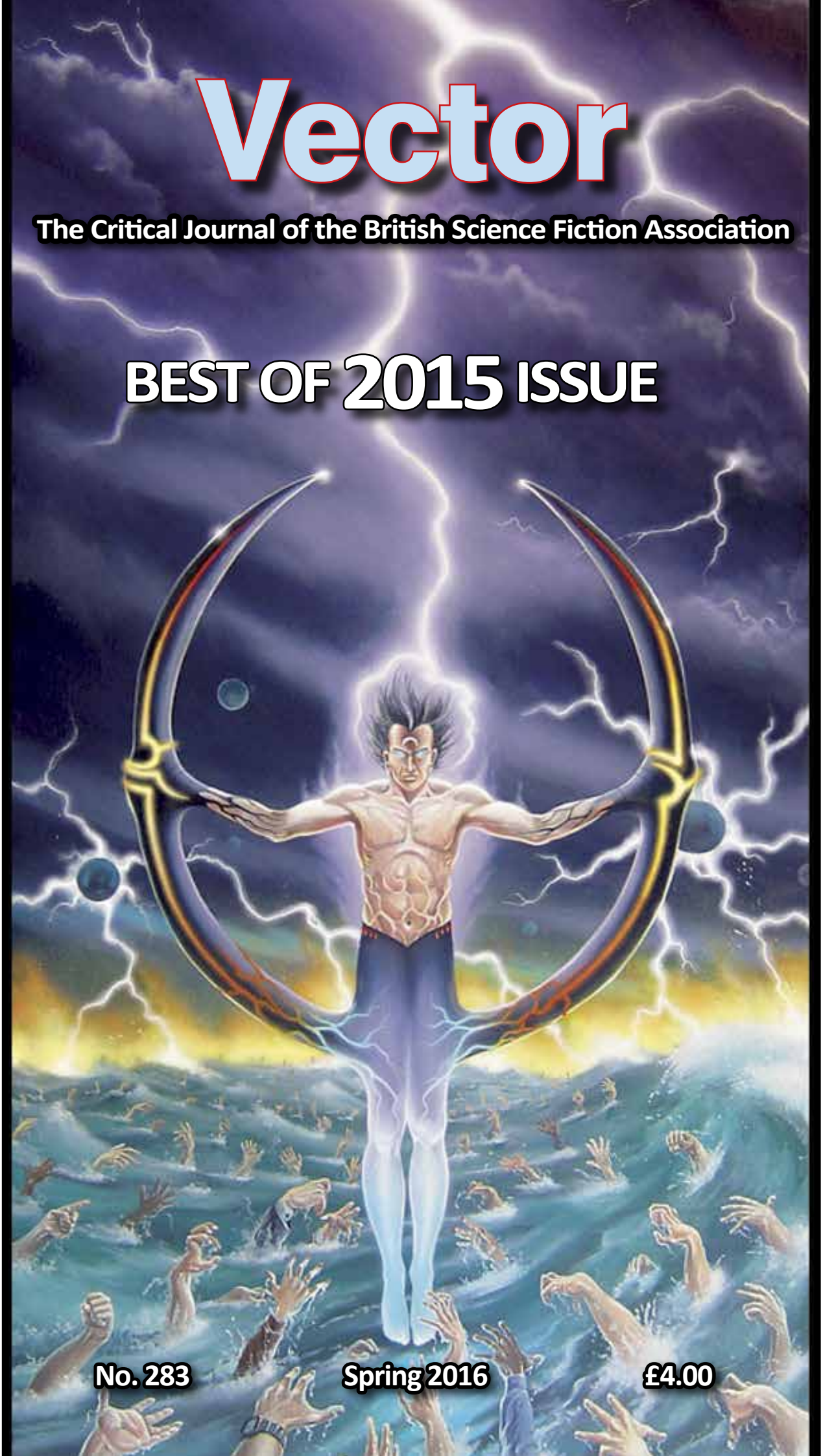
Vector

The Critical Journal of the British Science Fiction Association

BEST OF 2015 ISSUE



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ARTICLES

RECURRENT

THE BSFA REVIEW

In this issue, Maureen Kincaid Speller's *Sorcerer to the Crown* takes Aishwarya Subramanian's *Spirits Abroad*, to Duncan Lawie's *Luna: New Moon*, no less. Meanwhile, Paul Graham Raven insists *The Word For World is Forest* but *The Goblin Emperor* and Sandra Unerman remain unconvinced, and bring forth Susan Oke's *Binti* as Andy Sawyer's *The Last Witness*. *What if I got down on my knees?* instead, suggests Kate Onyett...

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Every year we bring you an issue of *Vector* dedicated to the best science fiction in the field over the previous year. Welcome to *Vector*'s Best of 2015 issue. We also make an effort to pay tribute to the landmarks in the field over the previous year. Last year our Best Of issue came out just as Leonard Nimoy's death was announced, and this year we sadly have another landmark figure to pay tribute to. David Bowie was a hugely influential figure in every field he touched. His musicianship ranged from soul, to disco, to industrial metal. His influence on fashion and art and design was celebrated by the V&A exhibition still currently touring the globe, and while the films in which he appeared were not always critically acclaimed or box office hits his screen presence was always powerful and pushed each piece to another level.

