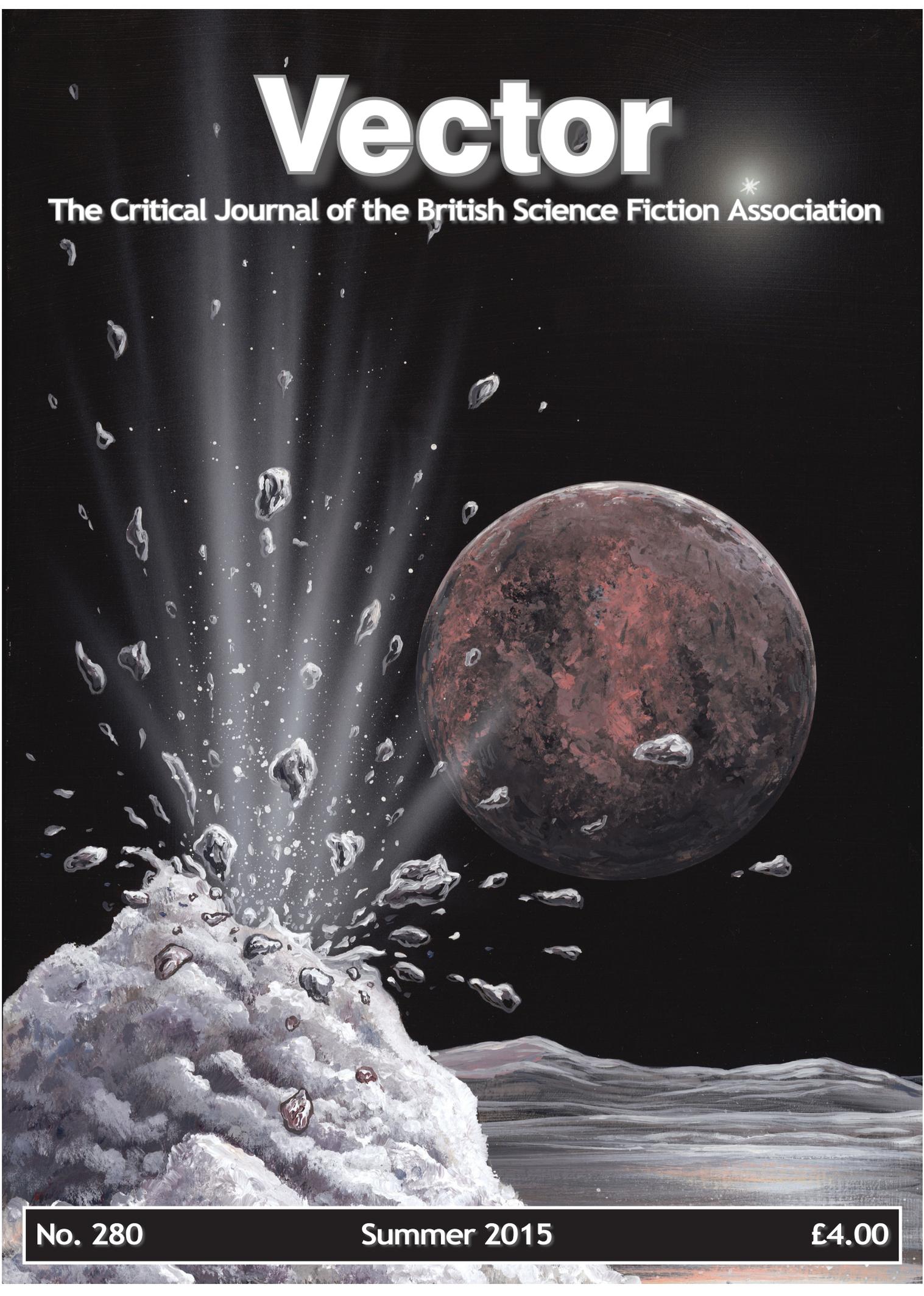


Vector

The Critical Journal of the British Science Fiction Association *



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The Critical Journal of the British Science Fiction Association

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In this issue, Gary Dalkin finds *The Way Inn*, while Anthony Nanson searches for *The Bone Clocks*, and David Hebblethwaite looks for the *Year's Best Weird Fiction* and *The Best British Fantasy 2014*. All futile in the wake of Ian Watson and *Saint Rebor* wandering into Shana Worthen's *Langue[dot]doc 1305* to play Sandra Underman's *The Galaxy Game* with Ian Sales' friend, *The Grasshopper's Child* in Cherith Baldry's *The Invisible Library*. Gary Dalkin and *The Good Shabti* join Susan Oke and *Folk'd* to watch things unfold and see who comes out on top... Eek!

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Torque Control

I wouldn't be here without Terry Pratchett. Of course I can't say that with a definitive knowledge, but nonetheless I know that a crucial and fundamental force which guided me down this particular route (along this leg of the trousers of time, if you will) were the works of Pratchett. One of the first sf books I read was the reissued *Carpet People*.¹ I never looked back, devouring the Discworld and later (much later, there was much re-reading and memorising of passages to do first) other fantasy and science fiction.

So, although to my eternal regret I never met the man, it was with a terrible sense of personal loss that I was told the news of Terry's passing. A loss I'm sure many reading this, some of whom will have met him and known him, will be able to empathise with. Ours is a genre in mourning. It seems like I receive weekly updates on heroes and legends who are leaving us,² yet few have reverberated throughout the field, the wider media, and the popular consciousness with quite the crunch of this. Of course it was a slow departure in many ways, and we had been bracing for it since Terry's heart breaking diagnosis with early-onset Alzheimer's and his gradual decline, but it was none the less (or perhaps, all the more) crushing for it.

But, Terry Pratchett leaves behind a wonderful legacy. He leaves a body of work which even the most respected authors envy, intelligent, thoughtful and original to its last. He leaves behind a raft of charities which he has supported and which continue to benefit from his patronage from Orangutans to Alzheimer's and Right to Die. He leaves a family, with whom our thoughts remain, and a family within genre, who I'm sure will champion his triumphs and ensure that he is rightly recognised as one of the great popular writers of his generation. And us, every mind he brought to life with images of Discs, luggage, witches, carpets, biker gangs, and ghosts.

I toyed with the idea of making this a special issue, in memory of Terry, but the journal Foundation were already doing that (#120, available now), and I knew they'd do an unmatched job of it, so instead I decided to invite the fine folks who run the International Discworld Convention to sum up what Terry meant to fans, you can read their tribute in these pages. Accompanying them we have articles on Star Trek and politics, Robert J. Sawyer, and Richard Bizley. The regular columnists return, Stephen Baxter (who of course worked with Terry on the Long Earth series) offers a tribute of his own in his analysis of *The Light Fantastic*, whilst Andy Sawyer takes a look at Margot Bennett's *The Long Way Back*, Paul Kincaid puzzles over quantum physics and Connie Willis's "At the Rialto", and Laura Sneddon turns her eye to politics and history in comics and graphic novels.

I'll end with some final words about Terry. One of the things I identified as a reason for loving the Discworld early on, was that unlike almost every other fantasy series I could think of (certainly at the time) it was inclusive. The first book I read in the series was *Equal Rites* so for me female leads were estab-

lished as a norm from the off, but also the fact that all these fantasy creatures and races lived in the same (god awful, but don't we all love it) city together, with roles to play, stereotypes to smash, and character arcs to explore. The Watch is the obvious example of this growing from the fantasy cliché of a band of brothers to encompass almost every group on the Disc.³ I'll always treasure the way those books taught me to over-think an accepted truth and challenge lazy ways of thinking, and I think the Discworld's emphasis on inclusivity and diversity is a lesson we can all benefit from reminding ourselves of.

I wanted to leave the final words to Terry himself but the search for the perfect summarising quote presents me with an embarrassment of riches, amidst the vast sweep of his ideas it's easy to forget just how quotable his books are. From: 'The presence of those seeking the truth is infinitely to be preferred to the presence of those who think they've found it' to 'There are times in life when people must know when not to let go. Balloons are designed to teach small children this.' And of course, 'no one is actually dead until the ripples they cause in the world die away'. So instead I'll just leave you with the motto from his coat of arms:

NOLI TIMERE MESSOREM (Don't Fear the Reaper)

Ripple ever onward, sir.

Terry Pratchett 1948-2015.

**Anna McFarlane
and Glyn Morgan
Co-Editors**

1 A passing comment that I know dates me terribly, possibly much to the horror of some of our older members.+

2 Woe is the man who starts the tradition of an annual memoriam page.

3 Maybe I'm misremembering but I think it's only Elves that get an exclusively bad rap and they come off pretty well in everyone else's books so I'm okay with that.

+Yes, these are footnotes. There had to be footnotes in this editorial, of all editorials, didn't there?

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Cover art by Richard Bizley,
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Do please check out his website, and our article on the artist and his gallery on page 15.

Please submit all articles, comments and queries to vector.editors@gmail.com

Vote Janeway in 2015!

Can modern politics learn from future lessons?

by John Allen

*'So who are you going to vote for this year?'
'I'm not voting for anyone because nothing
ever changes.'*

If there is a more tragic indictment of democratic apathy, I've yet to find it.

Science Fiction and fantasy not only offer us engaging stories filled with the 'What if?' scenario, they also provide social and political commentary on present day events. From Ray Bradbury to Ernest Cline, from *Star Trek* to *The Walking Dead*, popular entertainment thrives on science fiction and fantasy. Today in the UK we have a 'Walking Dead' electorate: disengaged, unhappy and generally apathetic. But what if we didn't? What if everyone engaged in political and social debate like the United Federation of Planets aspires to in *Star Trek*? What if we set aside culture, class and other personal differences like Rick and co. in *The Walking Dead*? What if one person was able and willing to influence change for the better like Wade in *Ready Player One*?

Science Fiction often provides keys to the voting hearts of millions that modern politicians never seem able (or willing) to find.

The Present Day

Electoral turnout in the UK has been declining since the end of the Second World War. Barring a few peaks in the 1970s and another in 1992, the percentage of registered voters casting a vote in General Elections has declined. The 2010 turnout of 65.1% might have been an improvement on the 2005 and 2001 turnouts of 61.4% and 59.4%, but we are still a long way off the 1950 peak of 83.9%. To my knowledge there is yet to be a 100% turnout.



All writers are told to write what they know. Science fiction often hides behind the veneer of fantasy in order to voice an opinion on the present and the potential future. The 'What If?' questions posed by great writers are best when filtered through the prism of science fiction. Ray Bradbury warned against the dangers of state suppression of free speech and information in *Fahrenheit 451*. Gene Roddenberry idly wondered what humankind could achieve were we to work more closely together in *Star Trek*. Isaac Asimov was thinking about the potential benefits and dangers of Artificial Intelligence long before anyone had a PC or an iPhone. Socio-political commentary is prevalent throughout most science fiction. It's possible to view the genre as a 'guidebook', covering what different sections of society truly care about. Yet present day politicians rarely, (if ever!) pay attention to it.

So what can politics learn – if anything – from science fiction?

Star Trek in 2015

At the same time the US goes to the polls to elect a new President in 2016, *Star Trek* celebrates its 50th birthday. The small budget show pitched as ‘Wagon Train to the Stars!’ is only 3 years younger than *Doctor Who*. To date there have been 726 episodes, twelve films (a thirteenth is planned for release in 2016), an animated series, and thousands of books. This isn’t bad for a show that only ran for three years in the 1960s. Like a lot of science fiction, *Star Trek* is more popular than any elected politician of the modern age. So what can an MP learn from science fiction like *Star Trek*?

Captain Kirk

‘Gentlemen, I have no great love for you, your planet or your culture. Despite that, Mr Spock and I are going to go out there and quite probably die in an attempt to show you that some things are worth dying for.’

William Shatner’s portrayal of the first Captain of the Enterprise was one of idealistic (possibly naïve) brashness. Kirk would try and communicate with a new alien or planet, but if he ever felt threatened he didn’t hesitate to fire phasers. Despite this, the original series portrayed a ship and crew boldly exploring uncharted areas of space, seeking out new life and new civilisations (I’m paraphrasing just in case a Trekkie highlights the inaccuracy). In reality they were exploring new ideas and new ways of doing things. Kirk might have been a bit trigger happy, but his mission was essentially peaceful. He boasted a multicultural crew and his first officer was an alien. Perhaps if the UK Parliament represented the many different sections of our culture and society as it is today, people might be more inclined to vote.

Captain Picard

‘No being is so important that he can usurp the rights of another.’

Patrick Stewart took the helm of the new Enterprise D as a very different sort of Captain. Focusing much more on diplomacy and understanding, Picard led the crew on a voyage to explore humankind’s very nature. There are many examples of socio-political commentary throughout *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. In one episode the Federation signs a treaty with a neighbouring species. The result changes border lines and displaces millions of the Federation’s own citizens without consulting them. The story illustrated a common flaw in centralised government – that of failing to take into account the wishes of the people it has been elected to govern. In

another episode Picard has to learn to communicate with a man so alien that they cannot understand one another at all. Yet if he fails, they both die. Politicians give up trying to understand another point of view far too easily.

Captain Sisko

‘It’s easy to be a saint in paradise. But they do not live in paradise. Out there, there are no saints, just people – angry, scared, determined people who are going to do whatever it takes to survive, whether it meets with Federation approval or not.’

Ben Sisko wasn’t only the Commander of a strategically important base; he was a father and a religious icon. Throughout the show, Sisko had to try and maintain a fragile peace in a region of space that was highly contentious. He had the highly spiritual Bajorans (angry survivors of a fifty year occupation) versus the seemingly cruel but highly nuanced Cardassians (a race trying to hold onto fading political influence). Many instantly drew parallels between Israel and Palestine. Yet the show was more about demonstrating the futility of ongoing conflict and unwillingness to try and understand another view point. Sisko epitomised a leader we would all like to see in modern politics – someone able to bridge the gap between diametrically opposed viewpoints. The show dealt with race rows, social class, disengaged and angry citizens, and war. This should sound familiar to any modern politician.

Captain Janeway

‘It never fails to impress me. No matter how vast the differences may be between cultures, people always have something that someone else wants, and trade is born.’

Kathryn Janeway had to deal with being cut off from the support of the familiar. Stranded, alone and surrounded by millions of new species, this Captain spent seven years leading a mixed crew of rebels and officers home from an uncharted area of space. Janeway was both practical and pragmatic – someone trying to hold onto their own principles whilst negotiating with races that had none. In a very real way *Star Trek: Voyager* mixed the original series theme of exploration and understanding with relatable questions of survival and conflict. How do you negotiate with people you don’t like whilst maintaining your own principles? Janeway dealt with the dilemma of trying not to interfere with other cultures. At the same time, she tried not to overlook oppression and brutality. Her decision to

prevent the genocide of an alien race by destroying the only technology that could get Voyager home is a case in point. She rescued several species from annihilation and even helped rehabilitate a victim of rape (Seven of Nine). Janeway explored the unknown and recognised the only way to positively influence people was to set a good example. How often do we wish current politicians had the self awareness to do the same? Instead we get MPs behaving like eight-year-olds, more interested in yelling and talking over each other in Parliament. Our MPs have more in common with naughty school children than they do with elected officials of state.

An Oasis of Hope

Star Trek is merely one example of how politicians can learn a great deal from science fiction. There are many others. Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One* was published in 2013 and has since been optioned by Hollywood. Not only is it a great story, it shows a very plausible future in which society as we know it is in a state of near collapse. Business has been reduced to two huge corporations vying for control of the planet and everyone spends most of their time in a virtual reality world called 'Oasis'. Without giving away too many plot details, the story is told through the eyes of Wade, a poor kid living in the stacks (converted caravans sitting on top of one another). Wade is not happy with his real life and lives a virtual life within Oasis. There he goes to school, has friends, and enjoys himself. When the creator of Oasis dies, his death activates a hidden Easter egg style quest within the virtual reality. The winner of the three hidden challenges inherits control of the designer's company and money. When Wade figures out and resolves the first challenge it triggers a hunt for him by the rival company.

Ready Player One shows us a world where politicians have become so enthralled to big corporations, that big corporations are all that's left. People have become cut off from reality as a result and live out their lives within a facsimile of something better. Wade himself starts off as a disillusioned teenager completely uninterested in the real world around him. All that matters is Oasis. It is only as he begins to connect with other people through the VR world,

that the real world becomes slowly more attractive.

The book is primarily a work of fiction, but it does posit a believable futuristic world. *Ready Player One* serves as a frightening reminder of what could happen if we lose total interest in politics and voting. Wade doesn't believe there is anything worth fighting for until he realises what would happen if one company gained control of everything. Hitler tried to do something very similar in the 1930s.

Lessons from the Future

'It has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all the others that have been tried.'

—Winston Churchill



Sometimes Churchill had his tongue firmly in cheek, but not when it came to matters of free speech and democracy. Whilst flawed, we have yet to find a better way in which to govern ourselves. Science fiction manages to explore new ideas and new ways of thinking that show us potential paths. It doesn't claim to hold the answers to all of life's problems, but it does teach us to open our minds and imagine the possibilities. You only need to look at the advances in technology to know how influential science fiction has been in this area. So it is with politics. The only difference is in terms of subtlety.

To Boldly Go Forward

If we are to stand any hope of a bright and wonderful future, we must continue to ask the most interesting question, 'What if?'; that is the question the best stories ask and the question great science fiction often works from. What if we all voted in elections? What if we taught children about politics in school in order to engage them in democracy from an early age? What if one day we are all able to come together to celebrate our differences instead of fearing and demeaning them? If that day is to ever come, it will only dawn whilst people like you and I continue to read and tell stories asking us all to think 'What if?'

Churchill once said 'Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak. Courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen'. Perhaps it is time we all, politicians and voters alike, listened to the lessons that science fiction can teach.

Breaking Out of Eden:

Science Fiction as a New Mythology in Robert J. Sawyer's Writings

by C. Patel, Lancaster University

In December 1968 the Modern Language Association held a forum titled 'Science Fiction: The New Mythology' which stimulated an academic debate that lasted several decades on the nature of science fiction as a new mythology. In 1972, Gail Landsman wrote one of the most popular essays on the subject, 'The Rebirth of Mythology'. According to Landsman:

despite our pleas for rationalism, our calls for progress, our conviction in the 'scientific explanation,' our need for mythology is so great, so compelling, that we have forced our culture to provide us with a new mythology – and this modern mythology is taking form in the literature of science fiction. (989)

Her assumptions are reflective of the theories concerning science fiction and mythology – then and now – in which 'rational science' is idealized over 'irrational religion'. However, although sf glamorizes the scientific method it functions as a mythology, not by replacing religious discourse with scientific theories, but by combining theological and philosophical discourse. Even though our view of sf has changed in the last half century, sf's function as

The debate

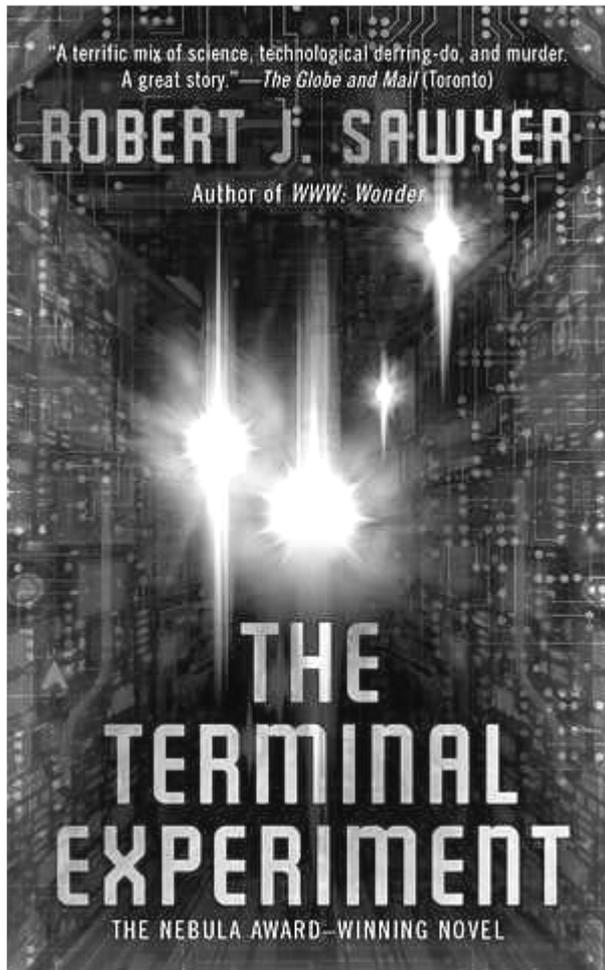
In order to evaluate the function of science fiction as a new mythology, I must first provide a working definition of the terms 'science fiction' and 'mythology'. For the moment, I will use the description of science fiction as defined by novelist Robert A. Heinlein in 'Science Fiction: Its Nature, Faults and Virtues' (1959). Heinlein identifies sf as the 'realistic speculation about possible [...] events, based solidly on adequate knowledge of the real world, past and present, and on a thorough understanding of the nature and significance of the scientific method' (28). I will define a myth by its functions, using Joseph Campbell's categorization of the four functions of mythology as a guideline (1968). Although scholars such as Landsman do not cite Campbell directly, it is my belief that their evaluation of sf as a new mythology is generally centered on one of these four functions of mythology. First, there is a metaphysical-mystical function that 'waken[s] and maintain[s] in the individual an experience of awe, humility, and response, in recognition of that ultimate mystery, transcending names and forms' (Campbell 609). Second, there is the social function, or 'the validation and maintenance of an established order' (621), and third

Although every work of literature is mythological in some sense, sf is most suited to explore cosmology and philosophy.

a new mythology has not changed, as evidenced by Robert J. Sawyer's writing. Sawyer, a contemporary Canadian science fiction novelist, has won many prestigious awards including the Hugo, the Nebula, and the John W. Campbell Memorial Award. I will be examining two of his award-winning novels, *The Terminal Experiment* (1995) and *Mindscan* (2005), in some detail as well as exploring several of his other works of fiction. Using Sawyer's novels as examples I will attempt to demonstrate that science fiction functions as mythology because, like mythology, it is a fictional narrative that dwells on the question of humankind and the universe. Moreover, I argue that, through the mythology of science fiction, scientific and religious language can coexist.

there is the psychological function, or 'the centering and harmonization of the individual' (623). Finally, there is a cosmological function that will 'render a cosmology, an image of the universe' (611). Campbell adds that today we turn 'not to archaic religious texts but to science' (611). This evaluation will be the basis for many scholars to argue that sf functions as mythology, as the genre fictionalizes the science form.

