanical And Scientific Progress Upon Human Life And Thought* in 1901. Yet James shows us how these need to be read as interwoven between the attempts at Realist fiction, the world histories, his non-fictions, social satires, autobiographies, pamphlets, manifestos and all the other fantastical sports and squibs that he poured onto the page.

What James offers is a consideration of the Wellsian aesthetic. That might come as a surprise: one thing Wells is famous for is apparently repudiating any claim at artistry. He voiced his suspicions about high art and was forceful in his views that the ethos of a literary or classical education was disastrous when disconnected from at least some scientific training. We know this from his famous spat with Henry James, which began with flirtation about scientific romances in the late 1890s and ended with Wells's funny but tactically catastrophic parody of Henry James' labyrinthine prose style in *Boon* (1915). After this publication, a brief exchange of letters followed, in which Wells entirely retreated before the magisterially wounded James and declared his own works 'abortions' without literary merit. Wells was still nursing the wounds when he returned to the debate in his *Autobiography*.

To these famous exchanges, Simon James adds some truly startling statements by Wells. He despised the cultural weight given to classical education, lamenting the scientific ignorance of William Gladstone (a knowledge that was indeed woeful and wilful) and mocking George Gissing's reverence for ruins when they travelled to Rome. Later, in 1941, whilst liberals wrung their hands about the possibility of war-damage, he declared privately to George Bernard Shaw: "I detest Rome. I don't care if all the treasures in the world are ground to powder." No wonder that the Eng Lit taste-maker F R Leavis declared in the thirties that Wells displayed all the disadvantages of having no education in "humane letters".

This was not mere stupidity on Wells's part: it was a calculated gesture of apparent philistinism designed to rock the assumptions of humanist education, which still to this day can carry ignorance of the vulgar materiality of science as a badge of honour. The strategy worked but only at the cost of

Wells being excommunicated from the literary canons then being formed around the Jamesian 'Art of the Novel' and Modernist experiment. The root of this story flowers decades later in the still occasionally shirty relationship between SF and mainstream literature. EM Forster's measure of the 'rounded character', for instance, was always framed against the photographic flatness of Wellsian utilitarian prose and haphazard narrative structures.

Yet rather than being just a philistine, Simon James demonstrates that Wells was actively and eloquently involved in the debates about the trajectories of literature in an age of mass market publication right from the start of his career. Once the Education Act of 1870 and technical innovations in printing developed a market for selling magazines and cheap editions, the guardians of Western civilisation like Matthew Arnold and John Ruskin feared that frivolous fiction would not civilise the mass but bring anarchy and degrade culture. Wells sort of agreed with them initially, avoiding even reading modern popular fiction, but after his scientific and journalistic apprenticeships, he steered a fascinating course somewhere between the Realist novel and the revived Romance. For Wells, Realism had become dominated by pessimistic determinism in Victoria's last years, Gissing and Thomas Hardy following Zola in tracking out iron laws of social fixity and class destiny. Wells saw an inherent conservatism in this and it didn't fit his own ambitions to crash the main hall from below stairs. But he also wanted to avoid the evasion tactics of the Romance revivalists, the best-selling Hall Caine arguing that it was the duty of literature to avoid the brute and dreary facts of reality. Wells's hybrid experiments of the 1890s – never quite 'scientific romances' until after they were written but subtitled odd things like 'invention', 'adventure' or 'grotesque romance' – were about using modes of the fantastic as levers against the innate conservatism of Realism. This device of estrangement is one of the founding strategies of SF, but his contemporaries struggled with ways of talking about this hybrid. Conrad famously called him by that paradoxical name, "Realist of the Fantastic".

The conventional line in Wells criticism is that everything that was interesting, ambiguous and nimble in Wells ossifies into shouty utopian World Government and engineer elitism after about 1900. The virtue of James's study is to devote chapters not just to his Utopian fiction but also to his Realist fictions like *Kipps* and *Tono-Bungay* and to regard all these works as constellated with each other. Realism might have limits but it can be diagnostic; the illness identified is then treated in utopian projections or plans for national improvement. After 1910, James suggests, Wells subordinated the novel to various projects of social reform but he often folded fact and fiction or didacticism and play into each other unpredictably. In summary, Wells's later work might read as tiresome autocratic pronouncements but James remains alert to their eccentric, hybrid styles. Rather strikingly, he quotes Wells from 1914 asserting: "I consider the novel an important and necessary thing indeed in that complicated system of uneasy adjustments and readjustments which is modern civilisation." His final chapter traces Wells's bewilderingly diverse reactions to the onset of the Great War. Whilst James has less to say about the 'very late' Wells, this book at least has the virtue of pushing the SF historian out of the conventional grooves of genre history to look at Wells in a more complete and complex way. Recommended reading this summer for the serious Wellsian.