Here we want to draw attention to Bowie's specific influence on the field of science fiction and fantasy. The most obvious impact he had was through his roles in *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1976) and *Labyrinth* (1986), a slow-burning cult movie that brought Bowie into the childhoods of countless people growing up in the 1980s onwards. This science fiction and fantasy imaginary was most obvious in these contributions because of their imagery and storylines, the stranger in a strange land of *The Man Who Fell to Earth* struggles with the change in culture and social mores in a way comparable to Robert Heinlein's Valentine Michael Smith. *Labyrinth* gives a fantastical landscape, evocative of fairy tales. Beyond these more obvious, visual references to science fiction and fantasy, however, was the centrality of science fiction through his musical catalogue. Space and the stars appeared repeatedly during his time as Ziggy Stardust in tracks such as 'Starman', 'Space Oddity', and 'Life on Mars' while *Diamond Dogs* was a concept album that filtered George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) through Bowie's own imaginary. For young people growing up in the 1970s Bowie's music showed how an imaginary landscape could be brought back to quotidian reality in order to change it, to adapt it for their own needs and to shape their own identities. Bowie's science fiction was not simply a forward-looking utopia (although it certainly flirted with such ideas by describing futures that might blow the minds of contemporary humanity). His science fiction was a means of changing a world that judged non-comformity, making aliens beautiful and valuable. As literary science fiction was exploring the New Wave, Bowie did the same in his music, films and fashion. The spread of his ideas from one medium to another, producing cross-platform characters rather than mere albums is also worth recognising in the context of science fiction. While visual science fiction culture is ever more clogged with endless cross-platform commercial projects designed to create billion-dollar industries rather than good art (however much we may enjoy some of the products of such projects) Bowie's work moved from platform to platform with the aim of doing some real world-building, layering the mythology of the man so that many fans reacted to his death with disbelief, shocked into mourning someone who had never fallen from grace, and who was credited with making his life into an art installation, by releasing his album almost simultaneously with his death, curating his death in tracks such as 'Black Star' and 'Lazarus' (and their accompanying videos) as his life came to an end. As we look back on the Best of 2015 we also pay tribute to one of the best figures in pop culture and in science fiction that we have ever seen.

We'd also like to take this opportunity to invite submissions for a future issue of *Vector* on science fiction and music. We've been thinking about a special music issue over the last few months and now with Bowie's passing we think it would be particularly relevant. We welcome submissions of around 4000 words on any aspect of music and science fiction so get in touch with us at vector.editors@gmail.com to pitch an idea or to submit an article.

Meanwhile, in the current issue, we give you the Best of 2015. Molly Cobb takes us on a tour through the best science fiction television shows of the year, both superhero-related and those rare examples that do not deal with our caped friends, while Ashley Armstrong makes us aware of the most recent developments in Young Adult (YA) science fiction. Our Best of Film comes from a number of contributors who give us their take on the big films of the year including *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, *Jurassic World* and *Ex Machina*. We also have our regular columns; Andy Sawyer bemoans the lack of available information on female contributors to mid-twentieth century sf while Steven Baxter marks the fiftieth anniversary of Larry Niven's 'Known Space' future history sequence. Paul Kincaid finds the origins of Dave Hutchinson's 2015 novel *Europe at Midnight* – shortlisted for both the Kitschies and the BSFA Awards – in a little known short story, 'On the Windsor Branch', and Laura Sneddon gives us the best comics of 2015. We also have a new addition to our Best of the Year issue – Connor McKeown joins us to walk us through the best videogames of the year – as well as giving us a preview of what to look forward to in the year ahead. Many thanks to all our contributors, I'm sure they will give us plenty to catch up on and new ideas for 2016.

Finally, we'd also like to take this opportunity to thank Martin Petto for his service as Vector Reviews Editor over the years, this issue marks his final appearance in the post. His replacement in the post is Susan Oke and we hope you'll join us in issuing her a warm welcome to the team. Good luck to Susan and best wishes to Martin with all of his future endeavours!

Anna McFarlane
and Glyn Morgan
Co-Editors, Vector

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Best of 2015 in SF Television

by Molly Cobb

THE SATURATION OF television by superheroes means a minimal number of shows that do not contain them as its focus. Luckily, superhero TV has been mostly good, justifying their increase in the medium. Unfortunately, this does mean that if you are not a superhero fan, it becomes harder to find other sf TV, especially of a certain level of quality. Even those of high quality are often adaptations, meaning if you are a fan of the original, you may have trouble enjoying the televised version if it does not match your expectations.

The Man in the High Castle (2015-present) is an example of this high quality television which is only loosely based on its source material. If you are looking for a straight re-telling, this is not it. However, though the show may deviate from the novel, it does so generally well. The political structure, society, and culture created in the narrative is quickly, easily, and non-intrusively introduced through camera angles and off-hand comments which exposes the world to the viewer without relying on info-dumps. In addition, the music utilised within the show is both appropriately atmospheric and well-placed in order to indicate the juxtaposition of American culture with the Japanese/German colonisation.

Unfortunately, the show's immediate focus on the resistance movement does little to demonstrate how individuals are meant to exist in this society. Fortunately, to the overall benefit of the show, the focus is later adjusted to acknowledge more of everyday life. Initially, the dystopian nature of the society is ignored by flooding the show with characters active in the resistance and set on continuing to fight the war. While admirable, it means we (as viewers) can never fully experience the implications of living in this world, thereby distancing us from the resistance efforts. Though we may sympathise with the resistance through the sheer knowledge of the Axis powers as enemies, there is a distinct lack of understanding exactly what is being fought against. Use of the Nazis in general without depicting particular examples of their impact besides violence demonstrates a reliance on the Nazis as enemies to evoke an audience reaction at the expense of fully exploring the society. As well, the show focuses on action more than the novel does. Together, these aspects lend a rather melodramatic air to many moments of repression or violence and undermines them through their unrealistic nature. Though incidents are clearly negative, their lack of depth

beyond simply depicting that 'Nazis are bad' causes situations to seem too contrived to be believable, even in the context of the narrative.

The Nazis are almost too big an enemy to be frightening on the everyday level. As a result, characters like The Marshall or individual members of the Nazi regime or Kempeitai come across as producing genuine terror in contrast. Though less horrifying than the governments themselves in terms of the dystopian context, the fear of the individual induces the fear of the fellow man, rather than the towering abstract of fascism. Thus, these characters and the situations they create become more relatable by virtue of not being too remote to consider.