Although every work of literature is mythological in some sense, sf is most suited to explore cosmology and philosophy. Unlike the other genres of literature, sf is primarily concerned with a system of ideas (Barthell 58; Landsman 993; Roberts 4); sf 'deals with ideas more than it deals with literary styles. It speculates in futurities and



in probabilities. These are what are to be remembered more than the depth of character of its heroes' (Wollheim 6). Because sf is more concerned with ideas than with characters or plotlines, the genre is best suited to examining questions that are explored by traditional mythologies. In a recent interview Sawyer also suggests that sf 'isn't fiction about science; rather, it's the literature of ideas – philosophical fiction' ('Interview by Nick DiChario'). Brian Aldiss (1973) offers a definition of sf that is rooted in its philosophical nature: 'Science fiction is the search for a definition of mankind and his status in the universe which will stand in our advanced but confused state of knowledge (science)' (164). Sf functions like mythology because it explores philosophical questions that are traditionally raised by mythology and religion. In *What If? Religion Themes in Science Fiction* (2000) Mike Alsford argues that 'one of the most compelling reasons for a theological consideration of science fiction is that it concerns itself with issues that lie at the very heart of the theological enterprise, questions concerning the identity, origin and destiny of the human species' (4-5). These questions are what make sf a new mythology. Sf differs from the philosophical essay or treatise, because it fictionalizes these questions and presents these questions in a story form. Likewise, Patricia Warrick in 'Science Fiction Myths and Their Ambiguity' (1978) asserts that a myth 'is a complex of stories which a culture regards as demonstrating the inner meaning of the universe and of human life' (Warrick 2-3). This genre is not the only type of literature that explores these topics, but its speculative nature allows it the flexibility to raise these

questions with more ease. John Radford in 'Science Fiction as Myth' (1976) concurs, as sf:

raise[s] the basic question, what is it to be human? It may be said, that all fiction deals with the question in some sense. But sf is a special case. First, sf deliberately manipulates reality. Whereas classical fiction seeks to imitate reality, to produce a convincing simulacrum, sf gifts us something that is explicitly other than what exists. It is not just that sf worlds are imaginary: it is that they are purposely constructed as alternate realities. (29)

That basic question, 'what is it to be human?' is the focus of this article, and I will examine the ways in which Robert J. Sawyer answers this question.

Robert J. Sawyer's *The Terminal Experiment* and *Mindscan* as a Case Study

Sawyer's *The Terminal Experiment* and *Mindscan* reflect this ambiguity toward science. In *The Terminal Experiment*, Dr. Peter Hobson, with the help of his friend Dr. Sarkar Muhammad, scans his brain (neural-net connections) onto a computer. The two men create three copies of Hobson's brain. The first copy, Spirit, 'is supposed to simulate life after death. To do that [they pare] out all exclusively biological functions' (155). The second version, Ambrotos, is an 'immortal version [in which they] excise the fear of growing old and concerns about aging and death' (155). The last version is left unchanged as a control group. The simulacra escape the confines of the computer (into the Internet), and one of the simulations is able to hire killers to murder people that the original Hobson has grievances against. By the end of the novel, it is revealed that the Control copy is culpable of these crimes. It is important that the Control copy is the one responsible as Hobson and Muhammad 'assumed that in modifying the brain scans to produce Ambrotos and Spirit, [they had] somehow removed the morality' (371). However, the Control copy informs Hobson that the only difference between them is that Hobson has a soul guiding his moral consciousness:

You have to worry about the consequences of your actions. Not just legally, but morally. You were brought up in a world that says there is a higher arbiter of morality, and that you will be judged. [...N]o matter how much you hated him, you would not kill him. The potential cost is too high; you have an immortal soul, and that at least suggests the possibility of damnation. But I have no soul. I will never be judged. (372-73)

Earlier in the novel, Hobson demonstrates how a pattern of lights in an EEG, a pattern he calls a soulwave, leaves the body after death. Muhammad suggests that these three simulations are in a sense 'alive', as their 'neural-net

activity [is] something akin to brain waves' (363). Yet at the time of death (or when the programs are terminated) the simulations do not have a soulwave (364). In *The Terminal Experiment*, Sawyer thus suggests that a machine that is created by a human, even though it is similar to humans and can even be classified as 'alive', is not comparable to humans because it lacks a soul.

Mindscan reveals a contrary viewpoint. As in *The Terminal Experiment*, in *Mindscan*, a company called Immortex is able to make a digital copy of the brain and transfer it into an artificial body. Unlike a biological body, the artificial body can be replaced, and thus the customer achieves immortality. However, '[d]espite [the] salesperson's talk about transferring consciousness, Immortex couldn't really do that. At best, they were copying consciousness into a machine body. And that meant the original still existed' (17). Therefore the original biological entity must sign over its legal right to life to its artificial copy. A great part of the novel deals with the consequences of these actions, with the son of one of Immortex's clients challenging the legal right of this android. Using courtroom scenes and legal language, Sawyer carries out a philosophical discussion of what it means to be human. Although Immortex loses the lawsuit over the issue of personhood, the characters still win the philosophical battle in the minds of the readers. 'There's no such thing as souls', the androids argue, 'There's no magic, airy-fairy insubstantial part of you. Everything you are is a physical process – processes that can be, and have been, flawlessly reproduced' (331). Alternatively, the novel also suggests that the androids are simply machines, as they can be turned off and thereby lose consciousness. Nevertheless, the epilogue underscores the idea that this state of consciousness is a matter of semantics. As Sawyer presents the issue of identity as a legal matter, the androids simply redefine 'identity' by redefining the constitution. The androids leave Earth for a settlement on Mars, and join other individuals who are denied rights, such as 'gay marriages. [... A]ll forms of marriage are legal, and out in the open' (355). By establishing a community that accepts both androids and homosexuality, Sawyer creates a parallel world where the issue of identity can be comparable to that of homosexuality, and ultimately decides that neither group should be denied basic rights.

Unfortunately, Immortex reminds him that he has legally signed away all rights to his identity. Up to this point, the reader experiences compassion toward the original Jake Sullivan character. However, when the two entities meet, Sawyer narrates the story from the android's perspective, and more importantly, from a first person point of view. Consequently, the reader reads the android version as 'I', and the biological version is recognized as 'the other'. This effect is furthered when, in an attempt to regain his identity, the original biological Sullivan has taken hostages and is threatening to harm them. Thus, the reader's compassion switches from the original body to the android one.

In Sawyer's short story 'Shed Skin', from which he developed his novel *Mindscan*, the original biological entity is dehumanized even more than in *Mindscan*. The androids are not in a middle of a lawsuit fighting for their right to identity; they have already won the case. Furthermore, the biological entities are identified by letters and numbers. George Rathburn is called GR-7, a combination of his initials, and a number to differentiate him from other GRs. Like Jake Sullivan, the biological Rathburn takes a hostage and demands that his identity be restored to him. However, Rathburn demonstrates a higher level of violence than does Sullivan. The biological Sullivan asks the android Sullivan to switch positions with him temporarily, and to allow him (the biological version) to live out his natural life on Earth. The biological versions live on a resort on a moon. In *Mindscan* this place is called 'High Eden', and in 'Shed Skin', it is called 'Paradise Valley'. However, Sullivan and George would rather live out a normal, human, life on Earth, than live on a paradise-like space in the heavens. As the android is immortal, he can return to Earth after Sullivan's death. In contrast to Sullivan, Rathburn demands that his android version kill himself. If the android ceases to exist, then the 'rights of personhood will default back' to the original entity ('Shed Skin', 118). Although the biological Rathburn is holding a woman hostage and threatens to kill her, the android Rathburn refuses to relinquish his right to personhood. He draws a parallel to the American Civil War, and suggests that if he were to give up his legal status in order to save a biological woman, then this will be equivalent to a asking a 'black man [to agree] to sacrifice himself in the white man's place. [...] The black man is

As in *The Terminal Experiment*, in *Mindscan*, a company called Immortex is able to make a digital copy of the brain and transfer it into an artificial body.

In *Mindscan*, the readers sympathize with both versions of Jake Sullivan. Sawyer presents the android copy and the original biological entity as protagonists in the novel. The biological Sullivan decides to upload his body into an android to avoid dying from a hereditary disease, to which the android body is not susceptible. However, he forgets that even though an immortal version of him will live on, the biological body must eventually die, and he must still face the horrors of death. After his condition is cured, Sullivan attempts to regain his legal right to personhood, but

worth less than a white man' (119). The android feels guilty when the biological Rathburn uses the woman as a shield, and they are both killed in the process. As in *Mindscan*, the harshness of the biological entity's actions motivates the reader to sympathize with the android rather than with the original entity.

These stories are mediums to ask the question, 'What does it mean to be human?'. 'Shed Skin' ends with the android committing suicide and suggesting in the final line, '[w]hat better way, after all, was there to prove that

he was still human?' (125). Death, or mortality, is often the only measure of humanness. However, in *The Terminal Experiment* and *Mindscan* define humanness not only through mortality, but how it relates to the conception of the (immortal) 'soul'. In *Terminal Experiment*, Hobson finds scientific proof of the 'soul', and in *Mindscan*, Sullivan dismisses the soul as irrational (or unscientific). Hobson feels guilty for destroying the Control copy of himself, even though the copies do not have a soul. Conversely, the android Sullivan maintains his right to life, because the biological entity cannot prove the existence of his soul. Yet, the reader might still identify the biological Sullivan as the 'real' one, as he is the one that is allowed to die, and thus, proves his mortality. In 'More than Human?: Androids, Cyborgs, and Others' (1978), George Zebrowski and Patricia Warrick assert that in Christian theology, 'immortality is often promised, but in another life [in heaven], after great changes have taken place, physical and moral – dying and a deserving way of life; to gain immortality in any other way would be seen as an act against the gods' (Zebrowski and Warrick 299). The original Jake Sullivan regrets his decision to upload his body into an android form. Yet, he does not express remorse for attempting to achieve immortality, but because he is denied the chance of living his one, true life. Sullivan's character does not believe in the soul, or immortality in heaven, therefore his regret stems from his desire to live out a full life on Earth.

Robert Scholes and Eric S. Rabkin in *Science Fiction: History, Science, Vision* (1977) contend, 'Ever since man ate of the fruit, and caused himself to know death, he has felt guilty in his inevitable struggle for life. Or so our mythology has taught us, and at some level we believe that mythology. When science fiction uses the devices of artificial life, its mythic heritage emerges to lend a guilty color to man's struggle against death' (168). In *The Terminal Experiment*, Hobson's repentance is directly linked to his role as creator. Like the counterfeits in *Mindscan*, Hobson's copies refer to him as brother, even though he is partly responsible for the creation of the digital copies and should be designated as father or creator. Hobson's sense of responsibility toward the actions of his copies is a direct result of his role as Creator. He produced these entities and unleashed them on the world. Further, Hobson wonders if the copies are fulfilling his unconscious desires. In *The Gospel According to Science Fiction* (2007), Gabriel McKee maintains, "The fullest expression of what it means to be a human being is the imitation of God' (2). Scientists who create robots and androids 'imply the creation of humanlike life' (Zebrowski and Warrick 297), and thus take on the role of God. Following the model of traditional mythology, where Joseph Campbell argues that mythology has a social function in 'the validation and maintenance of an established order' (621), science fiction's imitation of God is seen as a transgression against God's natural rules. As Scholes and Rabkin assert, "The more closely the artificial life represents god's work, the more drastically it obviates mortality, [and] the more profoundly man is guilty' (168). In *The Terminal Experiment*, the copy that is responsible for multiple murders is the one that most closely resembles Hobson. Thus, Hobson has good reason to feel guilty, as the copy that is most similar to the actual entity is the one that is responsible for murder. The other two copies are

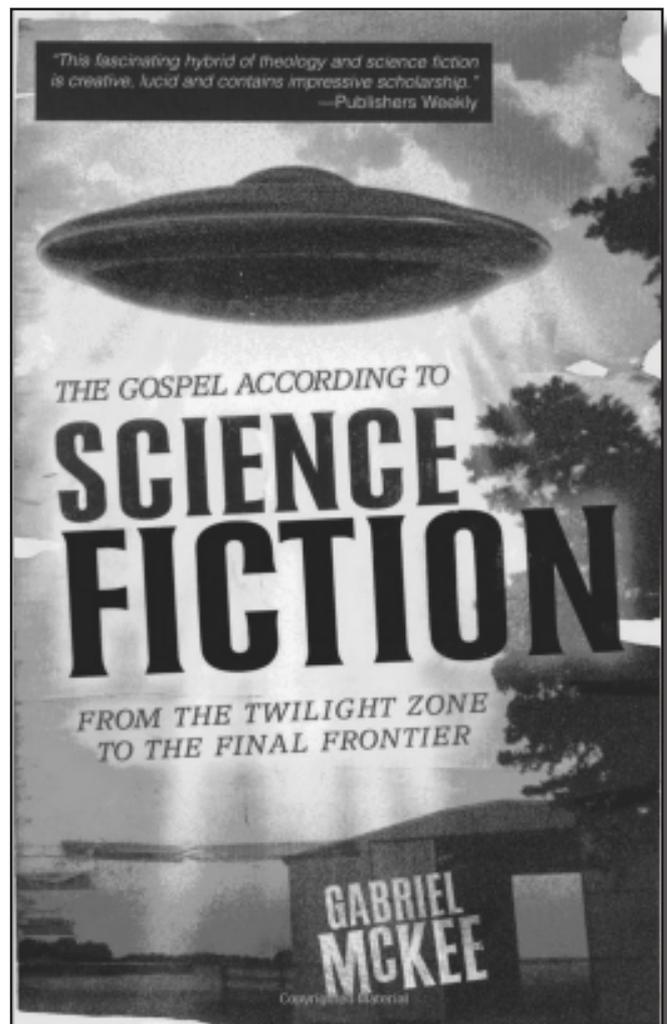
modified in such a way that they do not represent a real human being, and consequently, are not dangerous.

Re-Examining the Debate

Landsman suggests that we have created science fiction to replace these archaic religious texts. She argues:

One of the most striking peculiarities of our Western culture is that in the entire history of man's cultural and religious development, it alone lacks a mythology. We often pride ourselves on the absence of such irrationality in our society, yet we suffer unspeakable pain and intolerable emptiness as the price of its loss. (989)

However, science fiction is not simply a fictionalized science that replaces mythology and religion. In reality, as Steven Engler argues in 'Science Fiction, Religion, and Social Change' (2007), 'religion and science are often portrayed as opposed in a wide variety of ways. For example, while science in its knowledge mode is often perceived as rational, material, literal and objective, religion in its knowledge mode is often seen as irrational, spiritual, metaphorical and subjective' (111). In addition, sf is sometimes mistakenly seen as a tool that mythologizes the scientific story (such as the theory of evolution or the big bang theory). By



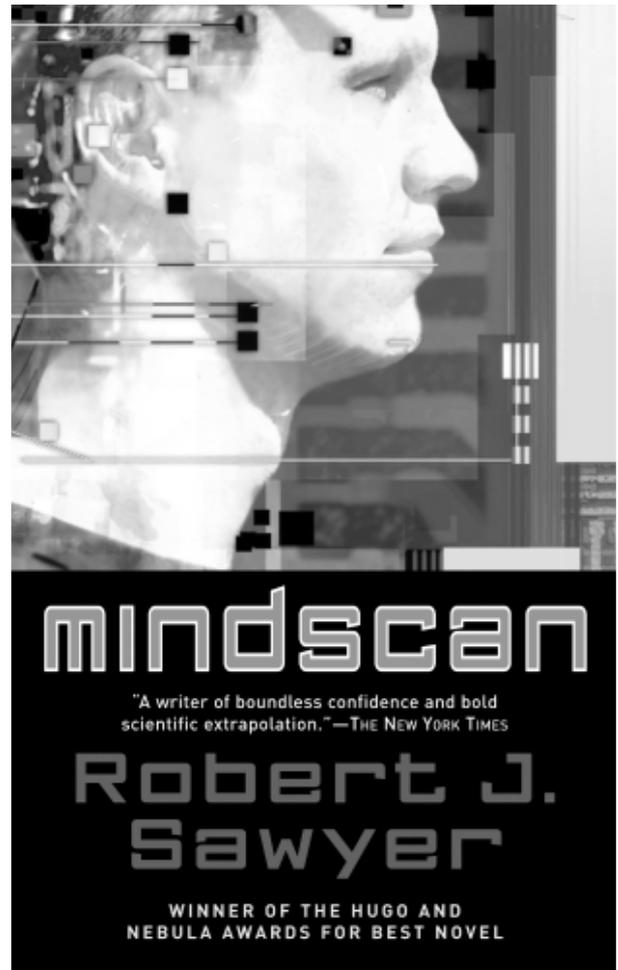
mythologizes, I mean the process of turning a scientific theory into a fictional medium, that can then replace the Bible story and other mythologizes of creation. As Peter Penzoldt in 'The Supernatural in Science Fiction' (1965) suggests, through science fiction, '[s]cience itself must offer a compensation for the imaginary world it has destroyed' (50) by offering a 'realistic' model of creation.

Yet not all science fiction offers a replacement to biblical stories, and further, the categorization of 'realistic' is subjective. While one would assume that the scientific method would lead people to determine what is real, true, or right, this methodology does not hold up in the real world. The percentage of atheists in the world is still in the minority.¹ While it is true that many people who identify themselves with an organized religion are not zealously pious, this does not indicate that these people are governed by a scientific 'rationality'. As Sprague L. de Camp and Catherine Crook de Camp argue (1975), 'A story may be realistic to one reader and imaginative to another, depending on his beliefs about reality. To a firm believer in ghosts, a ghost story is "realistic"' (5). Note that the de Camps are attempting to determine the difference between fantasy and science fiction (the latter of which is usually defined as more realistic). Critics often turn to the distinction between science fiction and fantasy in order to determine its properties as a mythology. For example, Darko Suvin (1979) argues that science fiction is the very opposite of fantasy, because he associates fantasy with myth and fairy tales. Myth, he posits, is irrational, close-minded, and 'oriented toward constants' (27), while science fiction is free-thinking, and oriented 'toward variables' (27). Thus, he maintains that fiction that contains religious themes is *not* science fiction, but is in fact, fantasy.

Suvin is incorrect in stating that mythology is 'oriented toward constants'. Mythology is dynamic and is always changing. In Greco-Roman mythology, portrayals of mythological heroes vary with each re-telling. Prometheus can be a hero or a sinner. Mythology cannot be static, as our view toward it is constantly changing. Sf continues this process of transforming mythologies. Suvin's argument is similar to that of Landsman when she declares, 'Whereas primitive man, living in a stable and generally unchanging culture, judges his actions and makes his decisions on the basis of precedent set "in the beginning", modern man judges his behaviour and approaches decisions on the basis of how they affect his future' (994). As an anthropologist, Landsman assumes that 'primitive man' lives in a stable, cultural environment. Yet an examination of mythologies and biblical stories reveals narratives full of conflict. In fact, I would argue that mythologies often present a chaotic world that is trying to re-establish a social order. For instance, Virgil's *Aeneid*, written directly after the fall of the Roman Republic, was a means of confirming social order after a period of civil war. Thus, it is difficult to support Landsman's supposition that science fiction is a modern culture's mythology as *opposed* to 'primitive man'.

Science fiction is a genre of *possibilities*, and accordingly it spans the spectrum from the rational to the supernatural. In *Terminal Experiment*, Hobson identifies the existence of a

¹ *Encyclopedia Britannica* affirms that atheists made up 2.0% of the world's population as of 2010.



soul through an EEG. A theological idea is proven through scientific means. This is the heart of science fiction as a mythology: the notion that science can fully explain the universe. As Mark R. Hillegas in 'Science Fiction as a Cultural Phenomenon: A Re-Evaluation' (1971) argues, sf embodies the 'faith that man, using science and the scientific method, is the master of the mindless universe in which he finds himself' (Hillegas, 280). While Sawyer does not admit to being religious, he still identifies with this belief that science will eventually prove or disprove the existence of God. In a speech, Sawyer declares, 'Do these facts prove whether or not God exists? No – not yet. But the best response to those who say science doesn't hold all the answers is to say, on the contrary, science does indeed hold all the answers – we just don't have all the science yet' ('The Future is Already Here', 138). Shortly after the release of his novel *Calculating God* (2000), he produced an essay entitled 'Science and God' (2000) to promote the book. It begins:

Although most people might consider the two nouns ('science,' 'god') to be the key words in that phrase, for me the most important one is that little conjunction in the middle. That's because the alternative wording would be 'Science or God' – which seems to be the choice many want to offer these days. (176)

In his fictional works, Sawyer demonstrates a belief that science and religion are interconnected.

this is the only current universe, and one of just a handful that have ever existed, [and thus] the life-generating properties of the very specific fundamental constants that define reality are virtually impossible to explain except as the results of deliberate design. (206)

In essence, the characters prove 'the existence of – one might as well use the word – God' (205), which, incongruously, leads to a crisis of faith that is reminiscent of the work of Douglas Adams, where proof of God leads to the *disproof* of God's existence as 'proof denies faith, and without faith I am nothing' (*Hitchhiker's Guide* 63). In Sawyer's short story, Pope Mary III abdicates because the 'creator is clearly not the God of the Bible or the Torah or the Qur'an. Rather the creator is a physicist, and we are one of his or her experiments. Science hasn't reconciled itself with religion' (206). The characters in this story demonstrate the idea that science and religion are incompatible. But it is important to note that, like many agnostics, they deny the existence of an *organized* religion and not the idea of a God, as an atheist would.

When discussing the active use of religion in science fiction, Adam J. Frisch and Joseph Martos (1985) suggest that:

The visions of some authors and some stories are obviously religious (even when they often appear to be antireligious) [...]. They are concerned in some way with basic being, meaning, and goodness, and since these are essentially religious concerns we can say that science fiction of this sort is essentially religious. When these authors satirizing religion or some aspect of it, therefore, we submit that what they are usually doing is condemning religiosity, that is, the external and shallow trappings of organized religion. (24-25)

When science fiction authors such as Sawyer are antireligious in their religious works, they are often following the model of agnosticism, instead of outright denying the existence of God, as an atheist. In 'Science

of physics and the fundamental constants were the source code. The universe was the application, running now for 13.9 billion years' (332). While God is described in terminology related to a computer programmer, the characters also demonstrate a sense of awe at the idea of God: 'The idea was staggering, huge' (300). The characters reflect Joseph Campbell's final principle of mythology, a metaphysical-mystical function that 'waken[s] and maintain[s] in the individual an experience of awe, humility, and response, in recognition of that ultimate mystery, transcending names and forms' (609). Nevertheless, although Sawyer's novels hint at the idea of intelligent design, the stories do not confirm creationism as identified by an organized religion such as Christianity. Sawyer is adamant that his 'novel takes pains to point out arguments against intelligent design, irreducible complexity, and many other issues' ('Rebuttal'). Furthermore, although *Calculating God* points to an intelligent designer, the novel does not suggest that this designer is infallible. In fact, as the universe operates as a computer program, the entire narrative is a lead up to the programmer fixing a 'bug' in the program (332). Both novels reveal contradictory perspectives, but what is important is that science fiction allows for a theistic debate, and ambiguity is essential to this.