## **Postcolonialism and Science Fiction by Jessica Langer**

(Palgrave Macmillan, 2011)

Reviewed by Aishwarya Subramanian

In her introduction to *Postcolonialism and Science Fiction* Jessica Langer speaks of two major science fictional tropes that have been a part of the genre since its inception. She calls these “the stranger” and “the strange land”; the grotesque alien invader and the planet to be conquered and settled by Earth. That these tropes function in ways that closely parallel the real world history of colonialism is not a big leap to make. Particularly when, as John Rieder notes in *Colonialism and the History of Science Fiction* (2008), many of the genre’s foundational texts were written when colonialism was at its height.

Science fiction, then, provides us with another way to talk about our alien others who may here become *literally* alien. When violent encounters with the alien ‘other’ are so fundamental a part of the genre’s history, what forms would a postcolonial sf take and what strategies would it employ? These are the questions that Langer attempts to address.

Before any of this Langer must first arrive at a definition of science fiction; a contentious issue, as she admits. Though gesturing to more rigorous definitions from Darko Suvin and Carl Freedman, she ultimately rejects them. This is in part because the Western narrative of scientific progress (all but synonymous with ‘science’ in most definitions of the genre) has had an unhappy relationship with the history of colonialism. As she demonstrates in a later chapter, the discourse of science was often used to serve the interests of the colonial project, often by ‘proving’ that other races were inferior or less evolved. Langer contends that a postcolonial science fiction needs to expand its definition of science and foreground indigenous systems of knowledge as being as valid as (and in some cases more sound than) Western scientific thought. She sees no contradiction in a science fiction that also contains elements of the fantastic and the spiritual. In the introduction Langer aligns herself with Ursula K. Le Guin’s almost anti-definition of sf. Le Guin believes that there is so much overlap between the genres “as to render any effort at exclusive definition useless”. Certainly the works discussed, including Nalo Hopkinson’s *Brown Girl in the Ring* (1998) and Vandana Singh’s *Distances* (2008), blur genre boundaries.

Discussing postcolonial literature in sweeping terms when most countries in the world might be considered postcolonial is a rather daunting prospect and Langer chooses to focus most of her attention on two specific contexts: those of Japan and Canada. She notes that postcolonial theory has often been constructed in terms of East versus West, with less attention paid to what she refers to as the “sites of trouble” that do not fit comfortably into that dichotomy. In Japan’s case, this complex relationship with colonialism comes from the fact that it too has a history of imperialism. The A-bomb, for Langer, “represents the collision of two imperialisms, Japanese and American,” and she focuses on the country’s conception of itself and its past since the Second World War. A section comparing various adaptations of Komatsu

Sakyō’s *Japan Sinks* (1973) is particularly interesting here. In the case of Canada, Langer explores the postcoloniality of a settler colony. In a sense, the country is not really postcolonial since the colonisers have never left. Referring to works by Hopkinson, Eden Robinson and Larissa Lai, Langer considers both sorts of postcolonial subject – the immigrant and the First Nations peoples marginalised within the country.

A recurring concern is that of the critic Yamano Kōichi, who describes post-war Japanese sf as having “moved into a prefabricated house” (ie modelled itself entirely on American works in the genre). Any genre imposes certain limits upon those writing in it but sf’s historical link with empire makes the question of a postcolonial form of sf particularly hard to answer. Postcolonial writers can (and do) engage directly with the more problematic tropes but they will face, as Audre Lorde might put it, the difficulty of trying to bring down the master’s house with the master’s tools. This is true even of the most potentially radical form of sf that the book discusses: the online role-playing game.