If one can make it past these initial drawbacks to the point at which the show refocuses to address these considerations, however, *The Man in the High Castle* begins to offer genuinely compelling characters and situations. The show fully comes into its own once it removes itself from making grand statements about the world (no matter how well done) and actually demonstrates the world itself. Once the focus is narrowed to individuals rather than the nation or resistance in general, a sense of humanity is injected into the narrative which allows for personal exploration beyond generic statements about 'making America free again'. By demonstrating personal reactions to the

situation, the effect of the state on its people becomes more deeply explored and makes for far more interesting viewing. Though the initially broad depiction of the society is likely done to introduce viewers to the world, it contains the same impersonal remoteness as the Nazis in general. Though still only a myopic view of the dystopia, as focus is still on resistance fighters or questioning members of the government, it does demonstrate the depth and breadth of dissatisfaction with the Nazi regime.

Indications of the American Dream under the Nazi regime are set against the questioning by Nazi officials over whether Nazi policies should actually be carried out. For example, the celebration of VA Day by Obergruppenführer John Smith, containing imagery of the nuclear American family, complete with dog and white picket fence, is contrasted with his discovery that his son has a congenital defect, which under Nazi rule requires his son be put to death. This juxtaposition reflects the initial moment when a natural-born American, 'normalised' to the Nazi regime, begins to question his loyalty. Contrasting these elements does an excellent job of depicting the various ways individuals survive in this dystopia. Thus, the enemy is humanised without necessarily engendering sympathy for the Axis governments and their actions. Instead, this humanising approach allows all characters to be seen as regular people trying to get by in a world which requires either complete immersion or complete resistance. By eventually coming around to include sincere, in-depth, everyday opinions from all characters regardless of nationality, status, or politics, the show creates a cross-section of reactions created to display the varying approaches to what living in this alternate world may be like. Despite its initial faltering, *The Man in the High Castle* offers a truly thought-provoking look at the world created by Philip K. Dick, despite any alterations from the novel.

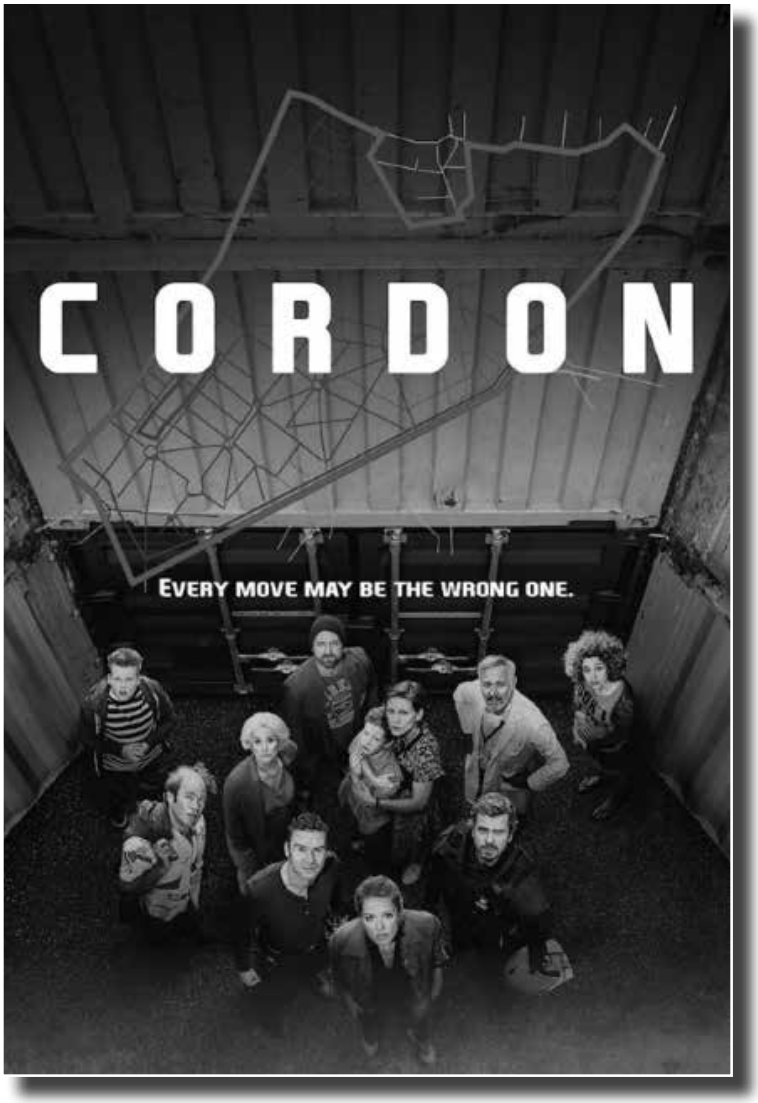
Other non-superhero shows are *Dark Matter* (2015-present) and *Killjoys* (2015-present). Both Canadian productions, these shows expertly complement each other if only because they are each strong in the aspect which the other is lacking. Based on the comic book of the same name, *Dark Matter* follows six people who awaken on a spaceship with complete memory loss. Much of the shows is thus based on them retrieving their memories. Unknown aspects of themselves are consequently revealed to the audience at the same time that the characters discover them. As a result, the audience becomes very much included in these discoveries while simultaneously precariously balancing viewer loyalty to certain characters as their criminal pasts are revealed and attitudes and opinions of both characters and viewers are constantly shifting. *Dark Matter* does an excellent job of raising questions concerning the self, memory, and identity while also discussing the technology involved in inducing such a memory wipe. This exploration is coupled with the presence of an android on board the ship whose memory and programming can be easily wiped as well. Discussion is therefore encouraged on the similarities and differences between humans and AI while also exploring what it is that creates identity and what is needed to be considered human or not. This is raised extremely well in one discussion with the android which consists of questioning whether these individuals should still be considered criminals as they have no memory of the crimes they have committed. By coupling this question with how the android can be reprogrammed by wiping its memory banks, it encourages thought regarding the reprogramming of people and whether if, by association, androids should be considered human as well.