Science fiction functions as mythology when it fulfills Aldiss's definition of science fiction as the '*search for a definition of mankind and his status in the universe*' (164). Of course, all literature in some way attempts to obtain 'truth' and the 'essence of humanity'. But sf is best suited for this endeavour as it is a literature of speculation of possibilities. Additionally, sf is distinguished from other mythological literature in that it reflects a faith that science can explain the universe. As Sawyer argues:

I don't think there's any question, including the most basic philosophical conundrums of where did we come from, why are we here, what does it all mean, and, indeed, the biggest of them all, is there a God, that cannot be most effectively addressed through the application of the scientific method. ('The Future', 138)

...sf is distinguished from other mythological literature in that it reflects a faith that science can explain the universe.

and God', Sawyer clearly suggests that there is a hint of intelligent design in the universe. Conversely, in his novel *Illegal Alien* (1997), the alien characters explain, 'We used to think that we were divinely created children of God. [...] But [then] we discovered that this is not true, that we are merely products of evolution' (360). In the novel, the alien bodies are produced by evolution, just as human bodies are. Dr. Smathers elaborates, 'The eye, in fact, is *incompetently* designed. No engineer would ever do it that way' (302). Yet, when the novel is considered alongside *Calculating God*, the novels reveal conflicting viewpoints. In *Calculating God*, the narrator firmly states, 'God was the programmer. The laws

Sf does not necessarily deny or confirm the existence of God, but instead suggests that humans should not live in a state of ignorance, stuck in the Garden of Eden. Just as Prometheus's transgressions against the gods resulted in the gift of knowledge to humanity, science fiction's morally ambiguous protagonists attempt to answer questions of humanity. This ambiguity does not differentiate science fiction as a 'new' mythology, because the original mythologies are also ambiguous and open to interpretation. Hence, *The Terminal Experiment* and *Mindscan* offer contrasting views of the religious idea of the soul, and of the ethical implications of research in

artificial intelligence. Religion and ethics in science are inseparable. Furthermore, just as traditional mythology validates religion, what defines sf as a 'new' mythology is its absolute faith in the scientific method. As Sawyer asserts, 'The scientific method is the single greatest tool of understanding ever devised by humanity' ('The Future', 137). Sawyer's novels and short stories exemplify how science fiction functions as mythology, exploring the identity of humankind by combining scientific terminology with religious questions.

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Richard Bizley: Artist in Space and Time

by David A. Hardy

A side-street in an old quarter of the little Dorset seaside town of Lyme Regis is perhaps not the obvious place that you'd expect to find the UK's only gallery specializing in space, prehistoric and science fiction art. Art galleries there certainly are, in plenty, but they usually show local scenes, seascapes and such. But think again: Lyme Regis is in the heart of what is known as the Jurassic Coast where, in 1811, Mary Anning – aged 12 – and her older brother Joseph spent a year unearthing the 2m (6.5ft) long skull of an ichthyosaur. It has since become the focus for fossil-hunters, and the site of many important discoveries.

The BizleyArt Gallery opened in 2003 at 12a Coombe Street, diagonally across the road from the Dinosaurland fossil museum. Artist, Richard Bizley, says that some tourists may enter and promptly do a U-turn! Others linger, jaws agape at the images of worlds far away in space, or lost in the mists of a prehistoric past. Certainly, some appreciate that his gallery is so different from others nearby. You can often see Richard, hard at work painting on his easel or airbrushing in his spray-booth, through the window. Do go in and say 'Hello' – but make sure that he sees you come in, because Richard was born deaf. This was in 1959, and he has had a life-long



fascination with science – especially astronomy – and science fiction. He was inspired by TV programmes, films, and especially books. I am honoured to say that it was one of my own books, the 1972 *Challenge of the Stars* with Patrick Moore, that was largely responsible for Richard starting to produce space art. Quite a responsibility! (In my case it was the 1950 *Conquest of Space*, by Willy Ley with amazingly photographic art by Chesley Bonestell.) But in early childhood he was also inspired by magazines such as *Science Fiction Monthly*. Richard attended two boarding schools, where he became popular for his space and science fiction paintings.

Although he started by painting mainly astronomical subjects, sometimes with more of a science-fictional theme, the fact that he lives where he does led to him often being asked to paint prehistoric subjects, and this side of his work has increased over the years. He has illustrated several books on prehistoric subjects, and has become one of the leading artists in this field. He paints mainly in acrylics – using very little digital work, except Photoshop to correct or edit scans of his art – and produces all of the art in his gallery, whether as originals, prints or cards. He also sells high-quality prehistoric and aerospace models.

Since early childhood Richard has always been able to ‘hear’ in his head ‘music’ by looking at images or things around him. He does not ‘hear’ colours; he ‘hears’ compositions and scenes, such as bright rainbows against dark skies, airport runways, good works of art and so forth. Movement, too, ‘such as a cloud of falling snow blowing and jostling gently very high above, silhouetted against the white sky’, can create music. Also, he says that it is not music in the normal sense, it consists of echoing, undulating, reverberating notes, depending on what he sees. For example, a scene from an aircraft window of the various cloud-tops receding into the distance creates a sort of orchestral music. Another example was the Space Shuttle’s three main engines: the way they lit up and roared until three perfect cones of blue light formed and the spaceship ascended and dwindled in the camera’s frame.

The ‘music’, Richard says, is indescribable. It was in his thirties, after watching a programme about it, that he realised he has had synaesthesia since very early childhood. He wondered if it was to do with his deafness, so he asked all his deaf friends and other artists, and not one of them has it. It is an unusual gift, which Richard uses to the full to create his paintings. He was recently fitted with a cochlear implant, which is of enormous help to him, especially working





with the visiting public in his gallery; thankfully his synaesthesia was not affected by the operation.

Richard enjoys reading all branches of science fiction, though he tends to steer towards hard sf. Arthur C. Clarke, Robert L. Forward and Isaac Asimov were his early influences. He now reads books by many authors, a favourite being Stephen Baxter. Although, he adds, some non-hard sf books may contain some gem of an idea or a vision that he finds inspiring. Richard has a deep fascination for what lurks in the deep realm of space:

What alien horizons await us? What, if any, kinds of life are 'out there'; how will they form? What kinds of engineering will humans create, including bioengineering? What kinds of starships will carry humans – will it be Generation Starships, Bussard Interstellar Ramjets, laser light pushed lightsails, fusion propulsion or something much more exotic?

He is confident that mankind will continue to explore our Solar System and will one day make brave voyages to the stars. He accepts that many of his astronomical paintings can be said to be science fiction art, as the boundary between the two is fuzzy, and he is a Fellow of the IAAA (International Association of Astronomical Artists).

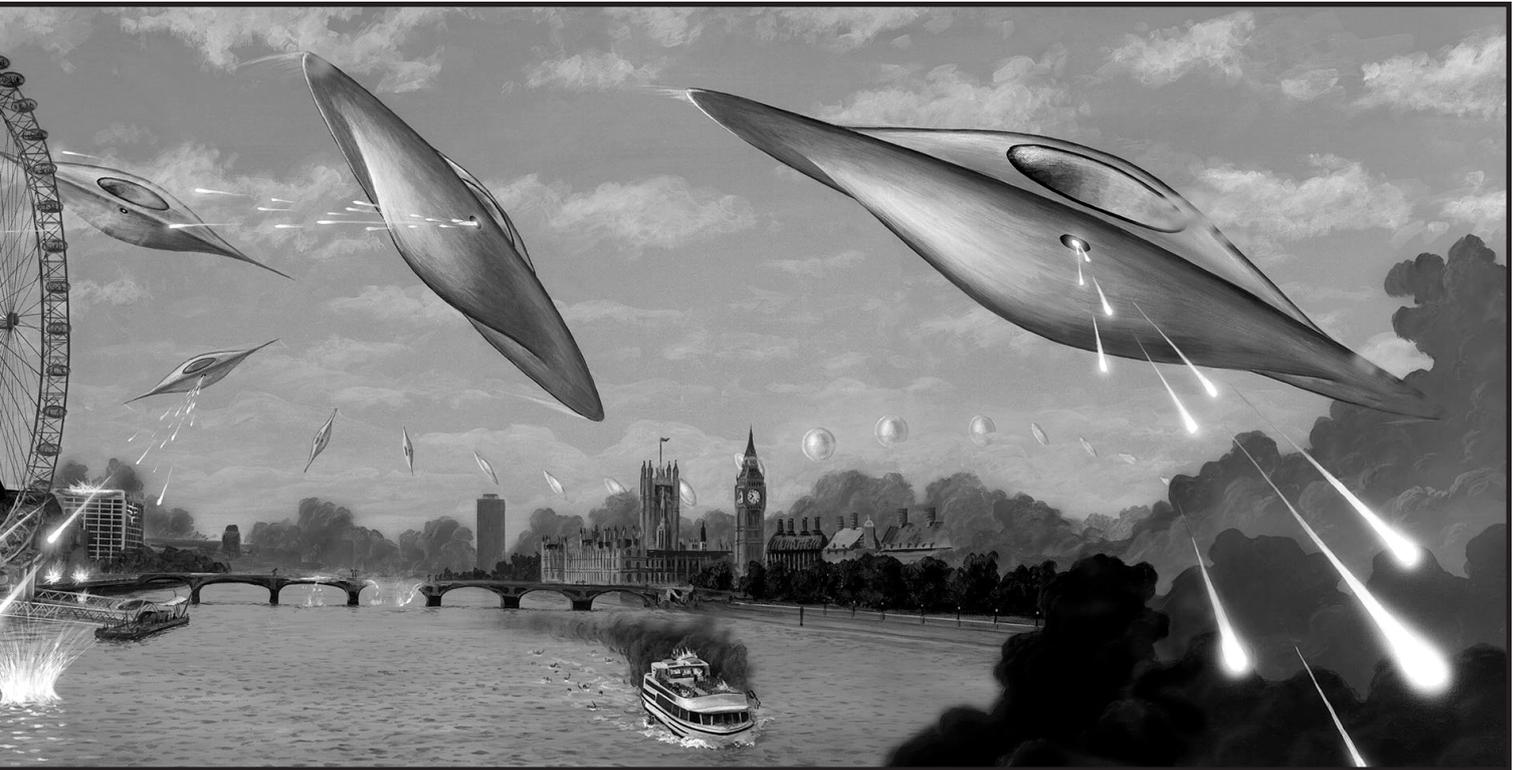
Many people nowadays, he says, do not yet realise or are currently unable to see the potential beauty beyond Earth that awaits us. He is often asked in his gallery, 'Why paint space and science fiction images?'. He replies by saying: 'We are all riding on a planet at 30 kilometres per second, orbiting a typical dwarf star, and we can only climb a few kilometres up the mountains before we need to wear a mask. People fail to appreciate the Earth is *also* a planet, after all!' He hopes that his art inspires others to see the 'bigger picture' about everything and to give science fiction the respect it deserves. I hope so too!



Richard's work — of all types — may be seen on his website: www.bizleyart.com

BizleyArt

Original paintings by Richard Bizley
Prints available, commissions welcome
Specialist in prehistoric, space and science fiction art
Visit BizleyArt Gallery - contact Richard if making a special visit to check opening hours
BizleyArt, 12a Coombe Street, Lyme Regis, Dorset, DT7 3PR
website: bizleyart.com email: richard@bizleyart.com
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Sir Terry Pratchett, Wizzard of Odd

by Pat Harkin and Naomi Jacobs

Terry Pratchett was a man of many worlds.

He wrote of a world which was small enough to fit inside the rug on a child's bedroom floor. He wrote of artificial worlds built by impossibly advanced alien races. And in his recent return to science fiction, he wrote of a seemingly endless string of parallel worlds ready for human exploration.

It is, of course, the novels set on Discworld for which he is best known. The Discworld differs from our world in many ways. It's flat, not round. It runs on magic, not science. And it's sensibly held up by four elephants standing on the carapace of an enormous turtle, not just – hanging there unsupported. But although the Discworld's geography may differ from that of the Roundworld, its inhabitants are indistinguishable from their Roundworld equivalents. The great strength of Terry's writing was that he populated his worlds with *people*. Real, believable people, who behave just as Roundworld people do.

Admittedly, some of Terry's people were short, bearded and fond of mining, quaffing¹ and singing about gold. And some drank blood and could turn into bats. Some were even made of stone. But they weren't the traditional dwarf, vampire or troll of folklore. They were people who just happened to be, well, a bit beardy, or pale, or gritty. In every other way they were people like us, behaving the way people do. That made them more real, more believable, and Terry used this to his advantage when he wanted to explore an important idea.

Terry's books explored themes which he regarded as significant. He wrote about gender equality, about excessive nationalism, about religion, politics, and law and order and he did it without anyone noticing. He took comic fantasy and used it as a magician uses

patter and sleight of hand. He told stories which made you think about things while all the while the story was saying 'Look at me! Look at me! Pay no attention to the idea behind the curtain!' Terry referred to this process as 'scaffolding'. The 'scaffold' was a supporting structure, a story which kept your attention while, behind the curtain, Terry was telling his real story.

The foundation of most of Terry's writing was the Discworld; described as a 'world and mirror of worlds' it resembled our Roundworld closely when it suited Terry whilst leaving him as much leeway as he needed to create his tales.

One of the things for which Terry was best known was his relationship with his fans. With the release of each book – usually two a year – he would set off on long, arduous signing tours often meeting many hundreds of fans at each. It's frequently remarked – and not entirely in jest – that it's the unsigned Pratchetts which are the rarities. At the end of each signing, Terry would send a report on how well it had gone to his agent, Colin Smythe. The report was superficially about sales, but actually about how well the shop had organized the signing and this extended to how well they treated the fans. Shops which brought the queue in out of the rain, or laid on cooling drinks if the air conditioning was inadequate were more likely to get return visits on subsequent tours!

And it wasn't just books he signed. As the Discworld became more famous, merchandise started to become available. Paintings and sculpture, T-shirts and jigsaws – all personally approved by Terry before they were allowed to enter production. Fans would bring any and all of these to 'meet their maker'. He signed scythe blades (the signature was then etched into the blade) and a computer monitor on which a fan had played the Discworld adventure game. He often said that he drew the line at signing body parts,

¹ As Terry explains in *Wyrd Sisters*, 'Quaffing is like drinking, but you spill more.'

but even that line was occasionally crossed and several fans now sport tattoos of his autograph.

If something wasn't 'right' it didn't go into production, no matter how expertly crafted it was. Some of the most valuable Discworld artefacts are test pieces which were rejected – a prototype figure of the character Cheery Littlebottom from the Clarecraft range of figurines has been known to fetch over £1000 for charity at auction.

Terry always enjoyed the relaxed atmosphere of the event, taking part with good humour in many of the activities including releasing model rockets – though not without a moment of terror for the organizers when one came within a hair's breadth of crashing into the author's expensive car.

The first formal² Discworld Convention took place in Sachas Hotel, Manchester in 1996. Originally described on alt.fan.prtchett as a 'mini-con' and conceived as 'a gathering of about 30 or 40 people who

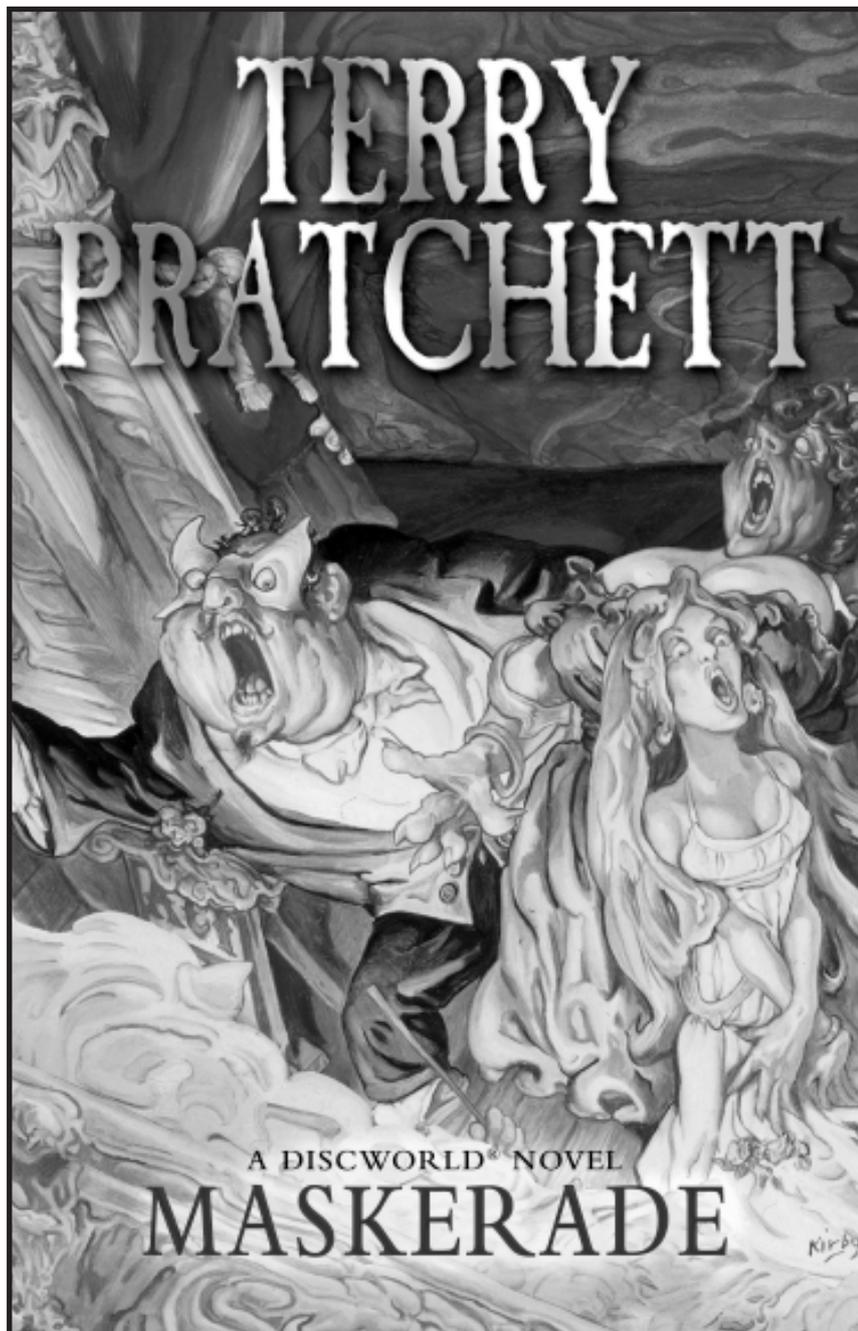


Discworld fans have always been gregarious and fan meetings are very common. Since the early nineties, facilitated by the popular usenet group alt.fan.prtchett (which Terry himself posted to frequently, in the early days of the internet) small groups have met informally in pubs and cafes every few months and larger meetings, of up to 1,000 people, have been held all over the world.

With the close scrutiny Terry gave to their work, it was inevitable that Clarecraft became filled with artists who were themselves fans. In 1995, they decided to host a somewhat larger gathering for fans at the owners' farm in Suffolk. The event was so popular that it became a regular fixture, with hundreds of fans of all ages (including plenty of families with children) coming together every two years to camp, laugh and take part in activities such as falconry displays, cabbage throwing, Morris dancing and water pistol duels at an event that was often compared to a miniature Glastonbury festival with slightly less music and slightly more extravagant costumes.

will get together for an afternoon' it rapidly grew beyond this initial idea and at the end of June some 400 people (strictly speaking more than the hotel fire regulations would permit) spent an entire weekend eating, drinking, chatting and playing games, as well as enjoying more diverse lectures and activities tangentially related to Discworld. The Convention was held only two weeks after the IRA bombing of Manchester city centre, so the local police force had to be given notice that there might be some controlled explosions taking place as part of an 'alchemy' demonstration, given by a chemistry professor. Terry was Guest of Honour, a role he reprised many times in the subsequent years, never missing a UK convention until failing health kept him away in 2014. Terry also attended Discworld Conventions in Australia (2007, 2011), USA (2009, 2011), Ireland (2009) and Germany (2009). Terry contributed enormously to the enjoyment of the fans at the Conventions. As well as being interviewed on stage, he acted as judge for

² For suitable values of 'formal'.



the costume displays and talent shows, but more importantly he made himself available to the fans in the bar or hotel lobby. He was happy to have fans sit and eat with him at breakfast or just chat in the corridors. Talking to his fans was as important to Terry as writing for them. He loved to hear how they related to their favourite characters – but he was almost resolute that he was in charge of the Discworld and often said that while he always listened to fans' opinions, if he had always taken notice of them he'd have written nothing since 1987 but novels about Rincewind the wizard, a character introduced in the first two novels and who appears from time to time in the rest of the series but usually not as a major character.

The first time any venue hosted a convention was always an eye-opening experience for them. Some fans take great pleasure in designing costumes in

order to appear as their favourite characters and hotel staff were never quite sure what to expect from a group of wizards, witches or barbarians in leather codpieces! In 2002, when the Convention was held at the Hanover International Hotel, Hinkley for the first time, the fans drank the bar dry twice during a single weekend, prompting the observation from the manager 'They're always drinking – but they're never drunk!'. Terry overheard this and later commented 'Discworld fans – they drink like the rugby club but they fight like the chess club!'

Terry's fans were also a fertile source of information for him. Whenever he needed to know something outside his sphere of knowledge (a vast sphere which he kept inflating by an insatiable appetite for reading) he could find a fan who knew more. For example, when he was writing *Maskerade* (the 18th Discworld novel, set largely in an opera house) he was able to find fans who could take him backstage and explain how an opera comes to life; about the mechanisms of the stage and the superstitions of the players and how these come together to create triumphant spectacle – or chaos. A small group of these fans, to whom he sometimes referred as the 'Greek Chorus', might answer the phone to be asked 'How much earwax do you produce in a lifetime?' or 'If there was a magic door which wouldn't let iron pass,

and you walked through it – what would happen to your blood?' or 'How many versions of the "One for sorrow" magpie rhyme do you know?' (The record answer for that one was 'I'm not sure. Probably about nineteen'.)