The chapter on race and identity in the virtual world is the book’s most engaging. Colonialism at first may seem impossible in a limitless cyberspace which elides such physical markers of difference as race and gender. Even though the emergence of the avatar has led to a “re-embodiment” of online presentation, a player still chooses how she presents herself. Langer quotes Maria Fernandez’s assertion that players of MMORPGs “are authors not only of the text but of themselves”. Langer focuses on *World of Warcraft* which she reads as sf in part because of the presence in the game of a technologically advanced alien race. Her contention is that the in-game conflict between the Alliance and the Horde structures itself in terms of the familiar/other, civilised/savage, centre/periphery divide. Too much of this chapter is given over to a catalogue of the races within the game and the human cultural groups they represent and yet the chapter also manages to discuss the uses of cultural stereotyping and the politics of the virtual minstrelsy involved in playing as “the other”. For a discussion that contains multiple iterations of the word “Bhabhaian” this is amazingly accessible. Langer speaks of the potential for radical change in the game if players actively work counter to the politics of the framework, but I think she may be a little too optimistic. Earlier in the chapter she cites Lisa Nakamura’s criticism in *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity and Identity on the Internet* (2002) that virtual identities limit our choices of how we present ourselves by “making only certain modes of presentation available” and surely this is equally applicable to attempts to radicalise *World of Warcraft*.

The vastness of the subject matter means that there is very little space devoted to individual texts. In some cases this is not a problem—the sections on Ian McDonald’s *River of Gods* (2004) are particularly enlightening—but other works, like Saladin Ahmed’s “The Faithful Soldier, Prompted” (2010), suffer. Yet it’s hard to see how this could have been avoided. There is relatively little scholarship in this area of science fiction studies, but there’s time enough for works with a narrower, yet deeper focus. For now, Langer’s book is a good place to start.

# The Shortlist for the 2011 BSFA Short Fiction Award

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## Kevin Smith

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I'm a lapsed sf fan: I used to read sf a lot; I was part of the fannish community; I even edited *Vector* for two years. But I dropped out and mostly stopped reading it. Then the collection of stories shortlisted for the BSFA Award arrived. Was there anything in it to lure me back to the fold? These, after all, were the best stories of the year. By the time I'd finished them, however, I was looking on the voting form for the oft shortlisted but rarely winning Noah Ward. Was this a bad year? Have I become too intolerant of poor structure, inadequate characterisation, sloppy plotting and rambling prose? Have the authors lost the wow factor or have I?

'The Silver Wind' by Nina Allan is a first-person narrative by a protagonist with logorrhoea. After an introductory paragraph or six, we go on a flashback in the course of which we get 1,500 words on the house and background of Lewis Usher, who plays no further part in the story. The solitary important item in this sprawling verbiage is an 'Owen Andrews clock', described as a 'time machine' – thus allowing a brief mention of the 'new physics' and the narrator's wife, who is dead.

Obviously he wants to turn back time and save her, for which he needs Andrews. He enlists the help of Dora, whom he met when selling her a flat. We learn a lot about Dora's purchase of the flat, which again plays no further part in the story. Where is Chekhov's gun when you need it? We also learn about the society – a standard alternative reality fascist Britain where black people, Asians and other immigrants have been deported.

Dora tracks down Andrews. He lives on Shooter's Hill, London, which has a rough reputation: it is under night-time curfew, it is a restricted area, infested with carjackers and patrolled by the army. It is "just a couple of miles from where we were sitting but ... in terms of current reality it was half a world away." So how does our hero get to Andrews, in such a wild place? He catches a bus. This brings us back to the beginning of the story. At this point the narrator tells us: "Things were happening so fast they had begun to feel slightly unreal." No, they weren't; it's all rather slow.

Andrews explains that you can't just rewind time and the narrator is instantly cured of his longing to bring back his beloved wife. The End. No, I'm afraid not. 8,000 words

in and we're not halfway. Rewinding time is not possible but 'time stasis' is; Nina Allan uses a nice metaphor – a hotel lobby with lots of ways out, leading to different realities.

Suddenly our narrator realises it is nearing dusk and he needs to catch his bus home to beat the curfew. However, he sees an army roadblock, panics and launches off into the wild woods where he has 2,000 words of fearful and erratic behaviour, before being glad to meet the soldiers again. They lock him in a hospital where the military has, according to Andrews, been doing time stasis experiments on random passers-by. He wakes up the next morning but it is summer, not spring, there is a newspaper headline he doesn't comprehend, the cell is unlocked, the soldiers have gone, and there are black people and Asians everywhere. Aha, the seasoned skiffy reader says, instantly detecting the not-so-hidden clues, this is not the world he started in. Absolutely right, it isn't – but his Oyster card still works on the bus and his debit card in the ATM. Convenient or what?