What *Dark Matter* lacks is world-building or exploration beyond the immediate characters. While they may be interesting and their situation thought-provoking, it is here where the show is limited. To contrast this, *Killjoys* has well-rounded world-building with a compelling culture, politics, and society which bolsters the characters that exist within it. Unlike *Dark Matter*, *Killjoys* does little to raise questions concerning the state of the world, but

the characters themselves remain interesting. Focusing on a team of bounty hunters, the show uses this premise to traverse multiple sections of society, from the slums to the rich and powerful, in order to depict the world they have created. However, this is done at the expense of spending prolonged time in any of those situations. Though perhaps neither show is fully accomplished, they each offer a particular aspect that is nevertheless well done, with *Dark Matter* offering though-provoking discussion and *Killjoys* focused on action-based fun.

Another show based on a comic book is *iZombie* (2015-present), which is a loose adaptation of the *DC/Vertigo* publication. Though entertaining and intriguing enough, the show rarely goes beyond the teen drama level of compelling. Viewers may notice that it resembles previous shows based on the 'morgue technician solving crimes with help from the dead' theme, such as *Tru Calling* (2003-2005). *iZombie* takes the relatively unique approach to zombies by depicting them as regular people who just happen to be dead and need to eat brains to survive, raising similar questions seen in other shows as to what constitutes the human. Eating brains is what induces visions of what the person whom the brain belongs to last saw, hence Olivia Moore's use of this aspect of her zombism to solve crime. Combining these two elements demonstrates the show's attempt to establish how zombies may have a positive place in society despite their negative aspects. Though the show does explore how zombies would be expected to fit into society and how brains for their consumption would be procured, it does not offer much else that is new or especially thought-provoking. Overall, the show is an interesting take on the theme but is more for entertainment than any advancement of the genre.

Though not a zombie horror/thriller, *Cordon* (2014-present [aired 2015 on BBC]) utilises similar cinematography and themes to depict the aftermath of a deadly virus outbreak. Whether these similarities were intentional is unclear, but *Cordon* essentially creates the atmosphere of a zombie film without being one. By effectively creating the paranoid fear of the sick 'other' while maintaining realism, the show encourages questions about how modern society would handle such a crisis. The show is given a distinctly sf feel and approach without directly utilising the more obvious themes. Considering some of the framing and camera angles (which are extremely similar to those used in zombie films to create tension over whether an individual is infected or not), it becomes hard not to anticipate the revelation of zombies. The creation of tension lends itself to the narrative's examination of the fear of the infected and the devolution of the individual from human to just a representation of the virus. Based on a variation of the Avian flu, the outbreak examines possible future paths of viral evolution and the need for technology and politics to evolve to address such concerns. The show additionally uses the situation in order to discuss contemporary politics, such as suspicion of Muslims, immigrants, or refugees, by demonstrating reactions against Afghan communities when it is reported that an illegal Afghan immigrant was patient zero. Even when proven untrue, the truth is buried because it is the 'ideal scapegoat' and takes attention away from the government mistake that actually created the outbreak.



The show's ability to create panic and fear without relying on a supernatural monster is expertly done and the apocalyptic feel of the city inside the cordon is powerful. The disconnect between the apocalyptic imagery inside the cordon and the 'normal' world outside demonstrates the separation of the individuals inside and out but also depicts the pre- and post-apocalyptic imagery of the city simultaneously. Within this environment, the characters introduced are believable representations of the myriad reactions and emotional processing demanded by the situation. Despite internal inconsistences revealed through unlikely coincidences and conveniences, the narrative remains realistic enough to leave the viewer tensely pondering the possibilities.

In terms of superhero television, there is a decent amount on offer, whether you are a *Marvel* or *DC* fan. Overall, though, *Marvel* appears to produce more consistently high-quality shows that demonstrate a broad understanding of modern concerns. Shows brand new for 2015 can be seen to gravitate towards feminism as the topic of the day and though

DC offers imagery of the powerful female character, it does so less organically than *Marvel*. *Supergirl* (2015-present) for example, though interesting and fun, suffers from a few flaws which prevent it from being a standout show. Plot holes as to why Supergirl has waited until now to use her powers are never fully addressed. Even when the show itself calls out the issue, asking her why, if she wants to help people, was she not around for previous disasters in recent years, it only stumbles over the question and moves on without clarifying anything. Though it does approach issues of feminism and the female hero, it is too on the nose about the subject, making it less an inherent aspect of the characters and more of an aside to the audience. It is as if the show has attempted to prove their awareness of the issue without actually demonstrating it. However, the characters and situations are entertaining and intriguing, even if the love 'square' between Supergirl and three other characters is a bit convoluted and cliché. The allusive inclusion of Superman promises a wider world beyond that revealed but never intrudes enough to prevent Supergirl from telling her own story and does cement her as an independent female hero, if nothing else.

Faring little better is *Arrow* (2012-present) and *The Flash* (2014-present). Both shows generally offered more of the same as explored in previous seasons, while too many additional components were added in a relatively short space leaving the show feeling too crowded with ideas, plots, and characters. With *Arrow*, the inclusion of magic, resurrection, etc. only served to demonstrate the poor pacing rather than widen discussions of such aspects within the show, especially since characters' reactions ranged from indifference to casual acceptance, leaving no room for examination. In contrast, *The Flash* fares better with its introduction of multiple worlds as it paces out their inclusion in the world and gives more intriguing and in-depth explanations. Unfortunately, many of these same explanations are presented as either info-dumps or technobabble which makes minimal sense, especially because Detective Joe West is often the audience's surrogate in these situations. His requests for explanations are rarely done organically and far too obviously for the audience's benefit, making them more of an aside than sincere dialogue.