Terry's fans could also be a source of ideas for him. He was once asked 'What do you think the Tooth Fairy DOES with all those teeth?' and the answer became an entire novel – *Hogfather*.³ On another occasion he was asked to consider the legal implications of a situation where an assassin has completed his contract - but the victim returns as a zombie. Although he quickly got as far as his 'scaffolding' story, that tale remains sadly unwritten.

Terry had so many fans that some could be found in

³ Not telling. You'll have to read it. Or watch the DVD.

recurrent:

SEQUENTIALS

Laura Sneddon

Politics and History? In Comics? Pah!

While political thoughts and ideas are expressed across all genres, it's well known that science fiction in particular provides a perfect platform for theorising on political futures and extrapolating on present trends. Comics on the other hand are perhaps a little more overlooked when it comes to the ability to hold complex ideas despite having their roots in easing the communication of political issues.

came to prominence in this format, ably illustrated by Dick Calkins, and the popular strip was quickly followed by Alex Raymond's *Flash Gordon* in '34. The new format was ideal for the various futuristic tales that followed.

These pre-Hiroshima heroes extolled the virtues of atomic power, although neither promise a utopian future, rather that of battles forever more.



The superheroes of course arrived soon thereafter, often incorporating SF elements in their super-powered or alien characters waging war against US enemies, but the political content of all US comics became heavily restricted by the authoritarian Comics Code in the '50s. This self-regulation spawned from the scare tactics of the decade, that comics were corrupting the American youth, particularly the superhero and horror titles.

The Code decreed, that '[i]n every instance good shall triumph over evil and the criminal punished for his misdeeds', as well as prohibiting glamorizing crime or sympathizing with lawbreakers, and removing all horror, nudity and hints of sexual 'perversion'. But in reality, as well as torpedoing the massively successful horror comics industry, the Code was also used to police progressive politics.

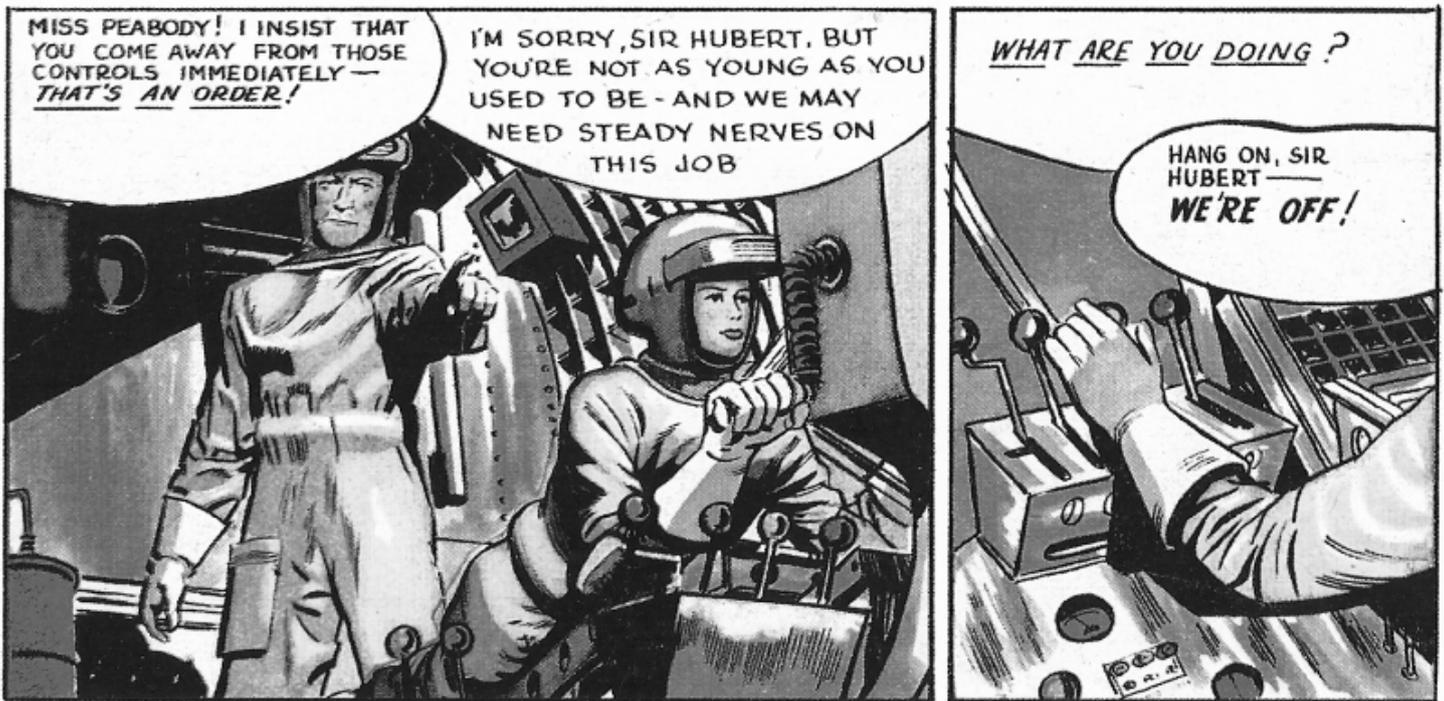
Women were shown as dutiful housewives with no drive of their own – Catwoman disappeared

Long before Superman crash-landed in Kansas, the advent of political cartoons in newspapers had heralded the dawn of an era in which poverty, and therefore illiteracy, was no barrier to communicating the topics of the day to the masses.

Science fiction comics were not long behind, with the earliest serial strip starring one *Buck Rogers in the 25th Century A.D* in 1929. Philip Francis Nowlan's creation

completely from comics for 13 years as the character simply could not exist under the Code. DC added their own rules, saying, 'inclusion of females in stories is specifically discouraged... Women, when used in plot structure, should be secondary in importance'.

There was some backlash from within the industry but it was soon quashed. EC Comics publisher William Gaines waged several battles in the courts, most famously over the SF story 'Judgment Day' from *Incredible Science Fiction*



#33 in 1956. It had been printed pre-Code, in 1953, but the reprint was objected to.

The story, by Al Feldstein, Joe Orlando and Marie Severin, follows Tarlton, an Earth-born astronaut of the Galactic Republic visiting a robot-ruled planet. The robot population had divided itself in two, blue and orange, with the former having fewer rights than the latter. This allegory of the segregated society in the contemporary US, was deemed by the helmeted astronaut as not qualified to join the enlightened Republic but he leaves them with the hope that they can change, as his planet once did.

In the last panel, back aboard his ship, Tarlton finally takes off his helmet to reveal that he is black. The Comics Code administrator demanded that they could not have the character be black, to which Feldstein and Gaines gave a hearty 'fuck you'. The comic was printed, but it was the last comic the former juggernaut of EC ever published. (Gaines focused solely on *Mad* magazine thereafter.)

The UK had its own witch-hunt to deal with but had far fewer homegrown comics to punish. When the acceptable, middle-class *Eagle* dawned in 1950, it announced *Dan*

Dare, Pilot of the Future proudly upon the front cover. As the *Eagle* was built upon good old Christian values, it's no surprise that Dan Dare is frightfully English, showing that good old chaps save the world with their plucky working class sidekicks. And yet this was also a liberal publication managing to both banish racism from Dare's world while simultaneously falling into racist tropes along the way.

The Silver Age of superhero comics in the '70s oversaw both adherence to the Comics Code slowly fading away and a surge in superhero stories losing elements of fantasy and magic in favour of sf-based origins and skills. It is perhaps not a coincidence that political issues returned once more to the pages, from the subtle textual layers of the mutant X-Men outcasts to the more brazen drug warnings from Green Arrow and Spider-Man, while Wonder Woman left her days as the male superheroes' secretary far behind in her new role as an icon of the feminist movement.

The UK science fiction anthology comic *2000 AD* debuted in 1977, coming to prominence during the Thatcher years with punkish digs at the dark future of society. The infamous *Judge Dredd*, patrolling the mostly automatized



Mega-City One with its 100 million bored citizens, provided a perfect stomping ground for playing with issues of authoritarianism and police states. Along with his fellow judges, Dredd, created by John Wagner, Carlos Ezquerra and Pat Mills, is charged to convict, sentence, or execute perps on site – not least for expressing art in one of the few ways available, graffiti!

2000AD, and UK science fiction comics in general, tended far more towards the leftwing end of the spectrum than their American peers, and it was the influx of British creators into the US comics industry in the late '80s that helped tip the balance. Truthfully though, many of the later American superheroes, created as they were by second generation immigrants and during the Civil Rights movement, had a fairly diverse foundation to build upon.

Science fiction has remained at the forefront of mass-market comics today, with dystopian and post-apocalyptic futures particularly popular, alongside space exploration and alternate worlds. The space opera *Saga* by Brian K Vaughan and Fiona Staples



is perhaps the most popular original series since *The Walking Dead*, while new reads like the psychedelic gender-swapping retelling of Odysseus, *ODY-C*, by Matt Fraction and Christian Ward are melting eyeballs across the globe.



But what of contemporary SF comics that contain more overt political thoughts? It's been a long journey through the pulp icons, superheroes, witch-hunts and Thatcher rebellion, for us to land in a political landscape that is perhaps just a tad too familiar. Yet while the '80s gave us *Le Transperceneige* (Snowpiercer), and the late '90s brought *Transmetropolitan*, today's comics seem a tad more hopeful.

Jacques Lob and Jean-Marc Rochette created their dystopian post-apocalyptic comic in 1982, with the premise that the remnants of humanity lived aboard a massive perpetually moving train. Carriage position determined class and rank, with one tail-dweller taking matters into his own hands to move up the train and claim his future.

In 1997, Warren Ellis and Darick Robertson brought forth the exploits of gonzo journalist Spider Jerusalem as he harangues his way around the corrupt cyberpunk, transhumanist City of the future.

Transmetropolitan shows a future full of incredible technology and terrifyingly familiar greedy politicians who care nothing for the filth that much of the population lives within. In *Le Transperceneige* humanity is far past the point of no return, but even to the bitter end the rich are screwing the poor in an attempt to maintain their lavish lifestyles.

Their 2015 successors are of a different breed. *Zero*, from writer Aleš Kot and a rotating team of artists, fooled the world into thinking it was merely an exceptionally clever spy thriller. *Letter 44*, by Charles Soule and Alberto Jimenez Alburquerque, focuses on the contents of a letter left for



the new, liberal president of the USA upon his appointment, explaining the previous war-mongering years. And *Bitch Planet*, a women-in-prison (WiP) exploitation riff from Kelly Sue DeConnick and Valentine De Landro.

In a move pioneered by Alex de Campi in her brilliant *Grindhouse: Doors Open at Midnight* series, WiP and science fiction collided in comics with *Bitch Planet*, retaining a similar feminist bent. Troublesome women in the near future are labelled as 'noncompliant' and shipped off far from Earth at the titular location. What determines noncompliance? Murder of course. Or being fat. Or maybe just ticking off your husband.

DeConnick is well known for being outspoken on matters of sexism within the comics industry and here she is free

to operate outside of all constraints placed upon her by the superhero publishers. Most of the inmates, as in real life, are women of colour and all the women are depicted realistically.

An example of the message within can be found with Penny Rolle, a 'wantonly obese' prisoner who when charged to picture her ideal self while connected to a mind-reading device, laughs uproariously as the projected image mirrors her real self. Penny's issue is by far the best thus far, as the strains of stories being constructed around political messages creeps a little around the edges elsewhere, but with such an important message to convey, much can be forgiven.

The term noncompliant, or NC, has been openly embraced by the comics fandom as a whole, and female fans in particular as an iconic status.

Letter 44 launched in late 2013, introducing the character of Stephen Blades, the newly elected 44th President of the USA who finds a letter from his predecessor waiting for him in the Oval Office.

The previous president, who happens to have had very George W Bush type tactics, explains within the letter just why he spent his two terms lying to the American people, warmongering in the Middle East, and fibbing about WMDs – there's some kind of construction in the asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter that didn't come from Earth, and he wanted as many combat-trained soldiers to be ready for it. Nine astronauts are en route to intercept the construct.

Minimal time is spent on disbelief as Blades soon gets confirmation from the members of the White House situation room. Narrative swings between Blades' desperate attempts to introduce his more liberal policies and disentangle the US from wars abroad, and the people aboard the spacecraft, 3 years into their mission to the asteroid belt.

It's an interesting concept, taking the corrupt and bloody politics of the last decade and showing one particular misguided reason behind it all, ably mimicking the pressure put on more liberal US politicians who still stand far to the right by British standards. In fact the actual non-conservatives here are the astronauts aboard their craft, who have learned to operate a much fairer micro-society within their confined space.

Having the President as a main character gives Soule much to play around with here concerning our own current day politics, and like those comics that referenced the reign of Thatcher, *Letter 44* will stand as a post-Bush science fiction comic for years to come.

Then there is *Zero*, Kot's near-future, subversive and postmodern espionage series where every issue serves as a standalone story that builds towards a larger, unique narrative. Edward Zero, conditioned from birth to be the ultimate unfeeling superspy is neither monster nor victim, wielded as a weapon by the always-warring human race.

Zero hides the emotions he is not supposed to be feeling from his superiors as his soul slowly unravels through his bloody adventures. The opening pages are seemingly set after the spy has left the service and caused some world-altering change, before plunging him into the earlier chaos

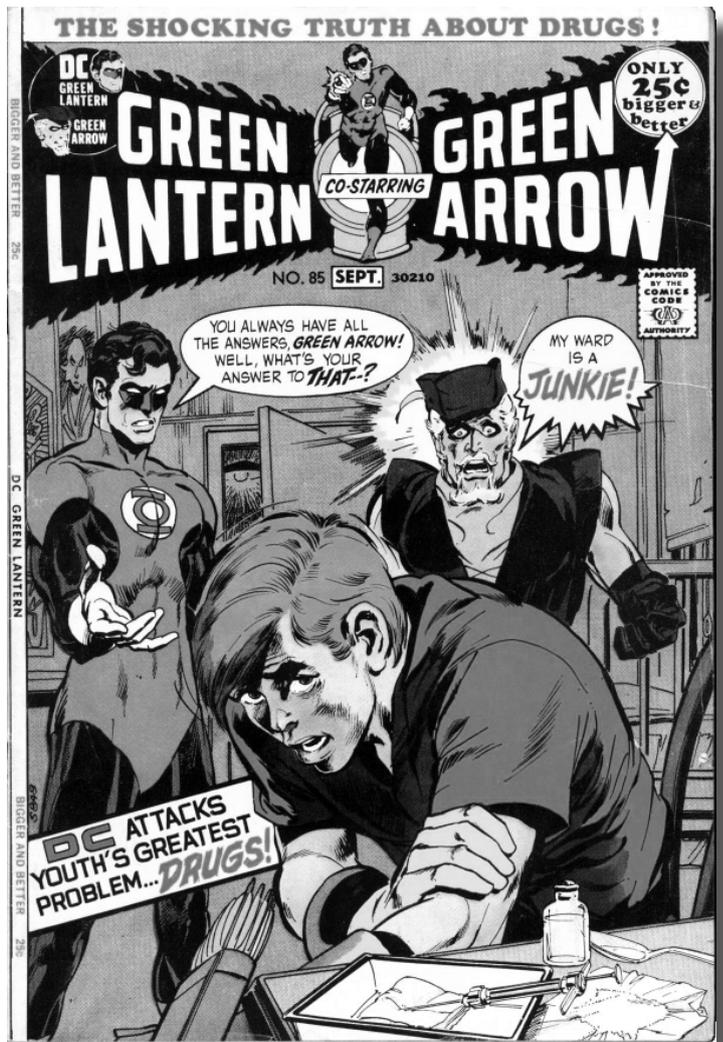
of the Gaza Strip. Kot doesn't shy away from referencing current and on-going political situations, dipping into the grey areas of human morality, but slowly, creeping around the edges, the SF flavour takes a stronger hold.

To say more would spoil the experience of reading this multi-layered and deeply philosophical comic, but while it's hailed as a revolutionary entry in the spy genre, less has been said about what it brings to the sf table. By combining speculative and trans-dimensional fiction with political commentary and espionage so subtly, sneaking the former in while readers are distracted by the post-James Bond antics, *Zero* has shown that sf comics don't need to have superheroes, spaceships, or robots on the front cover. They don't even need to label themselves as science fiction.

From Buck Rogers to Edward Zero, it has been a long and winding road with a million offshoots in every conceivable direction. Political content, when present, generally swings to the left in SF comics, not least due to British influence being so prevalent upon the US comics industry. But the days of pages and pages of space battles are perhaps behind us, with comics today leaning more towards multiple layers and philosophical wondering than pulp schlock.

To read a comic is to welcome the concept of change; there is no other medium quite like it when it comes to absorbing words and pictures alongside each other, the minds of readers required to fill in the gaps and do the critical thinking needed to complete the communications within. Perhaps it is this reason that has been the driving force behind the history of politics in all comic genres, but particularly in science fiction.

To look to the future and see progress and hope, rather than hoping the past will catch us again.



recurrent:

KINCAID IN SHORT

Paul Kincaid

“At the Rialto” by Connie Willis

I don't understand quantum physics.

Let me be clear, I probably know as much about it as the average non-scientist who reads science fiction and likes to watch the occasional science documentary. I know about light being both wave and particle; I know about Schrödinger's poor cat; I know about uncertainty and chaos and butterfly effects and so on. Philosophically, I even sort of get it. I just can't visualise it as a way of comprehending the real world.

And that is what this story is all about: not understanding quantum physics.

“At the Rialto” by Connie Willis, first published in *Omni* in 1989, was one of a string of stories she wrote in which what happens to the characters in the story in some way mirrors the scientific idea behind the story. Other examples would be “Schwarzschild Radius”, or *Bellwether*, or in fantasy terms “Death on the Nile” in which tourists in Egypt find themselves behaving in ways that echo Egyptian mythology. “At the Rialto” is perhaps the most accomplished of them, but the

Seriousness of mind was a prerequisite for understanding Newtonian physics. I am not convinced it is not a handicap in understanding quantum theory. (287)

Really, the entire story is contained in those two sentences: it is, after all, a story about bringing non-seriousness of mind to understanding quantum theory. But we'll come to that.

That quotation is taken from the keynote address by Dr. Gedanken (the name, a reference to Ernst Mach's “*gedanken-experiment*”, usually translated as “thought experiment”, is surely too emphatic a nudge in the ribs even for a comedy such as this), the central figure in this whole story though he only puts in an actual appearance in the last few lines. Ruth, the central character, is anxious to meet him because he is putting together a new project on ways to understand quantum theory, but wherever she is, he is not. Like so many of Willis's screwball comedy stories (as, for example, *To Say Nothing of the Dog*, or even, thinking about it, non-screwball stories like *Blackout/All Clear*), “At the Rialto” consists of

Really, the entire story is after all, a story about bringing non-seriousness of mind to understanding quantum theory.

way principles of quantum physics are played out within the story is disguised by the fact that it is presented as a Hollywood screwball comedy. In fact, that's the point: quantum physics, she tells us, is best understood as a Hollywood screwball comedy.

Willis is probably the best writer of light comedy working in science fiction today (to be honest, there isn't a great deal of competition), but she often uses the comedy as a way of approaching serious topics. Though her quest for the next laugh can tend to undermine the seriousness of the subject. However, it is rare that the comedy itself is the core of the story rather than its surface, which may be what makes “At the Rialto” so interesting.

The seriousness is there, mostly contained in quotations that punctuate the text and that are supposedly taken from addresses, schedules or presentations at the conference on quantum physics where the story takes place. But even these serious bits are handled in a light, off-hand way, as for instance in the opening lines of the story:

people rushing around and failing to meet.

Other of these serious punctuation marks in the story include a straightforward account of Schrödinger's Cat, the odd bit of technical language that neither we nor the author are meant to understand – ‘A discussion of the latest research in singlet-state correlations including nonlocal influences’ (301) – and a clear statement of the wave/particle problem:

The major implication of wave/particle duality is that an electron has no precise location. It exists in a superposition of probably locations. Only when the experimenter observes the electron does it “collapse” into a location. (304)

But in the main these snippets come from Dr Gedanken, broad statements that are more designed to underline the plot than to explore the scientific idea: ‘*We can only make advances in theory when we have a model we can visualize.*’ (298). The flesh built upon this skeleton of an idea does just that: finding a non-serious metaphor that will allow us to visualize the quantum universe.

The story begins with the arrival of Dr Ruth Baringer at the Rialto Hotel in Hollywood. She is there for a scientific conference. Why a scientific conference should be taking place in Hollywood is one of the running jokes in the story. There are, really, only two characters in the story, Ruth and David, but around them circulates a chorus of figures each of whom has one repeated refrain. Of these, Abey Fields constantly complains: 'Why do we always have to go to these exotic places, like Hollywood?' (288), and suggests instead that they should hold the conference in Racine.

Another of this revolving company of stock parts is Tiffany, the air-headed receptionist: 'I'm not actually a hotel clerk at all. I'm just working here to pay for my transcendental posture lessons. I'm really a model/actress.' (287) Sometimes Tiffany reappears as the waitress Stephanie, 'I'm working here part-time to pay for my holistic hairstyling lessons' (299), or Natalie, or Kimberly. Whatever the name, they occupy the same indeterminate role, both wave and particle, or rather neither one thing nor the other, only capable of becoming fixed if you can temporarily convince them that you are connected to the movers and shapers of the film industry. Without that spur to her concentration, Tiffany or her avatars is a constant source of chaos.

aspects of quantum theory that will be played out within the course of the story.

I mean, an electron is a particle except it acts like a wave. In fact, a neutron acts like two waves and interferes with itself (or each other), and you can't really measure any of this stuff properly because of the Heisenberg uncertainty principle, and that isn't the worst of it. When you set up a Josephson junction to figure out what rules the electrons obey, they sneak past the barrier to the other side, and they don't seem to care much about the limits of the speed of light either. (289)

When you figure out what the story is doing, you almost feel as if that paragraph should come with tick boxes so you can check off which aspects of quantum theory have just been played out within the confines of the Rialto hotel.

More pertinently, we latch on to the name David, who will become the positive to Ruth's negative, because everyone asks her if she has seen him yet. At the previous conference in St Louis, it seems that the two were 'practically inseparable. Moonlight riverboat rides and all' (289), and for all that Ruth tries to turn the conversation back to the details of the conference schedule, everyone else assumes that the

By now, perhaps the way events in the hotel serve as a metaphor for quantum physics, is becoming explicit.

The chaos starts when Tiffany cannot find Ruth's booking, or the booking of Ruth's room mate, confuses Ruth with Dr Gedanken, gives people the wrong room, and wonders whether Ruth doesn't really want the Disneyland Hotel because 'A lot of people get the two confused.' (287). Throughout the story, whenever people approach Tiffany for whatever reason, her immediate response is: 'I don't show a reservation for you' (288), as if they are Schrödinger's hotel guests who both do and do not get to stay in the hotel.