In the final 3,000 words (enough for a story in itself), nothing happens, except that the narrator, slower on the uptake than the reader, works out where he isn't. He settles in easily to this new world, and is never faced with a threat. The soldiers of his old world do not come after him to see how the experiment went. His doppelganger, the owner of the bank account, never appears, so there's never an argument about whose money it is. His wife is still dead. The hospital blows up, so even the choice of going back is removed for him. The story doesn't end so much as peter out.

What you need to realise about the next story, 'The Copenhagen Interpretation' by Paul Cornell, is that it is James Bond with an alternative reality setting and technobabble. Then, if you like that kind of thing, you can enjoy the ride and not worry about the plot. Or the characters. Or, indeed, the setting. There is lots of running about, fighting, killing and invoking of technobabble ('folds' which can be carried about one's person as weapons, or create rooms isolated from the world, or drive ships, sorry, 'carriages' to the stars; the 'embroidery' for communications; and so on) – lots of ideas crammed in here, none of them fully comprehensible or realised.

All the rushing around has been engineered by twins who made a fortune as renegade arms dealers and spent it on secret space carriages to travel to the nearest star and back, discovering relativistic time dilation on the way. They capture the hero, Hamilton, and his former lover, Lustre, so that they can explain the plot at great length to them (I said it was James Bond). It's a good job that they do because there's no way the hero would have found out by himself. They intend to extract secret information from Lustre by torturing Hamilton (using a 'fold'), to trade with the 'foreigners' they met at the star. But the English secret service has placed a tracker on Hamilton and bursts in to the rescue just in time.

And now, a twist: the head of the secret service tells Hamilton that the star trip and time dilation stuff was all faked. Everything was really a plot by another great power, Russia, and Lustre was only a 'flesh job' grown to imitate the original. All that you knew is wrong! Gosh! Wow! The subtle reader will deduce, from the fact that it doesn't make any sense, that this 'real' explanation is merely a cover up, a conspiracy, to explain away what happened. And if Hamilton had half a brain so would he. This was the winner, folks. Let's hear it.

In 'Afterbirth' by Kameron Hurley, the story of Bakira alternates with a dialogue between Bakira and another woman, a nasty ruling elitist – a structure with the merit of breaking the dialogue into semi-digestible chunks; if it were all together in one lump at the end (its chronological position) it would be hard going.

Bakira's story is interesting and well realised. We have a quasi-Islamic society on a far-off colonial world which has become isolated from its origins. The society is run by women. Boys are shipped off to military training at sixteen and used as cannon fodder in an interminable war. Women have to become mothers to make any progress in the society, but do not usually rear their own children, freeing them to do other things. Society is poor and repressive, except for the elite. Bakira is an astronomer who wants to make new discoveries, whilst her colleagues seem content to confirm old results. Her programme is closed after two years and she goes back to her farm with an unwanted telescope, and continues to study the sky. She makes a discovery that illuminates the history of their world and approaches a member of the ruling elite to ask to restart the astronomy programme – hence the dialogue.

The dialogue – yes, we can't avoid speaking about the dialogue. The first piece is between the nasty ruling elitist and a servant. We know that the nasty ruling elitist is (a) nasty, because she says 'fuck' in the third line; (b) ruling, because she can make a decision on the programme; and (c) elitist, because she "can't stand colonial trash". Characterisation done. The opening does the story a further disservice; the first line – "Who is this?" – has all the gripping qualities of Teflon. A little below, at the start of the back story, is the much more Velcro-like: "Bakira so Dasheem gave birth to her children at the breeding compounds in Jameela..." You could omit the entire opening dialogue and lose nothing from the story.