The constant reintroduction of characters on *Arrow* (e.g. Sara, Ray Palmer, and later, Roy) gives the impression that the show has run out of ideas and is therefore falling back on established characters (even when ostensibly dead), making their appearance unoriginal and lazy. The return of these characters is far too obviously done to advance *Legends of Tomorrow* (2016-present), thus indicating too much dedication to expanding the universe at the cost of fully developing what is already available. Though the inclusion of Hawkgirl in *The Flash* does offer a more elegant way into *Legends of Tomorrow* and allow for a cross-over between *Flash* and *Arrow*, it contrasts strongly with the inclusion of Constantine which felt far too much like trying to remind viewers of a show that was cancelled anyway. One reintroduction of a 'dead' character that does fare well is the re-emergence of Dr Wells on *Flash*. By offering an interesting look at the idea of multiple selves and multiple universes, the show opens discussion on how characters react to him and the psychological disconnect between knowing he both is and is not the same villain they previously destroyed (though unfortunately they ruin this by bringing back Eobard Thawne as well during early 2016 episodes). It will be interesting to see where the use of time travel and multiple worlds will end up in *The Flash* and its impact on other shows within the universe, but time travel could easily become confusing and contrived depending on whether they manage to rework their approach to convey relevant information to their audience.

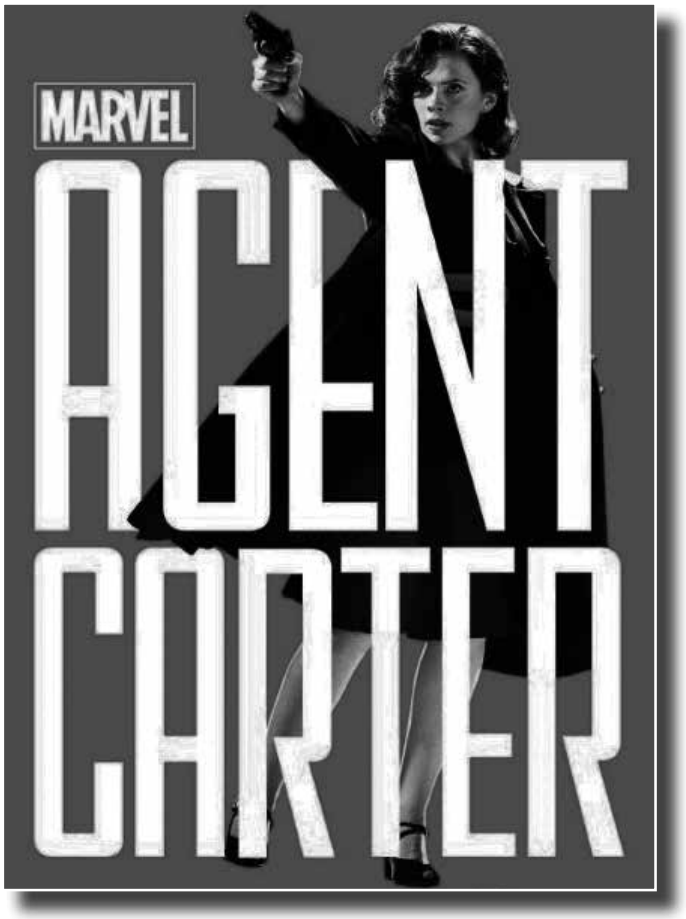
On the other hand, *Marvel* has been offering shows such as *Daredevil* (2015-present), which not only presents characters that are interesting and compelling, but the show overall simply looks good. Darker and perhaps more 'adult' than other 'daytime' versions of superheroes, *Daredevil* rounds out its good qualities with excellent action sequences and superb acting. Matt Murdock's struggle with his blindness and being a superhero portrays the idea of the superhero as less 'super' and encouraging everyday considerations of the 'hero'. Additionally, his journey into becoming Daredevil is both realistically gritty and mildly humorous by taking the opportunity to perhaps poke fun at assumptions that the transition would be immediately 'heroic'. Murdock's restriction of his crime fighting to New York City's Hell's Kitchen indicates the amount of good that can be done locally and reflects Daredevil as more of a 'neighbourhood hero' than anything world-changing, but the show never portrays this as narrow-minded or superficial. Connections with other characters from the universe are well-placed and the continuous appearance of Claire Temple throughout this, *Jessica Jones* (2015-present), and

Luke Cage (2016) gives a nice sense of continuity to the shows by demonstrating their co-existence without belittling their separate struggles.

As if determined to continue the darker tone achieved with *Daredevil*, *Jessica Jones* follows similar characterisation. While the show's intention to display the horrors of abuse are commendable, it seems to fall short by nearly overemphasising Jones' victimhood because the show appears to focus on her status as victim rather than her ability to overcome it (despite attempts to do just that). Though this does emphasize Kilgrave's effect on her, it raises discussion concerning which subject areas are difficult to approach from the angle of superheroes. Similar to issues of combining superheroes with 9/11, for example, abusive relationships and superheroes must work to avoid simplifying the situation. Though it implies all are vulnerable, and thus victims are neither 'asking for it' nor inherently weak, examinations must be careful not to imply that one must be a superhero in order to overcome it or that only supervillains are perpetrators. *Jessica Jones* manages this balance fairly well and presents a believable female character both within and without the situation of abuse. What the show does extremely well is to utilise this approach to open discussions on abuse in general and the effect it has on both victims and those around them. By exploring this through metaphor, such as mind control, and Jones' eventual ability to resist as reflective of overcoming an abusive relationship, *Jessica Jones* encourages an examination of all forms of abuse, not just physical, and demonstrates that victims are not always female, thereby doing an excellent job of navigating a difficult subject.