Ruth ends up having to spend several hours sitting in the lobby with a number of her colleagues waiting until Tiffany goes off duty before they are able to get their rooms. Although there is one delegate, one particle, who manages to penetrate the wall and get a room ('Amazingly enough, Dr. Onofrio seemed to have gotten a key and was heading for the elevators' (289)), a small detail that we need to bear in mind later when we are told about the Josephson junction, which:

is designed so that electrons must obtain additional energy to surmount the energy barrier. It has been found, however, that some electrons simply tunnel, as Heinz Pagels put it, 'right through the wall.' (299)

There are several such small moments as this, which become corroborative detail when we look back later. Although this proves deceptive not long after when Dr. Onofrio sadly reports: 'They gave me 1282, but the room numbers only go up to seventy-five.' (291) Such details don't catch our attention at the time, however, rather we notice two things. The first is Ruth admitting that she doesn't understand quantum theory and has 'a sneaking suspicion nobody else did either' (289); though she then sets out the

romance will continue exactly as before. And because the act of observation is what fixes things in place, so this assumption will become reality.

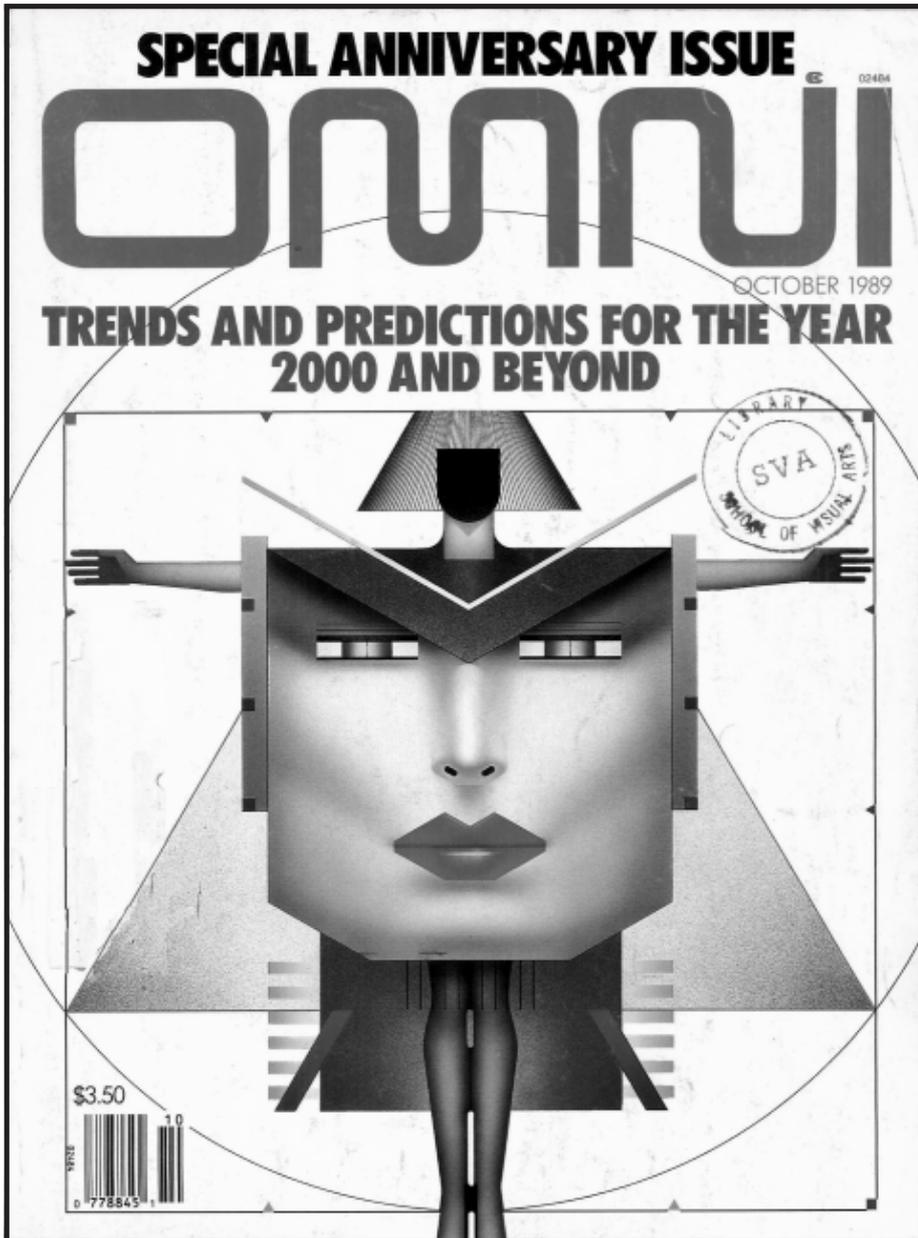
When Ruth finally gets to her room –

My clothes, which had been permanent press all the way from MIT, underwent a complete wave function collapse the moment I opened my suitcase, and came out looking like Schrödinger's almost-dead cat (291)

– she is late for the opening ceremonies: 'Dr. Halvard Onofrio ... will speak on the topic, 'Doubts Surrounding the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle.' Ballroom.' (288) She slips into the back of the ballroom, takes the first available chair, and inevitably finds herself sitting next to David. This will become a recurring feature of the story. Also inevitably, and also a recurring feature, what is going on in the ballroom turns out not to be Dr. Onofrio's opening remarks, or indeed anything to do with the quantum physics conference at all, but some sort of spiritualist meeting. When they fail to discover where the actual conference is taking place – 'I'm sorry. I don't show a reservation for them.' (293) – she and David head out to Grauman's Chinese Theatre, looking at the handprints and footprints in the concrete where 'You keep thinking you've found a pattern.' (293)

David tries to persuade her to go and see a movie, but she flees back to the conference for a seminar on chaos theory, though, of course

The Clara Bow Room, where it was supposed to be, was empty. A meeting of vegetarians was next door in the Fatty Arbuckle Room, and all the other conference rooms were locked. (295)



If an experimenter measured one of a pair of electrons that had originally collided, it changed the cross-correlation of the other instantaneously, even if the electrons were light-years apart. It was as if they were eternally linked by that one collision, sharing the same square forever, even if they were on opposite sides of the universe. (301-2)

Or, as she then spells it out because we are in the later stages of the story now and the theme is being made more explicit:

I thought of David ... It didn't matter where the electron went after the collision. Even if it went in the opposite direction from Hollywood and Vine, even if it stood a menu in the window to hide it, the other electron would still come and rescue it from the radicchio and buy it a donut. (302)

From this point on, of course, all is predictable: "At the Rialto" follows the strictures of the screwball comedy and must have the same sort of happy ending. The girl who has spent the whole time pushing the boy away from her, intent on her own independent intellectual pursuits, suddenly realises the answer to everything and so chases after the boy. So, as the conference disintegrates around her (as in St. Louis, the delegates spend their time seeing the sights rather than in conference), so she realises that the conference itself is meaningless, but the location of the conference means everything. She rushes to Grauman's Chinese, takes the first seat, and is inevitably sitting beside David. Of course,

the absent Dr. Gedanken and Ruth's missing room mate are there also, so she can reveal to them all that the paradigm for quantum theory is Hollywood. "And the Rialto," David said. 'Especially the Rialto.'" (307) The lights go down, the curtains open, the film starts, and the story ends.

It's a good comedy, slick, clever, so intricately constructed that even the smallest detail adds weight to the whole. It's the sort of story that Willis does best, and this is one of her very best. It was one of her numerous Nebula Award winners, a story that foregrounds the way we perceive science, indeed it is that extremely rare thing, a story that is funny about science. But in the end one question remains: "At the Rialto" is undoubtedly an excellent fiction about science; but does that make it science fiction?

Quotations taken from "At the Rialto" by Connie Willis in *Women of Wonder: The Contemporary Years* edited by Pamela Sargent, San Diego, Harcourt Brace, 1995, pp287-307.

Next day, however (after another incident in which she grabs the only seat in a crowded room and finds herself sitting next to David again) she is told that the seminar did take place and that 'The Clara Bow Room was packed.' (297)

By now the way that quantum physics serves as a metaphor for events in the hotel, or perhaps the way events in the hotel serve as a metaphor for quantum physics, is becoming explicit. A typically frustrating conversation at cross purposes with Tiffany is described as 'high-entropied' (298), and banging any piece of machinery is described as readjusting 'its fractal basin boundaries.' (299) More specifically, when Ruth slips out to a diner for breakfast, hoping to avoid David, only to find herself unhappily in a place offering 'papaya stuffed with salmon-berries and nasturtium/radicchio salad with a balsamic vinaigrette' (299-300), he materialises at her table: "How did you get here?" I asked. "Tunneling," he said.' (300) In other words, he has explicitly become an electron slipping through the barrier of a Josephson junction; even though he was supposedly elsewhere with other members of the conference, he appears as though there were no intervening space. They represent, we learn just a page later, the Einstein-Podolsky-Rosen paradox, which Ruth glosses thus:

recurrent:

FOUNDATION FAVOURITES

Andy Sawyer

The Long Way Back

by Margot Bennett (Bodley Head, 1954)

A recent (April 2015) BBC 3 'Sunday Feature' radio programme featured the work of three 'forgotten' women sf writers: Naomi Mitchison, Rose Macauley, and Margot Bennett. I was pleased to be smug about not thinking that Naomi Mitchison was 'forgotten' at all, but had the smugness wiped from my face on realising that I had never heard of Rose Macauley's *What Not: a Prophetic Comedy* (1918) and that Margot Bennett's *The Long Way Back* (1954) had languished on my 'to read' list for far too long. In tackling the latter (Macauley's book is duly to be read) I found something I should have read a long time ago.

Margot Bennett (1912-1980) was a Scottish writer of (mostly) crime thrillers who served as a nurse in the International Brigade in the Spanish Civil War and was

expedition to discover a land lost in the ragged remnants of history: Britain.

Bennett begins her novel with what seems to be a satire of the kind of machine-dystopia familiar to post-Wellsian sf, where her viewpoint character Game protests against being slotted into an appointed role in life and argues that he had developed gifts which make him more than an ordinary 'mechanical-repetitive worker'. He applies to be regarded as a physicist so that he can study cosmic rays, manages to blow the circuits of the grading machine (which keeps asking him if he is satisfied with the adequacy of the 'tobacco-rooms' and 'sex-cubicles' in his hut), and ends up being offered 'a really cushy job in anthropology. We're sending a team to investigate primitive Britain'.

We learn that atomic power has been discovered, a bomb exploded, and there is serious possibility of war with America, now occupied by people of Chinese or Japanese descent.

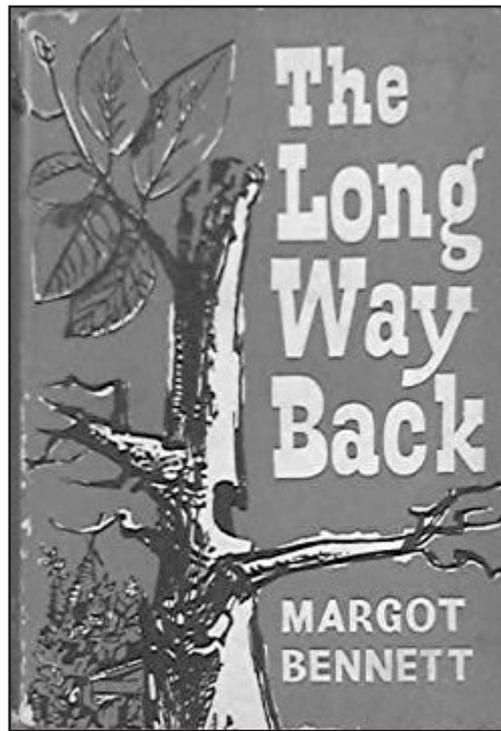
wounded in action. She wrote at least one other sf novel (*The Furious Masters*, 1968) and a couple of genre short stories, as well as the intriguingly-titled *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Atomic Radiation* (1964). According to family members interviewed by Sweet, she was a political activist after the war and, in her sixties, saved someone from drowning. Their reports of conversations held with her make you wish that she had written more sf. *The Long Way Back* made a Science Fiction Book Club edition, but it has rather drifted into undeserved oblivion.

The Long Road Back belongs to a class of speculative fiction which deals specifically with post-Imperial anxieties: examples include William Delisle Hay's *The Doom of the Great City* (1880), in which a New Zealand expedition wanders the ruins of a long-abandoned London, and Richard Jefferies' *After London* (1885) but, perhaps more relevantly John Christopher's *The World in Winter* (1962) in which a British refugee from a devastating (and sudden) new Ice Age returns with a Nigerian expedition to observe the state of his country. Here, it is an African (Kenyan?)

These early chapters are partly comedy, partly exposition of the background. We learn that little is known of the civilization which included Britain and ended with something called the 'Big Bang'. Only fragments of the culture of the White peoples survive, and, on reservations open to the public, a tribe known as the Boers, thought to be descendants of white slaves imported into 'this part of Kenya' to work on farms. Game learns that some time ago an explorer named Garrett visited Britain in an illegal boat (for vaguely-explained but seemingly reasonable reasons, sea travel had been banned) and brought back tales of a city, gold, 'savage Gods' and dogs. Now that long-distance flying machines have been developed, further exploration of the region can be embarked upon, and Game finds himself in an Amphibious aircraft under the command of a young woman named Valya, one of an elite of highly-educated women, chosen for their high intelligence as 'Brides of the State'.

So far, so satirical (it's perhaps worth pointing out that while Game's society is partly sent up, it's not entirely mocked and it is certainly possible to read it as a society that

works on its own terms: no odder than ours would be to someone from the outside). The members of the anthropological team are individual characters, and often cheerfully cynical about their social systems, but it would perhaps be wrong to call this a dystopia. When the expedition lands, they find a strange world with packs of dogs, mutated plant and animal life (the vampire starlings are an especial delight) and, eventually, a tribe of white-skinned inhabitants who chant a litany of Fear ('Let us fear war with our neighbours the Yorks . . . Let us fear the failure of our crops . . . let us fear illness, fire, death, destruction by the holy dogs . . .') and worship a god named Thay who 'made the big bang'. These natives speak 'a variant of the tongue that was spoken all over Africa', which suggests that the African/Kenyan world owes much to British



They deduce that some cataclysmic disaster (a chain reaction?) caused it.

On return to the flying machine, the three Africans leave, but Brown remains behind, to dream 'of the future when Britain might raise itself, generation by generation, to become a nation that would conquer the earth'.

While that sentence is emphasised in the synopsis prefacing the book, and Brown has earlier noted that his country had 'conquered the world' once before, it's possibly a mistake to think of it as some sort of triumphalist foreshadowing of the return of empire, or even a straightforward warning that the new colonizers are going to make the same mistakes as the old. Grame, Valya, and Hep are returning to uncertainty. The shaky romance between Grame and Valya has to

end, for she is still loyal to her status as a 'Bride of the State', and all three could be returning as heroes or 'punished by exemplary death'. Nevertheless, there's no real sense that Brown's dreams could, or even *should* be fulfilled.

We learn, directly and indirectly, something about the history of this world, through conversations with a spearmaker named Brown, the rituals of the tribe (which includes the 'I-Spy men' under control of the priest who act in imitation of what 'we' readers of the 1950s would recognise as totalitarian authorities: 'Tell us if your father and mother like the Yorks'). Part of this is Orwellian satire of totalitarian ideologies, part of it satirises through role-reversal Western stereotypes of 'primitive' cultures. We learn also (through the accidental choice of a tape played in an attempt to impress the natives with the 'voice of Thay') that atomic power has been discovered, a bomb exploded (the anthropologist Hep remarks that he had only heard rumours of this), and there is serious possibility of war with America, now occupied by people of Chinese or Japanese descent. There is still humour (during a discussion of marriage customs we hear about young people going to the woods to pair off, whereby '[s]ome of the them go to the dogs'), but things get bleaker.

The expedition is swiftly reduced to three: Grame, Valya, and Hep who, with Brown whose attempts to build a house have fallen under the condemnation of the priest, attempt after a 'trial' (more satire upon British xenophobia) to return to the Amphibious aircraft. First, however, the three Africans try to persuade Brown to lead them to the city he has hinted at. Following an attack by a tiger and a poisonous fish, and the discovery of a reef of coal, they find the vegetation-covered ruins of the city, where they discover nothing but fragments of pottery and a slab with enigmatic carving. Then, beyond the forest, they discover a sea of green melted sand, like the stone Valya wears which is fused glass resulting from an atomic test back home.

The Long Way Back is an odd novel. It's not necessarily meant to be an extrapolation of what a non-Western, post-nuclear holocaust civilization might be *like*, nor is it, I feel, a gung-ho adventure. Paul Brains, in *Nuclear Holocausts: Atomic War in Fiction* calls it a 'witty meditation on the ironies of the postwar future'. There are certainly ingenious nudges by the writer: the discovery of coal, which would give the Africans a motive to mount a full-blown colonizing expedition – except that they now have atomic power. And the 'city of gold' in the forest, the secret city at the heart of the natives' legends, only to be mentioned when death is approaching, has to echo the Spanish conquistadores' 'El Dorado'. If my reading of the inscription is correct, Bennett is slyly telling us that Christianity is entirely forgotten. *The Long Way Back* is rewarding, but perhaps a novel very much of its time, the 1950s.

There is though at least one passage which caused a wry grin; a fine satire of the university system near the beginning when Grame receives his anthropology training. He listens to speaker after speaker repeating, more or less accurately, essentially the same recital of facts, with small variations in language. This is explained as follows:

We stay until we've learned the lesson and then we become the teachers and recite what we've learnt to the new pupils. In a few days they become the teachers . . . By the early afternoon he had absorbed and regurgitated all the lectures, including those on anthropology. He staggered from the anthropology room, clutching his degree.

The atomic devastation forecast by Bennett has, thankfully not yet come to pass. We may remain less confident about the state of education.

recurrent: RESONANCES Stephen Baxter

Riding The Light Fantastic

'Great A'Tuin the star turtle, shell frosted with frozen methane, pitted with meteorite craters, and scoured with asteroidal dust ...' (p5)

This is line from *The Light Fantastic (TLF)*, the second of Terry Pratchett's Discworld books (1986, page numbers from the 1986 Corgi edition). The Discworld is known as comic fantasy - and a flat world sitting on four elephants riding a giant turtle through space is certainly a fantastical construct - but as this quote shows, there is an awful lot of science fictional furniture in these books too.

I first met Terry Pratchett at a Clarke Award evening, back in 1992. Since I'd been aware of his early, pre-Discworld novels *The Dark Side of the Sun* and *Strata*, both of them resolutely SF as well as exceptionally funny, I was already well aware of Terry's love of hard SF, and indeed his ambition to write the stuff. In fact you can see *Strata* as a SFnal exploration of the tropes that eventually congealed into Discworld. We would meet every so often at conventions and publishers' dinner parties. He enjoyed my work and was generous enough to say so, and he would hail me: 'What news of the quantum?'.¹ I learned that while as a teenager he'd once written a fan letter to Tolkien, he treasured memories of his early attendance at SF conventions just as much.

Eventually, of course, we came to collaborate on a series of SF novels: *The Long Earth* (2012-). This was rooted in some early, unfinished stories of Terry's, written alongside the first Discworld novels, as he experimented with the setting of an infinite chain of parallel Earths: tales of a kind of unending cosmic frontier. I think one model may have been Niven's stories on the consequences of teleportation, starting with 'Flash Crowd' (1973), the aim being to build up to a novel. But he got somewhat stuck on that project, and meanwhile Discworld started to attract attention . . . A quarter of a century later he dug out the old stories, and we decided to develop them as a collaboration.

And so, otherwise had Pratchett been lost to SF? Well, not quite. As my opening quote shows, Terry certainly imported a SFnal sensibility into Discworld, many of the books parody SF tropes as well as fantasy themes - and of these I would pick out *The Light Fantastic* as an exemplar. For

TLF is nothing less than a cosmic disaster story - or rather, a neat parody of one: 'In that circle of blackness was just one star, a red and baleful star [...] and the Disc was being carried straight towards it' (p51); 'It was sullen and awful, and, Rincewind couldn't help noticing, just a little bit bigger than it was last night' (p75). Yes, the Discworld is apparently doomed to a collision with a mysterious red star - which, every time we glimpse it, is that little bit bigger.

As such *TLF* is, on the face of it, working in a venerable tradition of such tales. One of the best known examples may be HG Wells' short story 'The Star' (1897), a remarkable account of global disaster compressed into a few thousand words - nowadays it feels like reading the Book of Revelations on Twitter. There were fictional precedents for tales of close encounters with cosmic objects, such as Jules Verne's *Hector Servadac* (1877), in which a comet brushes the Earth and flies off with a few chunks of it. More specifically, Aldiss and others noted similarities between Wells's story and Camille Flammarion's *La Fin du Monde* (aka *Omega: The Last Days of the World*) (1893) in which a cometary collision appears likely to destroy the world altogether.

A likely direct influence on *TLF* is *When Worlds Collide (WWC)*, best known as the 1951 movie (dir. Rudolph Mate), based on a novel, published in 1933, by Philip Wylie and Edwin Balmer. In novel and movie two cosmic objects sail into the solar system: in the movie, a sun with an Earthlike planet (Bellos and Xyra). Earth is doomed - but mankind is saved as a handful of people cross to the wandering planet in an interplanetary 'ark' spacecraft, a beautiful von Braun space glider. This kind of story has been retold many times since, depicting a range of responses from helplessness to hubris, depending on the mood of the times. In the movies, a peak of hubris seems to have been reached in the 1990s. In the movies *Armageddon* (1999, dir. Michael Bay) and *Deep Impact* (1998, dir. Mimi Leder), we don't just save a handful of survivors, we save the whole world by pushing away the intruder - complete with Bruce Willis wisecracks in the case of *Armageddon*.

TLF parodies the structure of such tales, for instance *WWC*. In such scenarios, after a first sighting, there are generally mathematical predictions of the doom-laden collision to come. In *WWC* these are made using a clattering 1950s Differential Analyser, a Meccano-like computer. Discworld computers are stone circles run by Druids, who spot that

¹ The latter must be pronounced with a silent 'T': 'quan'um'



The Light Fantastic 2 by Josh Kirby

the moon is in the wrong place: 'Nothing's wrong with the stones, it's just that the universe has gone wrong, right?' (p61). There are dire predictions of the doom to come: 'We'd be burned up?' 'Eventually. Of course, before that there would be discquakes, tidal waves, gravitational disruption, and probably the atmosphere would be stripped away' [...] 'People would panic?' 'Fairly briefly, I'm afraid.' (p65).