I suppose the key piece in the dialogue comes at the end. Bakira says, after her proposal is turned down, that her country: "...is ruled by rich, blind, First Family women like you who wish to divide and conquer us ... We are not

## The shortlist in full

### Best Novel

- Cyber Circus* by Kim Lakin-Smith (Newcon Press)  
*Embassytown* by China Mieville (Macmillan)  
*The Islanders* by Christopher Priest (Gollancz)  
*By Light Alone* by Adam Roberts (Gollancz)  
*Osama* by Lavie Tidhar (PS Publishing)

### Best Short Fiction

- The Silver Wind* by Nina Allan (*Interzone* 233, TTA Press)  
*The Copenhagen Interpretation* by Paul Cornell (*Asimov's*, July)  
*Afterbirth* by Kameron Hurley (Kameron Hurley's own website)  
*Covehithe* by China Mieville (*The Guardian*)  
*Of Dawn* by AI Robertson (*Interzone* 235, TTA Press)

### Best Non-Fiction

- Out of This World: Science Fiction but not as we Know it* by Mike Ashley (British Library)  
*The SF Encyclopedia*, 3rd Edition ed. John Clute, Peter Nicholls, David Langford and Graham Sleight (Gollancz website)  
*Review of Arslan* by M J Engh, Abigail Nussbaum (Asking the Wrong Questions blog)  
*SF Mistressworks*, ed. Ian Sales (website)  
*Pornokitsch*, ed. Jared Shurin and Anne Perry (website)  
*The Unsilent Library: Essays on the Russell T. Davies Era of the New Doctor Who* (Foundation Studies in Science Fiction), ed. Graham Sleight, Tony Keen and Simon Bradshaw (Science Fiction Foundation)

### Best Art

- Cover of Ian Whates's *The Noise Revealed* by Dominic Harman (Solaris)  
 Cover and illustrations of Patrick Ness's *A Monster Calls* by Jim Kay (Walker)  
 Cover of Lavie Tidhar's *Osama* by Pedro Marques (PS Publishing)  
 Cover of Liz Williams's *A Glass of Shadow* by Anne Sudworth (Newcon Press)

just the bloody afterbirth, the mess you leave behind... We are human beings as good as you." There is anger here, the sort of anger directed at the 1% by the Occupy protestors. But it's a very young, naive anger; it tells us nothing new. There's no subtlety, no nuance. The nasty ruling elitist has only one dimension, one role to play.

'Covehithe' by China Miéville starts well, evoking an air of mystery. This is more like it. Who are this father and daughter? Why are they leaving their seaside B&B quietly at midnight? How is that connected to the 'security zone' at the coast? The text flows well, there are few wasted words. Then a structure hauls itself out of the sea – 'a steeple of girders'. An oil rig. This is what they have come to see.

It turns out, as we discover in an infodump flashback, that oil rigs have been hauling themselves out of the water for some time, all across the world. Some have been blown to bits by the military, some left alone. We get a catalogue of sunken rigs, real ones, but not famous. They haul themselves ashore, turtle-like, and drill into the ground. Some time later, baby rigs emerge and head for the sea.

Here, I confess, I giggled. There are serious points to the story about the number of deaths on rigs and the consequences of their abandonment and sinking. The image of rigs coming back to haunt us is a striking one, a Green nightmare made concrete (and steel). The story was commissioned by the *Guardian* as one of a series exploring the world of oil; it wasn't the worst, and it wasn't the best. But oil rigs laying eggs? I giggled, I tell you.

The final story is 'Of Dawn' by Al Robertson. Sarah, a failed musician, is depressed by the death of her brother Peter in Iraq. Prompted by a collection of Peter's poetry, she pursues the work of a composer called Kingfisher who explored English folk songs and music. The image of a flayed, skinless man becomes prominent in her thoughts. She thinks she sees him around her. She plays Kingfisher's music with musicians who aren't there, but nevertheless disturb her neighbour. She follows the evidence to an abandoned village and stone circle in the middle of the Army training ground in Wiltshire, where she meets the flayed man, at the end of which she is more reconciled to Peter's death and able to make music again.

This is the most technically accomplished story in the shortlist. It has a coherent structure, a consistent viewpoint, a protagonist I followed believably into depression and wanted to know what happened to her afterwards, whilst still feeling that the story had properly ended. The back story emerges organically through the protagonist's memory, not shovelled at you by the author. These things matter. And yet... It's a gentle supernatural tale, not at all horrific despite the recurrent image of the flayed man. It progresses in an orderly manner to a predictable outcome, never really threatening, never really surprising. There is no wow factor, in other words.

Which is where I started: where is the wow? These days, I'm less impressed by verbal fireworks, stylistic tricks and cascades of ideas. Unless they are supported by a structure of believable characters, a coherent plot and tight prose, I'm just not going to go wow.



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