Continuing the trend of strong female characters, *Agent Carter* (2015-present) utilises its historic setting in order to examine perceptions of women and the changes in the female workforce post-World War II. Though the show does make a point of having standout chauvinistic male characters in order to demonstrate these perceptions, historical accuracy requires this characterisation as much as the show does. Unlike *Supergirl*, however, *Agent Carter* manages to write a strong, female character without patting themselves on the back for having done so and neither dwells on their female representations nor actively point them out, instead letting Carter speak for herself. Other characters support Carter more as a matter of fact, in contrast to Supergirl, who seems more supported by purposeful writing which attempts to introduce, defend, and close the issue by itself without engaging the audience on the subject. Despite *Agent Carter*'s historic approach, it manages to not vilify all men in the process but portrays a myriad of attitudes, thereby taking advantage of male expectations of women in order to introduce situations and prompt considerations.

Feminism aside, *Agent Carter* is fun, entertaining, and interesting, with the time period enhancing these aspects. The inclusion of snippets from the 'Captain America Adventure Program' were fun, compelling additions and the show as a whole was surprisingly well-paced for all that has been packed into only eight episodes. With engaging characters and plot, the show is well-written and well-acted, with interesting technology and an excellently portrayed dynamic relationship between Carter and Jarvis. Tie-ins with Captain American and Stark Industries were easily achieved without drawing unnecessary attention away from Carter while simultaneously alluding to the world of which she is a part. A single criticism of the show would be its tendency to fall back on tropes such as the well-intentioned but ill-advised experiment, Howard Stark's characterisation, and the seemingly Tarantino/Indiana Jones-inspired obsession with glowing 'treasure'. Overall, however, *Agent Carter* manages to combine all the best aspects of other shows into a single package, which, though not perfect, is borderline so and demonstrates a solid movement towards female characters as characters for their own sake.



Despite the abundance of superhero themed shows, other approaches to sf can be found if you know where to look. The expansion of the popularity of shows outside the US and UK means that a number of shows discussed here are Canadian, with *Cordon* being the only European addition, having originated in Flanders. Collectively, regardless of approach, these shows demonstrate the various ways in which contemporary themes and issues can be considered, especially through the lens of sf. The majority of the shows reviewed here attempt to use their platform in order to discuss concerns ranging from feminism to politics to identity to abuse to what it actually means to be human. Though not without their flaws, these shows offer any number of thought-provoking and entertaining narratives guaranteed to offer either fun or discussion, and oftentimes both.

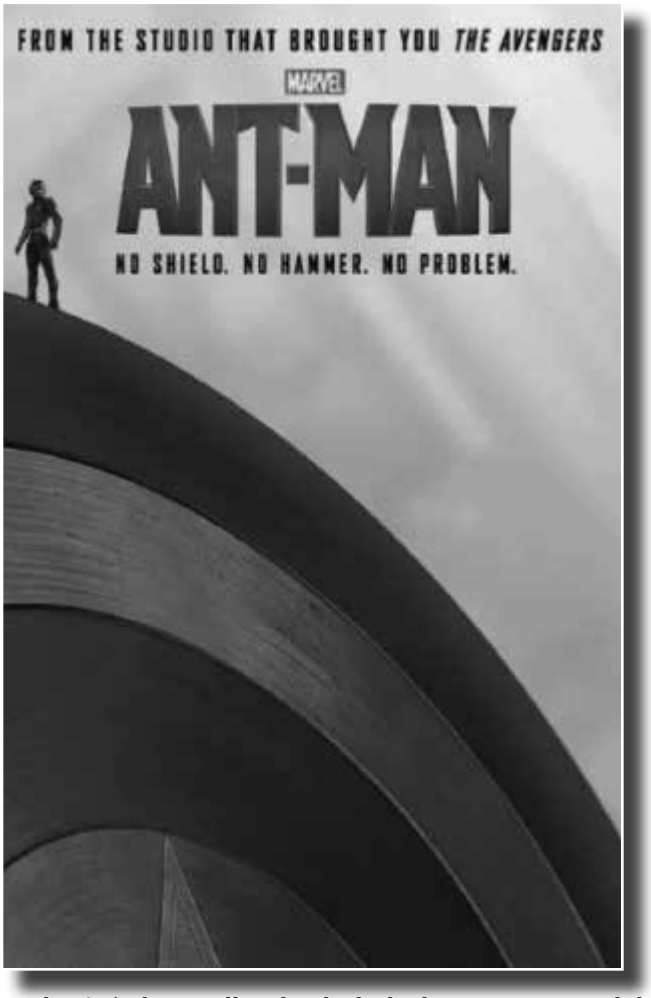
Best Films of 2015

by various

Lars Schmeink on *Advantageous*

***Advantageous* is director** Jennifer Phang's sophomore feature film, and similar to her debut *Half-Life* (2008) concentrates on the personal challenges of living in a harsh hypercapitalist near-future. The film follows single mother Gwen (Jacqueline Kim) and her daughter Jules (Samantha Kim) as Gwen faces a life-changing transition. Working as the 'face' of a biotechnology company, Gwen is released from her contract because she has become too old. Unable to secure another job, she fears for her daughter's future (expressed in the acceptance to a costly private school) and agrees to a procedure that transfers her consciousness to a younger host body.

In soft tones and carefully choreographed scenes, the film enacts Gwen's struggle with the discrimination, revealing the male-dominated and deeply sexist capitalist consumer culture that drives this (future) society. *Advantageous* concentrates on the individual fallout that this procedure has on the family, as Gwen 2.0 and daughter Jules renegotiate their relationship, trying to strike a new balance of dependency as Gwen fights to find her (new) identity. The film subtly challenges the ideal of Gwen's motherly sacrifice for Jules' potential future, revealing complex issues of embodiment and subjectivity, and thus subverts any transhumanist notions of eternal youth.