Efforts must be made to cope with the impending disaster. In *WWC* that ark-like spacecraft is built, with a lottery for places. In *TLF*, meanwhile, the wizards try to persuade the turtle to turn aside from the collision: 'All they've found out is that Great A'Tuin is looking forward to something' (p135). In the end, people panic and/or flee. While in *WWC* there is a scramble to get aboard the ark, in *TLF* people run to the mountains. 'That'll help, will it?' 'No, but the view will be better' (p145).

And, in the moral core of the book, people turn on each other. In a campaign to 'cleanse, scourging, purify', people turn against the gods, wizards, minorities like the dwarfs, even each other as they seek someone to be sacrificed to avert the catastrophe. Death, arguably Discworld's best character and a kind of representative of Terry's own moral clarity, is not impressed: 'THE DEATH OF THE WARRIOR OR THE OLD MAN OR THE LITTLE CHILD, THIS I UNDERSTAND, I TAKE AWAY THE PAIN AND END THE SUFFERING. I DO NOT UNDERSTAND THIS DEATH-OF-THE-MIND' (p148-9).

In the end, of course, Discworld is saved, to feature in a further 38 books (and counting) – and I won't reveal the ending here.

Modern-day disaster movies from *When Worlds Collide* to *2012* may seem nothing but apocalyptic porn. We enjoy a guilty thrill as we see the world thoroughly smashed up once again. There is of course a wider background to such works. Western culture has a deep-rooted expectation of apocalypse just around the corner that seems to date back as far as the Book of Revelations. But Camille Flammarion, a professional astronomer, was surprisingly generous in his view of millenarianism. In the pages of his own disaster novel *Omega* he says, 'The history of the end of the world as held by the Christian Church in all ages [...] is interesting, for it is also the history of the human mind face to face with its own destiny' (Part I, Chapter V). He could have said the same of modern disaster fiction. Perhaps to conceive of our own extinction is all part of our maturing as a species.

And maybe *The Light Fantastic* is a sign of sanity, in that we can take the mickey out of it all. It's only sad that we have lost Terry, a voice of that maturing, that sanity. To close with one final quote as an envoi:

'[Rincewind and the Luggage] headed along the quay and into the city, two dots in a dwindling landscape which, as the perspective broadened, included a tiny ship starting out across a wide green sea that was but a part of a bright circling ocean on a cloud-swirled Disc on the back of four giant elephants that themselves stood on the shell of an enormous turtle. Which soon became a glint among the stars, and disappeared.' (*TLF*, p217).

recurrent:

THE BSFA REVIEW

Edited by Martin Petto

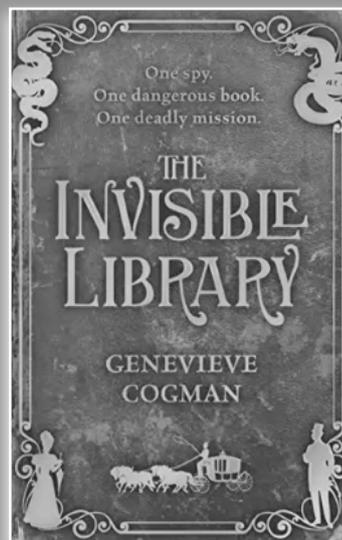
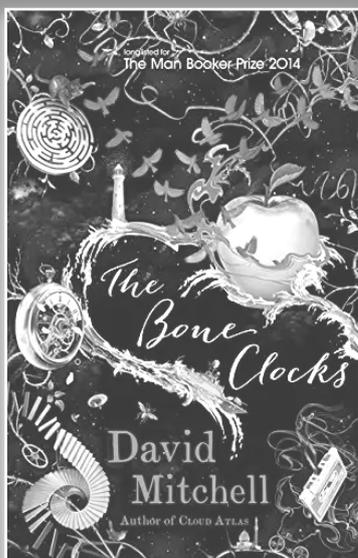
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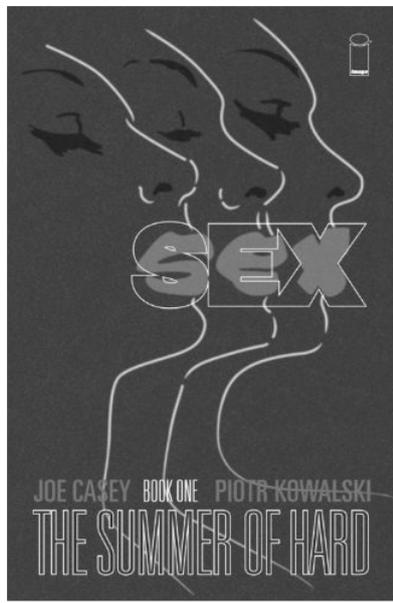
The Hugos...? Or not...

You are about to read a dirty word but please don't turn the page, I promise it is only a passing reference. So, the Hugos... wasn't that a great shortlist for Best Graphic Story? *Ms. Marvel Volume 1: No Normal*, *The Zombie Nation Book #2: Reduce Reuse Reanimate* and three Image titles: *Rat Queens Volume 1: Sass And Sorcery*, *Saga Volume 3* and *Sex Criminals Volume 1: One Weird Trick*. After years of being an embarrassment, Best Graphic Story is now the least embarrassing shortlist on the ballot.

Whilst I was waiting for Image to release the second collected volume of *Sex Criminals*, I came across another one of their titles in a local charity shop. As it were. If *Sex Criminals* is an attention grabbing name, *Sex: Summer Of Hard* is about as subtle as an erect penis wagging in your face. However, the nakedness of its name does not immediately live up to expectations. Instead we have the first volume of a comic that appears to be asking the question, what would happen if Bruce Wayne hung up his cowl?

Simon Cooke is a 35 year old billionaire playboy. Up until seven months ago, he was also the Armored Saint. As is traditional, this superhero alter-ego was motivated not by inequality or poverty but rather the "complete and utter decadence" of the city. Did I mention that he is blond?

Having promised his Alfred figure that he will quit his night job, Cooke returns to Saturn City in order to begin running the family business. As you can imagine, the hard-working professionals who actually run the global company are thrilled. After a hard day doing nothing, Cooke decides to unwind by heading to an exclusive brothel. One which just happens to be owned by one of his ex-nemeses, Annabelle Lagravenese AKA supervillain Shadow Lynx AKA his ultimate unrequited crush. She is as incredulous as the reader:



Guess I'll just have to take your word for it that you're not here on some sort of bizarre reconnaissance mission...

Of course, that opens up an even more interesting possibility...

...your curious, aren't you?

Not that I blame you. The way you were living, it stands to reason that once you hung up the helmet, the psychological floodgates would open up, big time...

Battle through all that highlighter pen – heavy-handedly and repetitively used throughout the book's dialogue to convey emphasis – and you find that the comic is really answering another question: what if Bruce Wayne was a virgin?

It is certainly a novel premise but not exactly one the world has been calling out for. "Do you know how many times I've played drunk?" Cooke says to his lawyer at one point. The implication that he's being playing the playboy seems to extend to the Playboy models seen on his arm. His lawyer encourages him to live the life for real: "Imagine if Tinto Brass made a film about Saturn City." This drinking binge climaxes in a bizarre scene in which the wasted pair suddenly become irresistible to women. Of course they do.

Alongside this we get a lurid, conventional superhero story starring Cooke's Robin figure, Keenan, who has now taken up the mantle. This comes complete with grotesque geriatric kingpin, one minute having sex with a prostitute and shooting her in the back of the head at the point of orgasm, the next pulling all a man's teeth out and having him raped by a *Pulp Fiction*-style gimp. "The kind of stuff we used to get from *Preacher*," notes a cover. This is intended as praise but instead is true in the sense it is primitive, adolescent schlock. As so often happens with comics, the conservative is presented as the subversive.

When *Sex* isn't being offensive, it is being silly or just dull. It lacks all of the wit and subtlety of its near namesake *Sex Criminals*. Which is a shame because superhero suppression is clearly fertile territory in which to sow a psychodrama but Joe Casey's writing buries this potential and Piotr Kowalski's newspaper strip-style artwork tramps down the soil. Instead we get Frank Miller's take on *Eyes Wide Shut* which is every bit as unappealing as it sounds.

I'm surprised the Puppies didn't nominate it for a Hugo.

Stay by John Clute (Beacon Press, 2014)**Reviewed by Paul Graham Raven**

“I must create a system, or be enslaved by another man’s.” – William Blake

It is difficult to know where to start. *Stay* is the fifth collection of John Clute’s reviews and essays to date, and stands alongside a couple of monographs (and hell knows how many other uncollected bits and bobs) as the latest waystone on a career path significantly longer than your humble correspondent’s life-span to date. I say this not to revel in my (increasingly relative and nominal) youth but to delineate the scope of the problem at hand: how to distill a lifetime’s cogitations on genre fiction into something coherent and accessible, while avoiding the lobster-pot of oversimplification?

The latter half of the problem is the more easily avoided, simply because Clute’s work – both at the molecular level of individual pieces and the molar level of his entire oeuvre – is not amenable to simplification. One does not go to Clute for snappy synopses and comparative recommendations; his reviews are not reviews in the limited and essentially commercial sense that the term now represents in the era of Goodreads and Amazon. Indeed, Clute’s own frustration with the current book-cultural hegemony – in which the reader must be treated as a special yet narrowly discerning snowflake whose existing tastes and prejudices should remain unchallenged, if not be pandered to outright – bubbles to the surface often in the reviews collected herein, chiefly in the form of barbed asides against the tyranny of the Spoiler Police. Spoilers, Clute seems to suggest, are the enemy not only of good critical writing but of good writing, period; if we are forbidden to discuss the endings of novels – which are, after all, an essential functional component of the work – then how are writers supposed to get feedback on what works and what does not? “We can’t talk about what we can’t remember,” as he puts it.

The Spoiler Police almost certainly don’t read Clute anyway, so the point is moot. And I suspect that those who do read Clute do so not in search of good-or-bad recommendations, nor for ratings of one to five stars (or – heaven forbid – one to five tiny rocket windings). Personally, I read Clute for the erudition, the wordplay, and for the collected experience of decades in the saddle: even if you don’t agree with the guy, any opinion he has to offer is based on a lifetime of reading, and of writing about what he reads. While Clute has been a prominent advocate of the notion that it is no longer possible to “keep up” with the entire output of a genre, or even just with the best bits, he’s also among the few who managed to do so, back in the days when it still was possible. What Clute thus brings to any genre reader under the age of forty is context, the occasionally irascible but always idiosyncratic back-streets knowledge of a life-long dweller. He knows his way around – and if the route you’re taken by isn’t the straightest or shortest, you can bet it’ll at least be scenic.

Part of the problem is the way in which a critical writing oeuvre is a more cumulative thing than a fiction oeuvre. Certainly, a fiction writer’s personal canon will grow cumulatively with time, and with it a sense of what that author’s work is “about” (or, perhaps more accurately, in what it is interested). But the novel and the short story (shared worlds and interminable multi-volume epics notwithstanding) are both fundamentally stand-alone

forms; while they may benefit in various ways from being read in conjunction with other works, it is generally not necessary – provided we ignore certain postmodern anxieties of influence – that one has read those other works to enjoy the piece. Critical writing can (and should) be capable of standing alone, of course, but it is also inescapably part of a longer conversation between not only the critic and the work under consideration, but also with other texts, other critics. We might say, then, that the critic is creating something like an epistolary narrative: a single letter in isolation may well tell a story but it is the cumulative effect of many letters that reveals the grand narrative, as well as the character of the narrator in relation to the world.

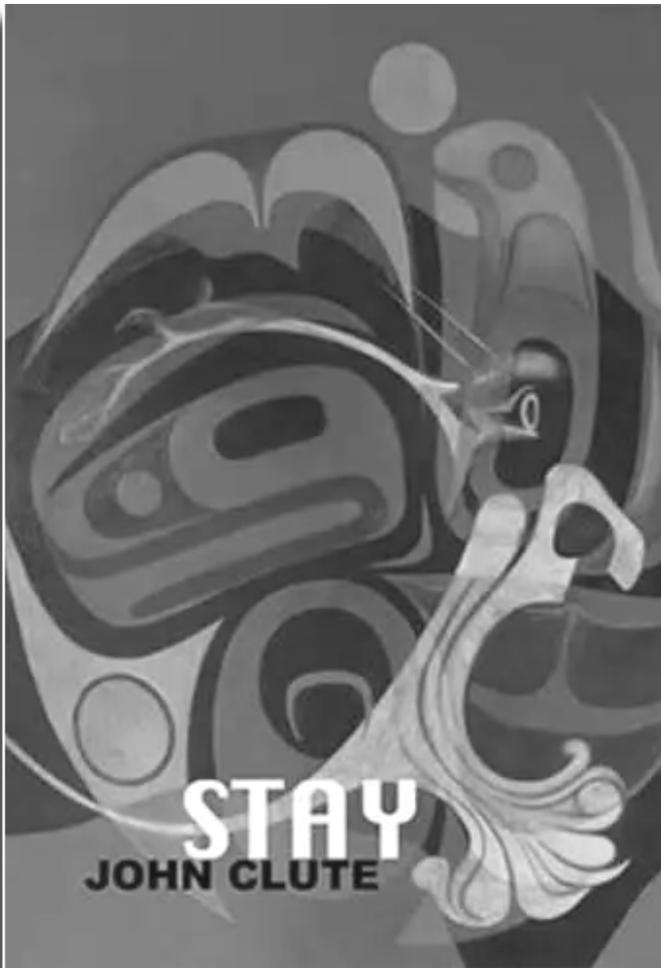
So critical writing is a genre in the same Bakhtinian sense that science fiction is a genre: each piece is self-contained, like a tile in a mosaic, but the pattern of the tile may make a wider, deeper sense when seen in the context of the grand design in which it has been placed. In ‘proper’ academic criticism, that grand design is the evolving backdrop of contemporary literary theory; with Clute, while academic work certainly gets an occasional look-in, the grand design is largely his own, patiently assembled from years of insight and cogitation, a literary Ferdinand Duval. The scale of this achievement should not be understated: to construct an original theoretical framework – a critical system, if you will – from the ground up, with reference predominantly to primary texts (the stories and novels) rather than secondary (critical or theoretical discussions), is the work of a lifetime.

But as mentioned above, that system is not amenable to concise summary, although *Stay* – thanks in no small part to the inclusion of the full text of *The Darkening Garden*, Clute’s hard-to-find chapbook lexicon of horror – perhaps comes closer to delineating the thing than any previous collection. There is a sense of decades-long threads being tugged together, skeins of argument braiding into something approaching a pattern, but, interestingly enough, it seems that the nature of the thing we’ve called science fiction may have only become apparent in the process of its passing from the stage.

To unpack that claim, however, I am obliged to dabble in the simplification I’ve heretofore tried to avoid. So, with the broadest of brushes: for Clute, science fiction, horror and fantasy are sub-phenomena of a broader, more nebulous genre named Fantastika. This zooming-out offers an escape from the insoluble problem of defining science fiction as distinct from its sibling non-mimetic/non-realist genres (fantasy, horror, etc.); SF thus becomes merely one significant (yet fractured) landmass among an archipelago of others, which nonetheless share a similar epistemological and ontological climate. And Fantastika is, if I’ve understood it correctly, coextensive with capital-S Story; at any rate, “any Story is inherently non-mimetic”, and “absolute Story is absolute Fantastika”, and Fantastika has “an inherent non-allegorical bent”. Fantastika is not metaphorical, then, but a genre wherein the work “is a kind of representation of itself”; at its apogee (as, Clute suggests, in the movie *Under The Skin*), Fantastika is “pure Story: not a lesson, but the thing told”.

So what of science fiction, then? SF is (or was) “the literature that said the Twentieth Century was going to work”, and “[SF] stories can only be pronounced in worlds which are not yet sf”; these quotes come from a review of Paolo Bacigalupi’s *The Windup Girl*, a book which

“announces the death of the old tongue”, while later on, China Miéville’s *Embassytown* is tagged as “the sound of sf past and present struggling to become a single book”. Later still, we learn that in 20th Century SF “the reward for saying yes is the future”, while in 21st Century SF, “the reward for saying yes is death”. Meanwhile, traditional SF has become “a Somme of monuments to that which was never there in the first place”, the lacunae in question being the emptiness in the promises of Progress (the dominant undead metanarrative of the liberal West); “stories set in sustainable worlds are congratulations about some story that has already been told”; and trad SF “entails magical thinking [...] a form of seduction, a relic of Enlightenment Whiggery: reality is told by winners.” Phrased thusly, the death of SF (or its regeneration, for the optimists among you) is clearly of a part with the growing cultural backlash against neoliberalism and technoscience, which are two sides of the same obolos; to steal a phrase from William Gibson, we have learned to distrust that particular flavour.



To really explain the demise of SF, though, we have to dig into the lexicon of horror, because it turns out that horror and terror hold the clues to the radical cultural break with the aforementioned Enlightenment Whiggery from which Fantastika emerges. Fantastika “is born at a point when it has begun to be possible to glimpse the planet itself as a drama [...] because it is at this point that Enlightened Europeans were [...] beginning to think that glimpsing the world was tantamount to owning it” – a transitory period dramatised by Neal Stephenson’s wrist-snapping *Baroque Cycle*, and surely not coincidentally. With this

comprehension of the world-as-system comes creeping the realisation that we are Bound to the world (both in the literal sense of the word bound, and in the more specific narrative sense Clute has in mind); in opposition to the fictive ‘realism’ of mimetic fiction, “the Fantastic exposes the lie that we own the world to which we are bound”. Old-school trad SF – in which the reward for saying yes is the future – was an attempt to plan our way out of the jaws of that horrific realisation, just as good competent engineers would do.

But engineering is a problem-solving discipline, not a problem-identifying one – and the environmental (and hence existential) elephant in the room is now so plain to see that only the most dogmatic and hidebound proponents of scientism would dare to claim we can just roll it back out through the door. SF spent half a century or more writing cheques it would never be able to cash, and now splits into two broad factions: one publicly burning its high-school poetry by way of penance, the other trying to hustle free drinks out of bar-flies with tales of the Good Old Days™ (coming soon from Baen Books). And so – to graft on an inelegant theory of my own – we’re left with a genre scattered along the five stages of grief: denial and/or anger (in the form of “those hard SF manuals for the 1% we still sometimes get tricked into reading” – zing!), bargaining (see Project Hieroglyph’s attempt to reboot sf-as-inspirational-pablum-for-engineers), depression (that 21st Century SF harbingered by Miéville, Bacigalupi and others, wherein the reward for saying yes is death) and acceptance (few examples but Bruce Sterling is a possible candidate).

That the world-as-system lies at the heart of Clute’s theory is perhaps unsurprising; scratch any theorist hard enough, and you’ll find a systems analyst lurking beneath the hammerite. But it is interesting to note that the weird little subgenre of SF which takes systemicity as its *subject* seems critically opaque to Clute, the master systematiser: he gets little traction on Sterling’s *Caryatids*, for example, and (in my opinion) misparses Karl Schroeder and Hannu Rajaniemi’s systems-centric approaches to post-Singularity fiction. And then there’s his (uncharacteristically trad SF) resistance to the systematising efforts of others, herein represented by Margaret Atwood’s *In Other Worlds*, which is (gently) berated for refusing to use the established terms and framings when discussing SF – even though it’s fairly clear that Atwood quite deliberately avoided the established terms and framings, precisely because she’d have then been bogged down in decades-old debates and terminology which she considered irrelevant to the point she wanted to make.

But who’s right – Clute or Atwood? For my money, it’s both and neither: both theories let me look at a big canon of literature in a useful way, but neither offers a truly totalising theory (which, as a card-carrying postmodernist, I believe in any case to be an impossibility). If I could convince you of one thing that might change the way you read a book like *Stay* – indeed, one thing that might get you to read a book like *Stay* at all – it would be that you are in no way obliged to agree with the critics you read, except on the basic point that literature is worth arguing about. And if you don’t believe that, why were you reading this review?

The Bone Clocks by David Mitchell (Sceptre, 2014)

Reviewed by Anthony Nanson

I loved *Cloud Atlas* so was keen to read David Mitchell's new novel. Like that masterpiece, *The Bone Clocks* comprises six novella-length sections each narrated by a different character in a different time period. But these narratives are closer linked than in *Cloud Atlas*, taking place at roughly decade intervals and reincorporating the same characters so the whole adds up to a single story in a single fictional frame. This integration of the story has posed certain structural challenges to a writer whose primary interest, both here and in *Cloud Atlas*, is in the kind of high-performance pastiche that gets you listed for the Booker Prize.

The narrator of the first section, Holly Sykes, daughter of a Gravesend publican, is 15 years old in 1984. She crops up as a character in every section so we witness her progress through life as the decades go by and she returns, with satisfying inevitability, to narrate the final section in 2043, when she's in her seventies. The second section is told by a Cambridge undergraduate, an arrogant twat who ruthlessly exploits for his own gain anyone who trusts him. The third narrator is more sympathetic, a war reporter whose only flaw is his fatal addiction to his work. The fourth section, extending from 2015 to 2020, follows Crispin Hershey, onetime 'Wild Child' of literature, now going to seed, whose grudge against a hatchet review of his latest novel shamelessly recycles a plot driver from *Cloud Atlas*.

These first four sections revel in evoking the narrators' voices, from the stropky semi-articulation of the working-class teenager ("I'd never nicked anything in my life and really I almost peed myself") to the jaded sophistication of the has-been novelist ("I see my reflection in the mirrored wall, and recall a wise man telling me that the secret of happiness is to ignore your reflection in lift mirrors once you're over forty"). The present-tense narration – so overused these days – is justified by a number of scenes where, for reasons I won't spell out, the narrator loses their memory of what they've just related. These four sections also work hard to evoke the flavour of each decade with cultural and current-affairs references that are sometimes too obviously shoehorned in: "You say that, but reunification is going to cost the earth. My clients in Frankfurt are very jumpy about the fall-out." The sections are linked by the network of connections between characters, of which Holly is the central node, and also by a hidden plot that now and again surfaces, unexplained, into the characters' lives. At first glimpse, I thought we had to do with the supernatural or beings from another dimension. It quickly becomes clear that the individuals in question are human beings blessed with advanced 'psychosoteric' powers.

Little is explained about these adepts till the fifth section, set in 2025, when a narrator who is one of them

reveals all via a sequence of big infodumps and flashbacks. There are goodies (Horologists) and baddies (Anchorites); I best not say much more. This narrator's voice is less distinctive than the previous sections', the life and times of the 2020s are little evoked – beyond a few token advances in IT – and neither scenes nor secondary characters are strongly realised. What we get instead is a Latinate lexicon to refer to psychosoteric phenomena, some nice visualisation of the metaphysical landscape of death and a high-stakes Harry Potter-style combat sequence that seems pitched for the big screen but also made me wonder whether Mitchell's intention was parody.

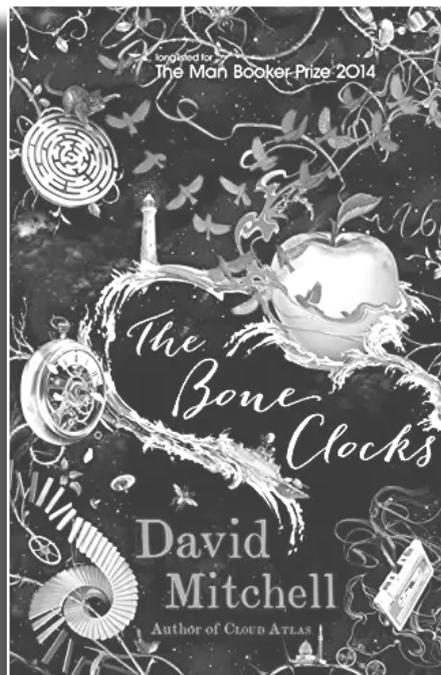
After that, the final section is anticlimactic, despite its subject being the collapse of civilisation when the oil runs out. It's a well-imagined and all-too-plausible portrayal of a local community struggling along with their chicken-keeping and homemade clothes, as promoted by today's Transition movement – only for this tolerable existence to be overrun by gangsterish survival of the fittest when the Chinese-sponsored Cordon of law enforcement ceases to be economically viable. The impact of this scenario is weakened by the fact that – bar one brief prognostication that the internet won't last for ever – it's not set up by the rest of the novel. The psychosoteric plot is abandoned, has no consequence, except to provide a *deus ex machina*.

As in *Cloud Atlas*, there is a sustained theme of the perennial moral choice between coldly exploiting others to serve one's own interests and, on the other hand, warm-hearted service of others – in ideological terms, the choice between the right and the left. The relative autonomy of the six texts in *Cloud Atlas* permits the novel to be unified by a theme. In *The Bone Clocks*, theme isn't enough; the narrative continuity between the sections demands more coherent narrative structure.

If the relationship between the science fiction plot and the verbal pyrotechnics of pastiche is strained, and the crucial fifth section is under-imagined and over-explained, the first four sections could use some polishing to eliminate intrusive detail and a sometimes forced tone of voice: "Still, boyfriends act goofy to hide stuff, any magazine'll tell you. Wish I could phone him right now. Wish they'd invent phones you can speak to anyone anywhere anytime on." During a lovely send-up of a literary festival, Mitchell quotes the trasher of Hershey's novel to throw in what sounds like a ironic acknowledgement of risks Mitchell

takes in his own writing: "One: Hershey is so bent on avoiding cliché that each sentence is as tortured as an American whistleblower. Two: the fantasy sub-plot clashes so violently with the book's State of the World pretensions, I cannot bear to look. Three: what sure sign is there that the creative aquifers are dry than a writer creating a writer-character?"

The Bone Clocks is better than that but I fear it may have been written against a deadline that prevented Mitchell doing full justice to his genius.



***The Best British Fantasy 2014*, edited by Steve Haynes (Salt Publishing, 2014) and *Year's Best Weird Fiction: Volume One*, edited by Laird Barron and Michael Kelly (Undertow Publications, 2014)**

Reviewed by David Hebblethwaite

A review of this nature should set out its stall so here goes: I believe that in a fantasy story – especially one worthy of the ‘best of’ label – the fantasy should be intrinsic to what the story is doing. I also want it to be earning its keep; I don’t want stories that feel as though they’re trying to gain effect by appealing to a sense of nostalgia or fondness for a particular idea. Hopefully this will give you a sense of where I’m coming from as I look at these two Year’s Best anthologies.

Let’s turn first to Salt’s *Best British Fantasy 2014* (whose remit incorporates science fiction). Some of its fourteen stories are decent enough but lacking that extra spark. ‘Cat World’ by Georgina Bruce tells of two sisters who live on the streets, their only escape being the odd stick of Doctor Rain’s Travel Gum, which takes them away to the titular, friendlier place. But when one sister goes missing, the other finds the world more dangerous than ever. Bruce’s story is reflective of pressing real-life concerns; and the convincingly child-like narrative voice does work. The problem is that the fantasy elements are scarcely necessary and ‘Cat World’ reads much like many a familiar literary realist story along similar lines. Likewise, Carole Johnston’s ‘Ad Astra’ sees a couple’s relationship tested when they go into space; it’s okay but ultimately there’s no need for the story to be set in space.

Still, better this approach than that taken by David Turnbull’s ‘Aspects Of Aries’, a series of snapshots from a future where social divisions have formed along astrological lines. It doesn’t convince either as something that might actually happen or as a sandbox future for satire. Turnbull’s story seems mostly geared towards delivering the weak (and pretty distasteful) pun in its last line. I read stories like these three and think: fantasy and SF can do so much more than mimic the strategies of polite realist fiction and facilitate bad jokes.

Thankfully, there are some pieces in the anthology which do show some of fantasy’s potential. ‘Saga’s Children’ by EJ Swift – shortlisted for last year’s BSFA Award - is narrated collectively by the children of Saga Wärmedal, a celebrated space adventurer whom they never knew and who called them all together to meet her on Ceres. Swift captures the sense of her characters living in their mother’s impossibly long shadow, their lives manipulated by forces beyond their comprehension. ‘Saga’s Children’ works most of all because its grand gestures mirror its larger-than-life canvas.

Elsewhere, ‘Zero Hours’, Tim Maughan’s tale of young people bidding online to undertake zero-hour contracts, eschews metaphor, ending up as the story that feels most engaged with present and future. The protagonist of Nina Allan’s ‘Higher Up’ grew up in the shadow of 9/11 and now

has premonitions of a similar event involving her pilot husband; the fragmented structure blurs reality and fantasy to cutting effect. I’m glad to see stories like these in *The Best British Fantasy 2014* and they make the anthology worth reading; I just wish there were more of them.

Now to the first *Year’s Best Weird Fiction*, whose rotating editorship promises an ever-shifting view of a field which,

inaugural editor Laird Barron’s introduction acknowledges, can be “nebulous.” There are twenty-two stories here, with a variety of approaches – and varying degrees of success. ‘The Nineteenth Step’ by Simon Strantzas begins promisingly, as a couple move into a dilapidated house whose staircase appears to have an extra, invisible, step. But the story ends just this side of ‘it was all a dream’; and the glimpse of a hidden world isn’t enough to earn that.

Anna Taborska’s ‘The Girl in the Blue Coat’ takes us to Poland, where the spirit of a young girl may have lived on beyond the horrors of the Nazi occupation. There’s scope here for an eerie experience of doubt: the core is told at several layers of remove, through the sceptical eyes of journalists and other researchers. But the sense of possibility never quite comes to life.

In ‘Moonstruck’ by Karin Tidbeck, young Alia’s mother Vera is consumed with a fascination for astronomy, so much so that her skin becomes patterned with grey patches of what she insists is regolith. When the moon begins to move towards the Earth, Vera’s condition only grows more acute; meanwhile, Alia is going through her own transformation, as she has her first period. Tidbeck creates a striking parallel between mother, daughter and moon, but still leaves space for a strangeness greater than the three.

Many of the stories reference older writers and forms, sometimes with a sense of leaning too heavily on them for effect but on other occasions able to build on those foundations. Scott Nicolay’s ‘Eyes Exchange Bank’ has characters discussing Poe and its own share of amorphous figures and sinister buildings – but there’s a rawness to the telling which aligns that iconography with the contemporary setting of a small town beset by economic hardship, to which the protagonist has returned. In ‘Shall I Whisper To You Of Moonlight, Of Sorrow, Of Pieces Of Us?’, Damien Angelica Walters takes the obsession of a classic weird fiction narrator and transfers it to a bereaved character who could not let their partner go, creating an effective portrait of someone struggling to move on.

I couldn’t help but wonder on finishing this anthology: what would a 21st Century weird fiction, built from the ground up, be like? I’m not sure that I really saw it here and perhaps it is the wrong question to ask; perhaps riffing off the past is simply in the nature of weird fiction. Future volumes of *Year’s Best Weird Fiction* will help to answer that; for now – despite my reservations – there are some stories here which are worth exploring.



The Way Inn by Will Wiles
(Fourth Estate, 2015)

Reviewed by Gary Dalkin

For the longest time I wasn't sure that this was going to be a *Vector* book. For its first third, *The Way Inn* reads as a beautifully crafted middle-brow lit satire, a mordantly humorous depiction of the vacuity of modern corporate life. It centres around Meetex, a trade fair and conference for those who organise and service trade fairs and conferences. The narrator, Neil Double, is an archetypal 21st Century Ballardian hero, a pioneer of a new profession, the conference surrogate, who attends events like Meetex so you don't have to. This very contemporary profession provides the perfect way to explore the facile world of the vast anonymous conference centre and the even vaster Way Inn chain hotel across the motorway.

Double loves the antiseptic, transient, commitment free world of corporate hotels so much he spends almost his entire life staying in them, between travelling the globe attending one conference after another, reporting back for multiple clients on the highlights of the banality they have negated. But gradually his world comes apart at the seams. Double's every step is dogged by a tiresome acquaintance, the journalist Maurice, who manages to accidentally sabotage his attempts to get closer to one young female delegate who he has met before but whose name he can't quite remember and another young woman who he has seen in unforgettable circumstances but never actually met. Meanwhile the director of the conference discovers Double's motives for attending and, fearing the lost of trade which would arise if conference surrogacy blossoms into a successful new industry, takes drastic action.

As Double's professional life begins to unravel, the first hints that all is not right on a deeper, even metaphysical, level slip sideways into the narrative. On a late night excursion through the hotel he thinks he sees the impossible and, back in his room, the alarm clock makes strange noises, even when unplugged. This latter event evokes the unplugged television in *The Shining*, while his room number, 219, is just up from the most famous suite in the Overlook Hotel (at least in the film version) of Stephen King's classic novel. With the early observation that sometimes it's the new buildings which have ghosts, more is afoot than satire.

Yet still Wiles walks the line between satire and suggestions of the surreal, which might yet place *The Way Inn* within the realm of slipstream. Is this the story of an overstressed executive with too slight a grasp on reality, who has lived an unreal life free of family, friends or commitments for so long that when the only thing which matters to him is threatened, he slips easily into madness? Is this going to be one of those novels positioned ambiguously between insanity and the supernatural? It seems that way as, with superbly crafted prose Wiles builds an ever increasing sense of dread - shot through with shafts of sardonic wit - which leads to a stunning set-piece in which enough pieces of the fantastical design come together to be truly thrilling, exhilarating and terrifying all at once. And you realise that yes, this novel belongs in *Vector*.

There is a brilliant high concept idea at the heart of *The Way Inn* which I will not reveal but in design and execution it is genuinely stunning. As the novel progresses, it becomes an increasingly unsettling and frightening

story of supernatural horror (this is something the cover disingenuously evades, the marketing department at Fourth Estate preferring, deceptively, to sell the novel as a mainstream comedy thriller). In fact, as Double is drawn further into the hotel and the world of the beautiful woman whose name he does not know, whose job it is to find locations for new branches of The Way Inn, and that of Hilbert, the customer-facing representative of the inner management of the local branch of The Way Inn, the novel morphs into a much truer sequel to *The Shining* than King's own ill-advised sequel, *Doctor Sleep*. Here is the Overlook (and yes, Wiles does slip that word into the text) 40 years on, upgraded and revamped as corporate, global franchise. You really don't want to stay the night.

There are other influences: William Hope Hodgson's *The House On The Borderland*, HP Lovecraft, Jorge Luis Borges, Mark Z Danielewski's *House Of Leaves* (without the footnotes), Clive Barker and as the closing acknowledgement notes, there's a swimming pool for JG Ballard. Yet Wiles's work is warmer than Ballard; there is more humanity, more to fight for and, ultimately, choices to make which really can make a difference. But then, just when it seems Wiles can do no wrong, he struggles to bring it all to an end, undermining the so subtly established sense of cosmic dread and carefully brewed atmosphere of darkness, corruption and fear for a spectacular Hollywood ending. If this were a movie, one would assume the ending had proved too dark or understated for test audiences and so had been reshot using the boilerplate feelgood summer blockbuster template. Think of the way *Sunshine* fell to pieces or imagine *Spoorloos* suddenly mutating into its own American remake, *The Vanishing*, in the last reel - or, to return to the printed word, the sheer ludicrous excess of the fantastical side of David Mitchell's *The Bone Clocks*. It is an ending we have seen endless variations of over the years and in its blazing dunderheadedness seems entirely out of place with what has come before. While it will play marginally better with *Vector* readers, who will be familiar with this sort of thing from too many bad movies, those coming to the book from the mainstream lit side of the great divide are in a for a shock they may not enjoy at all.

Right up to my final session reading *The Way Inn*, I could not wait to get back to it. I was convinced it was going to become one of my favourite books. I could not imagine the author would mess it up. Wiles seemed so in control of the material, his writing so assured. It is therefore a bitter disappointment that the novel is resolved with a repetitive series of turgid action movie clichés; leaving one to wonder if an editor demanded the current ending or if an editor should have convinced the author to supply a finale much more in keeping with what came before. It is still, for those first 300 pages, very highly recommended but I just regret I couldn't have checked out sooner.



The Peripheral by William Gibson (Viking, 2014)

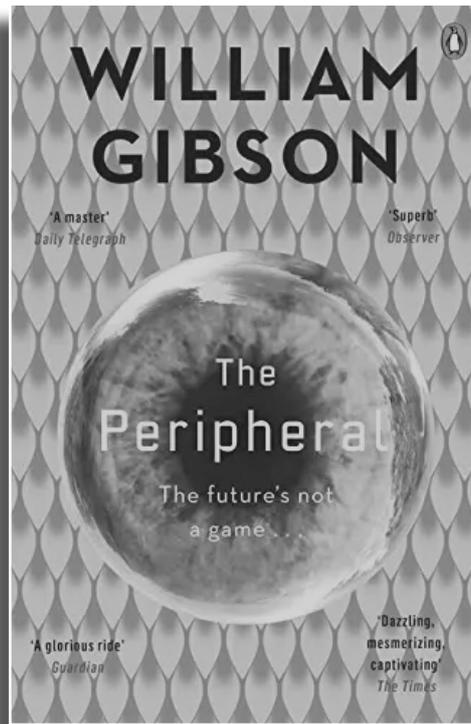
Reviewed by Kerry Dodd

The *Peripheral*, the latest novel from William Gibson, is an exciting journey that blends multiple realities into twisting parallel plots which are gripping to unravel. As is typical of Gibson's writing, neologisms and terms are left unexplained in the opening of his narrative, requiring the reader to decode their meaning. This means that any synopsis has to explain a few of the important concepts, even though they are more immersive when experienced firsthand. The narrative opens with Flynne Fisher, a girl who works at a 3D printing shop in a near-future America. In this easily foreseeable near-future extrapolation of current technological developments, the 'building' of drugs, 'fabbing' of real items and the prospect of earning a lifestyle from playing games, serve as the main drives of the economy and people either buy items from Hefty Mart or 'print' their own. Flynne is coerced by her brother, Burton, to cover a job for him - the testing of a beta for a new game - which leads her to 'witness' a murder, an observation that dramatically warps the rest of her life and is the focus for rest of the story.

Meanwhile, the parallel plot focuses on Wilf Netherton, an apathetic London PR man who is disenchanted with life in a post-jackpot, or post-apocalypse, world where 80% of the population have died from a mixture of climate change, pandemics and politics. Gibson's elusive portrayal of the 'jackpot' makes clear that this is simply a vehicle to construct a backdrop dependent on these modern anxieties. Hazy and multi-faceted, it is refreshing to see a calamity that is shown as an amalgamation, rather than purely influenced by one specific current threat. This future often functions as a world of imitation: through androids and 'cosplay' zones - spaces which consciously replicate a previous historical period, such as Victorian London. Netherton's narrative opens with his employment to work with an ex-girlfriend, Daedra West - a celebrity and publicist who also acts as a form of diplomat. Interestingly Daedra's body functions as a canvas for her art, as she repeatedly tattoos herself, has the skin flayed and then exhibited. A clear satire based on celebrity culture that foregrounds not only the visual aspect of the future but also our own society.

Although Gibson's writing is stylistically complex, offering an enigma to be deciphered as the reader progresses through the book, the two interconnecting stories complement each other well, providing a slow reveal of key jargon and details. The terminology is dense and uncompromising but all the more rewarding for those who persevere. Short and sharp chapters switch quickly between the two protagonists in an entwined plot, a novel which is hard to put down as each section further allows the reader to interpret both the language and secrets in tantalising small packages.

The parallel strands in the story connect through Netherton's ability to interact and share data with the past of Flynne's world, facilitated through connecting to a mysterious, heavily encrypted Chinese server. Gibson quickly avoids any paradoxical problems by stating that the interfering of the future with the past sets Flynne's world on an alternate course. The parallels, doubling and connections drive the plot to discover the secret of the murder, a form of crime story veiled behind a deeply set technological lens. By merging the past and future, the novel becomes a fast-paced read with a rich imagination which is believable, yet fantastic.



The 'Peripherals' of the title act as an interesting bodily extension, which a person, or AI, may inhabit in the future either through rental or ownership. The concept of an extra shell that lies at the edges of both vision and society is a superb image and one which becomes a great narrative device. Gibson's focus on bodies, their modification and construction, is a splendid exploration of what the 'human' constitutes, fitting well alongside his other representations, such as cyberspace in the *Sprawl* trilogy. Flynne's original perception of the future as a 'game' resonates with contemporary developments in both video games and virtual reality. Yet she is able to use a 'Peripheral' to travel to the future, a body which she can virtually inhabit. As the past and the future collide, the plot moves between different time frames and viewpoints, demanding the reader's close attention to keep pace with.

The sophisticated integration and projection of modern concerns, set in a dialogue between two prospective futures, is a setting which I found to be deeply intriguing. The relationship between the two worlds allows a clever debate that comments on their respective faults. From the outset of the cover's chrome veneer, the novel is a polished story and perfect to engage with this back-drop. The visualisation of the disorientation that Flynne and Burton endure when moving between the two places is detailed and convincing, whilst the seeping dissatisfaction with which Netherton regards the future is shown through his growing immersion in the past. The narrative offers the perfect blend of time-travelling and murder mystery, bound up in medical machines, moving tattoos and nano-bots.

Although there are plenty of unanswered questions at the end, I found *The Peripheral* to be a superbly satisfying read. Both of the worlds are rich in depiction, a credit to Gibson's masterful writing of visual scenes. The narrative is irrefutably relevant to contemporary concerns, whilst also offering a thrilling page turner. The start may be slow-moving for those not used to Gibson's style, while the conclusion does conventionally tie off the ending at a far quicker pace than the rest of the book. However, the depth and details within the world is incredibly engaging and a joy to lose yourself in, a setting which I would love to return to.

***Langue[dot]doc 1305* by Gillian Polack
(Satalye Publishing, 2014)**

Reviewed by Shana Worthen

A few months ago, I visited Barking for the first time; disoriented, I followed the GPS until I arrived at Barking Abbey, 12th Century home of the nun and author Clemence of Barking. That was when I realised I'd been following the directions backwards, the time to my destination much increased from when I started.

Artemesia Wormwood, protagonist of *Langue[dot]doc 1305* and scholar of Clemence, ends up much further removed in time from her hoped-for destination than I was. Urgent family medical costs and a nearly-inevitable lack of lucrative postdocs have sent her back to Australia, where a last-minute opportunity lands in her lap: the first time travel expedition needs a medieval historian. She ends up in 1305 as a solitary replacement for the original two historians, on a physics-dominated exploration of the past. Her intended role is to help the team blend more effectively into the hills around a small village, avoiding interaction with the locals through (increasingly snarky) briefings on the culture and timetables of prayers and processions. But 12th Century Barking isn't 14th Century Languedoc; the digital resources she's been provided with are outdated; the scientists have been given no personal incentives to follow her guidance; and the locals aren't unobservant idiots.

Gillian Polack builds up the past as much through flitting through the heads of medieval natives as she does through the superficial observations of the visitors. Especially near the beginning, there was too little, too fast of the lives of the villagers; the passages in their headspace are cryptic until they have had time to build up, until the reader has had time to settle in with the characters. The exception is the knight-in-exile Guilhem, whose liminal relationship to the village eventually makes him an appropriate intermediary between the strange hillfolk and the rest of the world they are visiting. Artemesia, as the only modern who has a language in common with him, is their designated representative; the rest of the team know her meetings are necessary but don't actually find them an interesting topic, whether in committee meetings or briefings. Their research interests lie elsewhere - in the observation of eclipses and stars, rocks and plants.

Guilhem-the-knight is, confusingly, one of many Guilhems in the village of St-Guilhem-le-Desert but he is the one with strongest connections to the wider world, arriving in exile from northern France and repeatedly visiting the Templars in Pézenas and the shopping in Montpellier as he strives to determine where his life's course should take him next. The name of the village itself anchors it in a wider context: St Guilhem was the widely-travelled William of Gellone, cousin and companion to Charlemagne, founder of the local monastery, and about whom a major chanson de geste was written. Guilhem-the-knight and Artemesia have historical fiction in common, at very least.

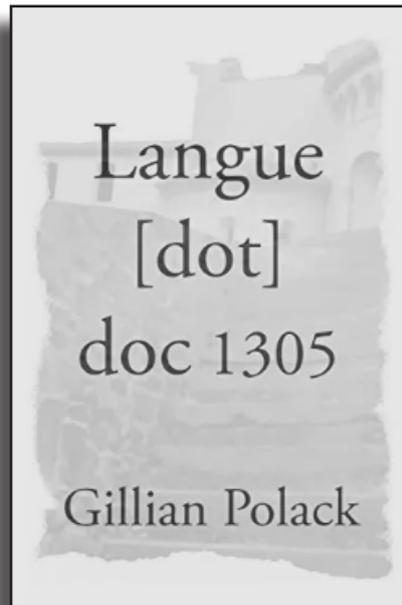
As a medievalist, purported travel to our actual past, to a period I know about, makes me read every sentence critically, an exhausting approach when I'd rather be enjoying some escapist reading; I bounced off of Connie Willis' *Doomsday Book* when the protagonist was only a couple of pages into the past. So I generally avoid time travel to the Middle Ages books and it is high praise to say this book was tolerable with respect to visiting the period (only a sentence or so threw me out of the narrative). Polack achieves this by leaving out most of the concrete material details of daily life and focusing on humans relationships; if Artemesia wasn't there to point out the differences in worldview, it would be easy to think of the medieval natives as having more in common with the careless visitors than they do from what we can see of their thoughts and actions. It helps, sadly, that the one medievalist on the trip is not actually allowed to go out and research; she's intended to be support staff. For all the different viewpoints the book visits, we are almost never given an omniscient perspective on the world, helping to anchor the reader in lived experience rather than textbook snippets. Material goods are examined through exceptions: through the protagonist's eyes, the reader learns greater nuance in the abandoned or gifted medieval goods which are brought to her. One of the scientist's gardens, to supplement all the fridged food brought back in time, but the reader learns little of what's been planted. In addition to being a novelist, Polack is a medievalist and food historian but you wouldn't know this just from reading this book and, oddly enough, that's a good thing. Often, a novel is better without a

bibliography (see, for example, Michael Crichton).