Glyn Morgan on The Marvel Cinematic Universe in 2015: *Avengers: Age of Ultron* and *Ant Man*

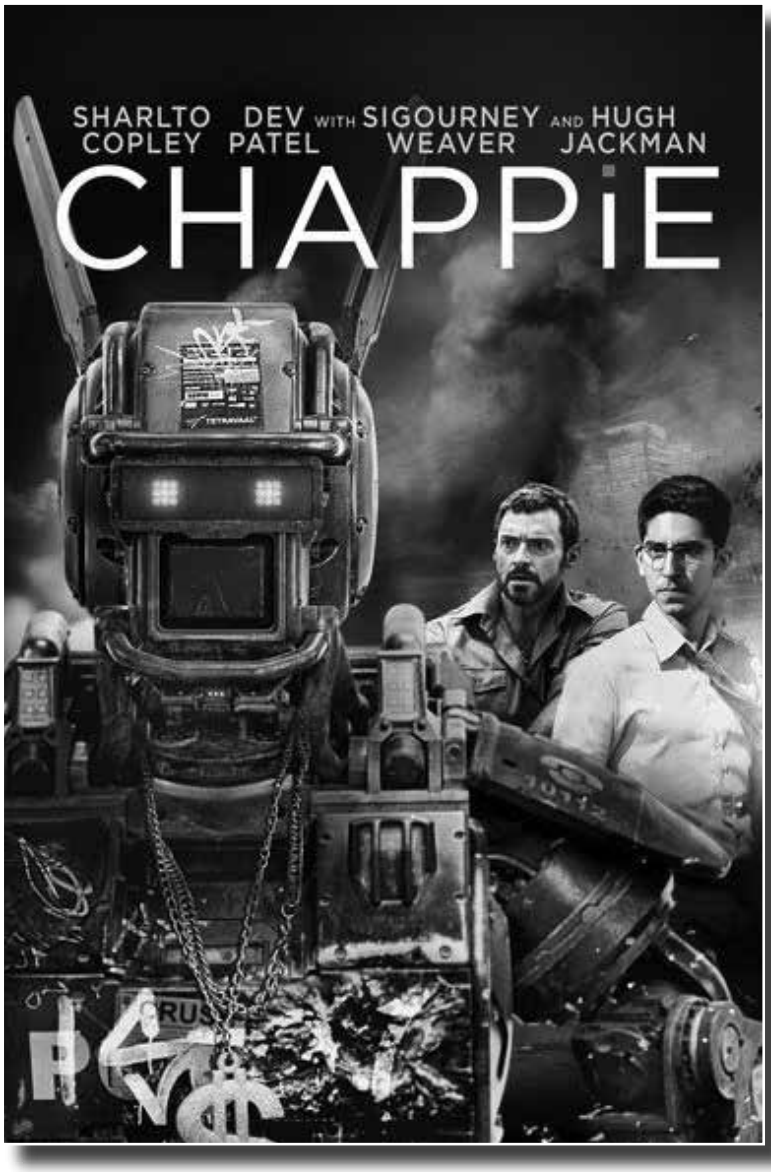
2014 saw the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) attain new heights with *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* and *Guardians of the Galaxy*, arguably the two best additions to the franchise thus far. It was always going to be a difficult act to follow then, going into 2015. The expectation was probably always going to be greater than the delivery, particularly with the first of the year's two films: the follow-up to what was, until two other films from this year* displaced it, the third highest grossing film of all time: 2012's *The Avengers*. Director Joss Whedon, with his deft hand for directing an ensemble cast, returned at the helm but ultimately *Avengers: Age of Ultron* couldn't match up to the films which immediately preceded it nor its titular predecessor. James Spader, in full mo-cap, was a delight as the titular AI/robotic villain but he lacked true menace and the Machiavellian charm of the series villain-gold-standard Tom Hiddleston's Loki. New additions to the MCU Quicksilver, Scarlet Witch, and Vision were all fine, but an already over-stuffed film inevitably felt too busy as it rushed from action sequence to action sequence. 2016's similarly hero-filled *Captain America: Civil War* will have to be wary of a similar fate. Whedon has talked in post about how much was left on the editing room floor and it certainly seemed there were key links in the chain missing (I understand Thor's role in a peculiar dream-sequence/vision/bath-in-a-cave was to set up all that is to come in the MCU but it still felt like a random diversion). Also, how many Marvel films have now ended with a large object falling out of the sky onto a city in the final action sequence?

By comparison to the final film of 'Phase 2', the first film of 'Phase 3' was practically devoid of expectation, or at least as much as any new addition to the MCU is these days. *Ant-Man* had something of a tortured route to the screen with the very public departure of director Edgar Wright (*Scott Pilgrim, Shaun of the Dead*, *Hot Fuzz*, and of course beloved TV series *Spaced*) despite having written the screenplay with fellow Brit and sf devotee Joe Cornish (*Attack the Block*). He was replaced with Peyton Reed, a director whose CV by contrast includes Jim Carrey comedy *Yes Man* and Jennifer Aniston-Vince Vaughan rom-com *The Breakup*. I was fully geared to be disappointed. I was almost disappointed that I wasn't disappointed… Despite hitting once again some familiar beats vis-à-vis the now formulaic hero origin tale, there were enough fresh additions to *Ant-Man* to keep it interesting. The humour felt largely balanced by the plot, and Michael Douglas made an interesting, if frustrating mentor as Ant-Man Snr. The shrinking mechanic was particularly well used (just don't think about it too much), particularly in the climactic fight sequence in which Paul Rudd's eponymous hero takes on the scenery chewing, China Miéville-stunt double, that is Corey Stoll's Darren Cross. It was of course hugely disappointing to see Evangeline Lilly's character, Hope, so obviously, and explicitly, sidelined for yet another white male superhero to ascend to his destiny, (especially given the deal around Spider-man's rights, and the filming of a webslinger reboot as part of the MCU has pushed back production on the much anticipated *Black Panther* and *Captain Marvel***) but also sadly inevitable.

Overall both films were fine additions to an ever-expanding universe but neither managed the heights of some of their predecessors. Indeed, Marvel's most interesting work in 2015 was on the small screen with the likes of *Daredevil*, *Jessica Jones*, *Agent Carter* and the increasingly fascinating *Agents of SHIELD*. The juggernaut keeps rolling, however, and shows no signs of slowing: there's plenty more where these came from.