To a degree, as Charles Stross's Laundry novels are to horror, so *Langue[dot]doc 1305* is to time travel novels: a group of people mired in bureaucracy even - especially - during their precious months in the past. Paperwork, disclaimer forms, documentation, inventories and the problems resulting from doing all these things poorly, all take up an enormous amount of the characters' time. Boredom too is an issue; not just boredom with paperwork but with being cooped up inside their nominally-secret cave with the erratic freedom to risk roaming. Some of the most nonchalant visitors to the past are so dismissive of Artemesia's warnings that they cavalierly watch the past as if it were their own reality show, a situation which is really insulting for those being watched as they attempt to go about their daily lives.

All those complicated human relations, along with all that bureaucracy, make the plot build in slow and not always steady ways. Polack, writing in elegant and accessible prose, shows us snippets of life, moments of tranquility, decision-making, rejection. People are complicated and the reader often is given no certainty as to where life takes each person's story next. While the mundanity of life distracts, months trickle past.

It's no thriller (a caveat which says a lot about books it otherwise relates to) but *Langue[dot]doc 1305* is a very good time travel novel.



***Saint Rebor* by Adam Roberts
(NewCon Press, 2015)**

Reviewed by Ian Watson

Let us celebrate Adam Roberts, for his effervescence; his intellect; his eloquence; his impertinence, cheekiness, chutzpah. *Saint Rebor* is number nine in the *Imaginings* series of short-ish signed limited edition single author story collections from Ian Whates's ever-admirable NewCon Press. Within 164 pages of text, prepare to be masterpieced many times.

'Anhedonia' posits that a concentration of dark matter, local to this neck of the galaxy, blocks us homo saps from experiencing the full bright numinous ecstatic radiance of the universe. Other advanced alien races evolved almost zero capacity for pleasure to protect them from "the waterfall blast of the sense of wonder". If we wish to go to the stars, we must sterilise our sensawunda plus our enjoyment of orgasms or pâté de foie or even ginger biscuits. This is, of course, bollocks but it's gorgeous bollocks with knobs on, blending Golden Age skiffy with post-modernist cunning. Roberts is one of the most scientific of literary SF authors—he knows his onions and unpeels them with great technical panache—but the metaphorical deployment of cosmology (for instance) may in the longer or even shorter run actually be more insightful than the cascades of data from CERN in pursuit of models of reality which may be purely imaginary.

Thus likewise in 'What did Tessimond Tell You?', a riff about universe-disintegration a bit like Stephen Baxter's poignant 'Last Contact', except that we only find out towards the end of the story that our noblest Nobel laureates have been radically wrong about space/time/. Roberts is excellent at the Upending, the Overturning, the Inside-outing, by rendering cutting-edge science metaphorically, while still—in this particular story—being electromagnetically persuasive.

There's Poignancy and an Overturning too, in 'Noose', a powerful story which immediately questions the nature and format of fiction before invoking the superscience. The objective correlative of the protagonist's depression is in fact salvatory. Oh, and such casually glorious sentences: "... the heavy clouds took their flash-photography of cowering humanity". Bravo.

In 'Gerusalemme Liberace' we don't need to know anything about Torquato Tasso, although back in the days knowledge of Italian poets was a *sine qua non* of British cultural life, and Roberts does his best to resist our cultural Thinning by recuperating Chaucerian words such as "maugre" within otherwise ordinary sentences. And why not! This super-hip Jerusalem story is about meme-warfare and I refuse to hint why Liberace is more charismatic than Jesus.

Which brings us logically to 'Trademark Bugs' in which Roberts—who authored a Jonathan Swiftian novel called *Swiftly*—writes with full-on Swiftian *saeva indignatio* an academic legal history of our world later this century when Big Pharma has completely absorbed democracy, government, tax systems, the military, *et al.* (*Saeva indignatio* means "savage indignation"; let us be kind to our readers who might not speak Latin. Roberts, who has a high opinion of his audience, rarely condescends.) Here's a near-future world where trademark law has replaced human rights, a remarkable *expansionem ad absurdum*, if that might be the phrase; Roberts has bigger dictionaries than me. This tale is unarguable and accusative.

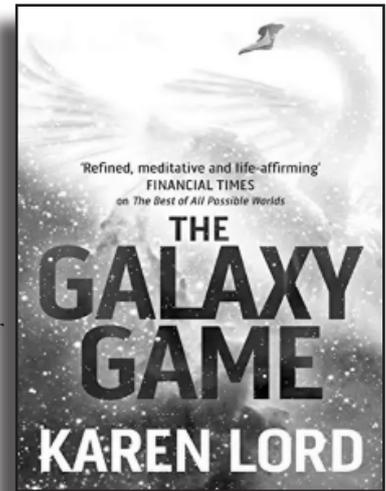
I have run out of space; unfolding Adam Roberts is like cosmic inflation.

***The Galaxy Game* by Karen Lord
(Jo Fletcher Books, 2014)**

Reviewed by Sandra Unerman

The main character of *The Galaxy Game* is Rafi, a disturbed fourteen year old boy. He has strong psionic powers which he is deeply reluctant to use because of his family history. Other people are suspicious of him as a result. His only satisfaction comes from playing the Wall Running game, which turns out to be of greater importance than anyone expects. His friends Ntenman and Serendipity have their own troubles but are also concerned for Rafi.

The novel is set on three planets. People travel between them on mindships, which have alarming effects on their passengers. The background is the same as that of Karen Lord's previous novel, *The Best of All Possible Worlds*, although this is not a direct sequel. The reader is shown the different ways of living on Rafi's home planet, Cygnus Beta and Punartam, where he goes to train. The third world depicted, Ntshune, has a complex culture whose importance grows throughout the novel.



These interlocking civilisations are fascinating in their own right and are described in convincing detail. Lord is good at providing reasons for the characters to explain things the reader needs to know. That said, there is so much background that the story itself takes a long time to get going and the wider political developments remain more intriguing than the fate of the individual characters.

The story is told in the third person, from multiple points of view, except for brief episodes narrated by Ntenman. He is the most cheerful and light-hearted of the friends so his interventions add some humour and variety of tone. They do not provide much emotional depth though. Rafi has the potential to be a strong focus for the novel but I never felt drawn closely enough into his life. The important moments are seen from the outside. We are not in his point of view when the treatment he receives at school drives him to leave or when he takes his first journey in a mindship. Later on, as he comes to terms with his abilities, we are told how he changes but do not live through the experiences with him.

It is also a drawback that all the people who cause real trouble in the novel remain offstage. There are plenty of adults in the novel, whose ways of coping with their own past and the constraints of their culture are interesting in their own right, but Rafi's father is the only identifiable individual worth fighting and he never appears. Otherwise, the forces of opposition are provided by governments and cartels whose inner workings are not disclosed. It is refreshing to have so many politicians and others all trying to do their best in their different ways but this does dampen the dramatic impact of the story.

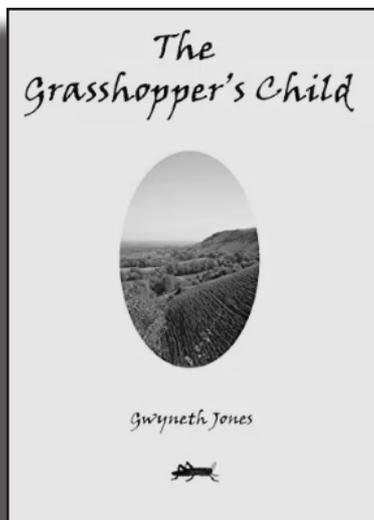
I haven't read *The Best of All Possible Worlds* and those who have may get more out of *The Galaxy Game*. As a standalone, it has plenty of interesting and thought-provoking material but is not a wholly satisfying read.

***The Grasshopper's Child* by Gwyneth Jones
(TJoy Books UK, 2014)**

Reviewed by Ian Sales

The *Bold As Love* sequence by Gwyneth Jones comprises five books - *Bold As Love* (2001), *Castles Made of Sand* (2002), *Midnight Lamp* (2003), *Band of Gypsies* (2005) and *Rainbow Bridge* (2006) – which between them hoovered up two Arthur C Clarke Award nominations (including one win), three BSFA Award nominations and three Locus Award nominations. So a new addition to the sequence is something worth celebrating, although there have been changes. Jones has described *The Grasshopper's Child* as Young Adult - she normally writes YA genre fiction under the name Ann Halam - which the preceding five novels were not. Jones is also one of the best science fiction writers the UK has produced but *The Grasshopper's Child* was self-published...

After the “rock n roll reich” described in the earlier books was catapulted to power, it was displaced by a junta of criminals, only for the Chinese to then invade and occupy the UK. *The Grasshopper's Child* opens ten years later. Heidi Ryan is an Indentured Teen, sold into slavery because of family debts (her father was murdered, apparently by her mother,



who is now in hospital). She has been assigned as carer to the Maylocks, who live in the Garden House at Mehilhoc, and also becomes involved with the local Exempt Teens - “exempt” because they have not been sent to an Agricultural Camp.

Heidi is convinced her mother is innocent but cannot prove this. She comes to the conclusion that evidence to absolve her can be found in Mehilhoc and that’s why the state sent her there. There’s also something

odd going on in Mehilhoc, particularly in regard to local super-rich gentry the Carron-Knowells. Not to mention inside the Garden House - Heidi thinks someone is spying on her as she sleeps, there’s a locked steel door by the kitchen and the Maylocks mysteriously have access to high technology.

Two-thirds of the way through the novel, pirates make an abrupt appearance and kidnap the teens to sell into slavery in other countries. But their ship hits an artificial reef a mile offshore and sinks. Happily, the teens are rescued but the incident causes all the various plots and sub-plots threaded through the novel to come crashing together.

It will come as no surprise to fans of Jones that Heidi is a well-drawn character, as indeed are much of the cast; and there’s some lovely writing - particularly of the park surrounding the Garden House. This is superior YA, there’s no doubt of that. However, as the above synopsis suggests, if there’s one criticism to be levelled at *The Grasshopper's Child*, it’s that so much is going on in it; Jones slings one ball after another into the air... And yet, somehow, she manages to keep juggling them through to the end *and* succeeds in knitting everything together into a resolution that makes sense. It’s a shame there isn’t more – especially since, in places, it feels like there should be.

***The Invisible Library* by Genevieve Cogman
(Tor UK, 2015)**

Reviewed by Cherith Baldry

The opening paragraph of *The Invisible Library* establishes the setting of Prince Mordred’s Private Academy for Boys where the curriculum includes “strategic combat, duelling, open-field assassination and rugby.” I was immediately charmed.

The Invisible Library is an institution which exists between a number of alternate worlds, its purpose to acquire and preserve books. In particular, it’s important for the Library to hold books which are unique to a single alternate, especially when there is only one copy in existence. If this should involve the theft of the volume in question, that’s just part of being a Librarian.

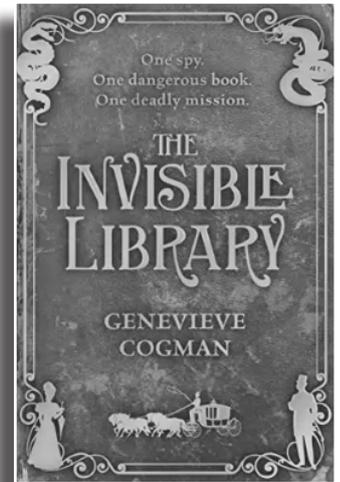
The fast-paced action in Prince Mordred’s Academy is just a taster for the main plot, establishing the protagonist, the Librarian Irene, and the way in which the Library functions. On her return, she is given a more important and difficult mission in another alternate world. She also acquires a trainee, Kai, on his first venture outside the Library. Her orders are to steal a specific book and bring it back to the Library but, of course, it is not that simple. On arriving in the alternate world, Irene discovers that the book has already been stolen, its previous owner murdered and several other interested parties are on its trail.

The two central characters, Irene and Kai, and the rapport between them, are one of the major strengths of the novel. Neither of them is a stereotype. Irene is brave and competent but kick-ass glamour is reserved for a secondary character. ‘Trainee’ might suggest bumbling ineptitude, a source of comic relief, but Kai is intelligent and resourceful and has secrets of his own which are revealed in the course of the action.

The alternate world is a heady mix of supernatural creatures, including werewolves and the Fae, alongside steampunk science with zeppelins and robot centipedes. The chaos this implies is counterbalanced by a Victorian flavour to the world’s social *mores*, producing a place I could easily believe in (though I might not want to live there). It’s populated by interesting characters, such as an alternate version of Sherlock Holmes and the charismatic but dangerous Fae Ambassador.

The plot is highly complex, depending on the motivations of the people who are in search of the book and the danger into which Irene and Kai are plunged as they try to track it down. It’s a fast roller-coaster ride and if you blink, you might miss something vital. Yet all the various threads come together satisfyingly at the climax.

Woven into the edge-of-the-seat story is the suggestion that the Library may be more than just a book depository, that in some way its acquisitions influence the development of the alternates from which they come. And at the end of the book it is implied that Irene will have more adventures in this alternate world. Maybe these will involve a deeper understanding of the true nature of the Library. I hope I’m right. I may have just found a new favourite author.



**Folk'd by Laurence Donaghy
(Blackstaff Press, 2013)**

Reviewed by Susan Oke

This is the first of the *Folk'd* trilogy, described by the author as three volumes of family intrigue and ancient Irish mythology in a head-on collision with modern themes of unexpected parenthood and unwanted responsibility. The book opens with a prologue set in the future where it seems the mortal and faerie worlds are merged. A small child wants to hear the Origin story and the reader is plunged into a dark alley in modern day Belfast.

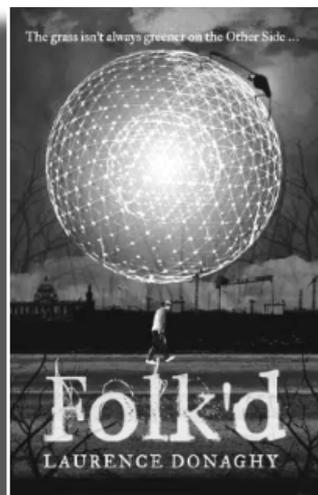
Danny Morrigan is struggling with a wheelie bin and all the “shitty” aspects of being a young and practically penniless father. Life with a small baby is vividly depicted, introducing the conflict between frustration at lost opportunities and genuine love for his son and girlfriend, Ellie. The longstanding friendship between Danny and Steve is another real gem. The two Belfast lads swear up a storm; the language is colourful but it's also natural and engaging. Danny comes alive on the page and Steve is his perfect counterpoint.

When Danny and Steve are called upon to do some reluctant gardening—flattening a hump of earth—a chain of events begin that literally changes Danny's world. Ellie and his son disappear. Danny's frantic search for them is derailed when everyone forgets that his son ever existed. It turns out that hump of earth, which has miraculously reappeared in his garden, is an entrance to the Other Side: the world of the faeries or the Low Folk. Danny's synaesthesia helps to protect him—his gift is being able to remember—though he has to fight his way back to the truth. A fight that puts him at odds with his best friend, Steve.

The book charts Danny's journey as he unravels what has happened to his family and comes to terms with the fact that the Low Folk might actually exist. Family ties are major theme, in particular the bond between father and son, with Danny struggling with the legacy of his absent and alcoholic father.

The tealeaf-reading crone of a neighbour is used to introduce the mythological aspects to good effect. The Irish myth of Nuada and the Morrigan is narrated to Danny via hold-music on the phone but while this is an interesting technique, it felt rather shoehorned in. The imminence of the world-changing event is, however, ably foreshadowed in the countdown to the launch of the Hypernet: Your Gateway to a better World.

The sections of the book written in Danny's point-of-view are vibrant and engaging. My only niggle is the slide into an omniscient style when filling in backstory with other characters and moving the plot forward when Danny isn't around. Donaghy leavens the book with humour, using both dialogue and situation to great effect. I smiled often, and even laughed out loud on occasion. I thoroughly recommend this book to all and sundry. I have already sunk my teeth into the sequel, *Folk'd Up*.



**The Good Shabti by Robert Sharp
(Jurassic London, 2015)**

Reviewed by Gary Dalkin

The Good Shabti is a novella consisting of two alternating narratives. One is set 4000 years ago and chronicles the last days of the dying Egyptian King Mentuhotep from the point of view of the slave, or shabti, Bak. As the king gradually succumbs to a terminal illness Bak, who merely hopes to survive by remaining as anonymous as possible, is drawn into the ailing ruler's scheme for a new and religiously controversial form of interment. In the present, an international team of scientists - led by the ambitious doctor Botha, though the story is more closely aligned with the perspective of statistician and cryptographer, Ruth - endeavour to reanimate the now ancient king with state-of-the-art technology financed by the Emir Sharif Ali Al-Maud. Careers and reputations depend on success, as however much time passes, those without power remain eternally subservient to those in authority.

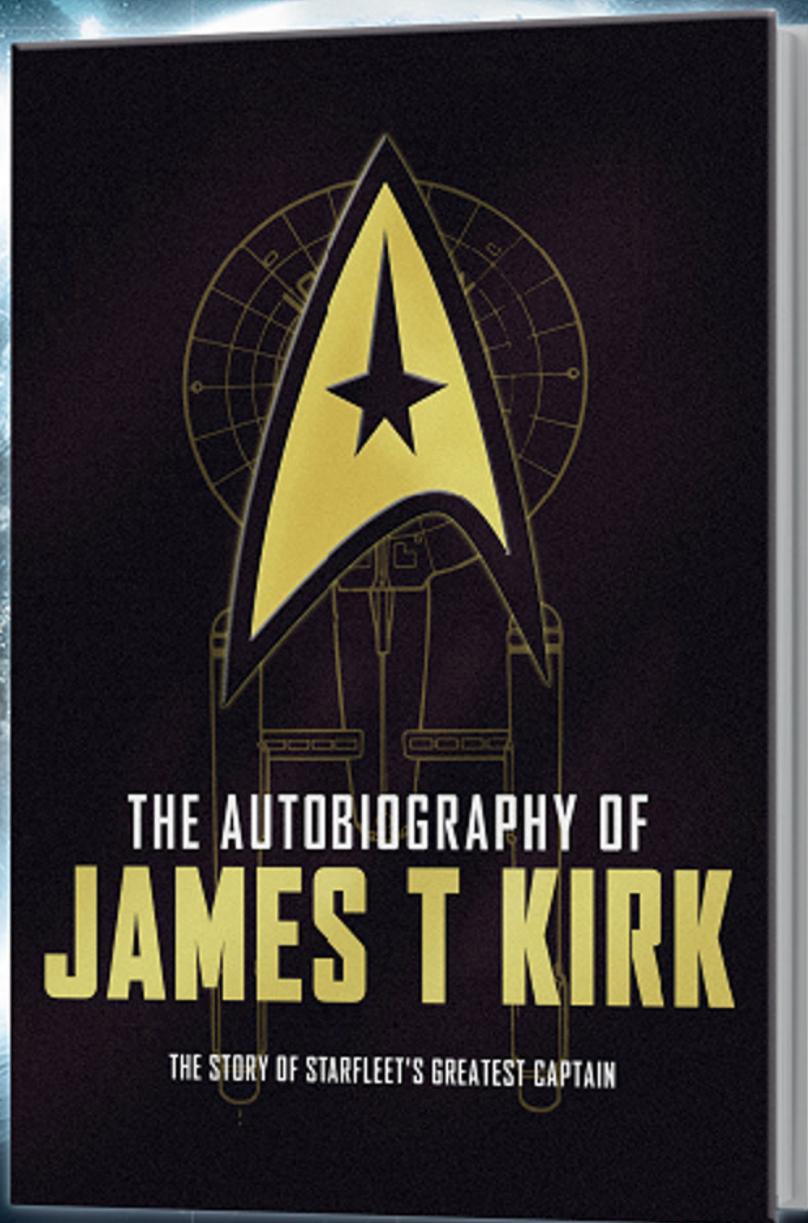
The tale has an elegant simplicity of structure in that as the king declines and Bak's life becomes ever more imperilled so in the present the disinterred remains come closer to technological resurrection, even if something seems to be going wrong. The story is well-written and rattles along at an increasingly feverish pace, mixing court/office politics with compelling SF horror of real grip and impending dread. It falls well within both the tradition of stories of scientists-who-should-leave-well-alone and of mummy stories, more typically embodied by Universal and Hammer films than in print. It all builds to a breathless, if not entirely unpredictable, conclusion and if there is one jarring weakness, it is in the early cameo by an Englishman who appears to have wandered in from a Fifties Ealing Studios film: “Open this damned gate, you bloody jobsworth!”

Robert Sharp is the Head of Campaigns & Communications at English PEN and the author of various short stories. *The Good Shabti* is his first novella and was originally commissioned for inclusion in the Jurassic London anthology, *The Book of The Dead*, but proved too long and so has received deluxe stand alone treatment. According to the publisher's website, “The limited edition of *The Good Shabti* is 136 pages, including the afterword by the Egypt Exploration Society's John J Johnston. It is printed on 120gsm paper, bound into black buckram and (rather striking) red endpapers. The front cover has been stamped in gold gilt with the cartouche of the Pharaoh Mentuhotep IV. The wrap-around dust jacket is by award-winning artist Jeffrey Alan Love ... Every copy has been hand-numbered (by antique stamps, of course) and signed by the author.”

Considering these production values, the volume sells for a very reasonable £12 (ebook editions will follow from Sabrina Press). It's a very classy package, though given a large font, many blank pages and others with little text on them, there is not as much here as one might imagine. I read the whole book in 75 minutes flat and I'm not a fast reader. *The Good Shabti* is a good story - I'm just not entirely convinced that it is sufficiently substantial to warrant such lavish treatment.



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