**The Force Awakens* and *Jurassic World*.

** 2018 and 2019 respectively.



Andrew M. Butler on *CHAPPiE*

Blomkamp's *District 9* (2009) was an interesting parable set in Johannesburg a couple of decades after an alien ship had arrived, in a world where it was not entirely clear that Apartheid had ended. Blomkamp offers us sf from outside of Hollywood – but I fear tries to mimic Hollywood too much. *District 9* focuses on the hapless official, Wikus van de Merwe's (Sharlto Copley) attempt to evict the aliens from a township, forming an unlikely alliance with alien Christopher Johnson (Jason Cope) after he is infected by alien DNA. *CHAPPiE*, two films down the line, shares the same flaws as Blomkamp's debut – somewhat dodgy racial politics and an uneasy shift between after-the-event documentary and 'actual' events.

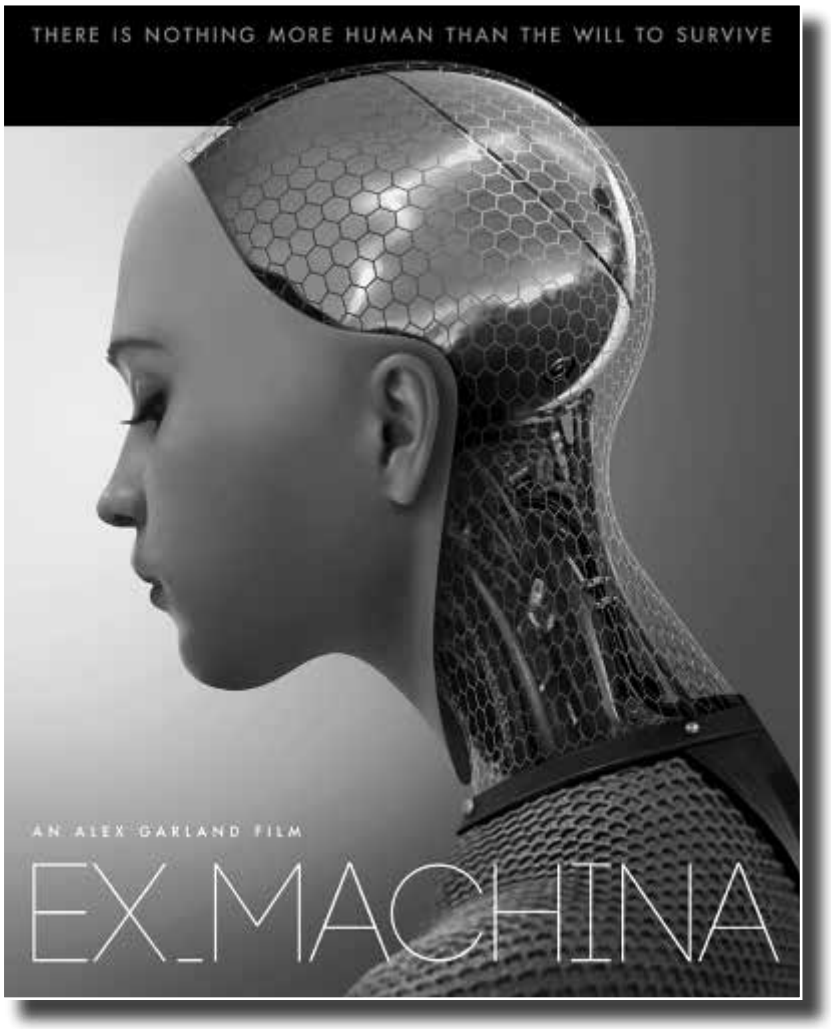
Here it is Copley who embodies the film's central effect, a RoboCop-esque android that is kidnapped along with its programmer Deon (Dev Patel from *Skins* and *Slumdog Millionaire*) by a gang of hapless drug-dealers (Yolandi (Yolandi Visser), Ninja (Ninja) and Amerika (Amerika)) who have to repay a huge debt to an Evil Drug Overlord (who must be evil because he is subtitled). Whilst Copley's performance was used as reference by the animators, apparently motion capture was not used for the CGI. It's a charming and amusing performance, but not exactly convincing as a robot.

Of course, there's breath-taking action and explosions, but there's the sense that we've seen it before and it's all faintly ridiculous. Ninja's happy to play mother to her substitute child, whilst Amerika's keen to make it into a gangster. There's snarling and shouting and nods here and there to *Blade Runner* and *Aliens*, much better films – and Hollywood star Hugh Jackman is joined by Sigourney Weaver, who I suspect was only on set for a couple of days. Blomkamp envisaged this film as part of a trilogy, but I don't see him getting the chance to make it – *District 10* seems to have vanished from view and that may be also for the best.

Mark Bould on *Crumbs*

Long ago, there was an apocalypse of some sort, and in its wake an infertile humanity is shutting up shop. Dying out, and not much caring about it. The dwarfish, hunchbacked Candy scours the ruins while his lover, Birdy, transforms industrial wreckage into artworks and fetishes. A storekeeper trades in artefacts from the lost world – a plastic Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle, a plastic baby Jesus, a children's Max Steel 'Force Sword', a copy of Michael Jackson's *Dangerous* LP – and recounts the legends in which they appear. Above these few remnants of humanity hangs a dormant space station. Candy, who half believes he is an alien, sets out to discover why this citadel in the sky is stirring back into life, and to find a way back to his homeworld. Instead, he has a violent encounter with a skinny black Santa Claus and finds a cinema screening *Süpermen Dönüyor*, Kunt Tulgar's 1979 Turkish Superman knock-off, which challenge him to remember a different past.

The first Ethiopian sf film, *Crumbs* is a key document of the anthropocene and a salvage-punk masterpiece. The lush green highlands around Wenchi crater-lake seem indifferent to humanity. The volcanic landscape and peculiar mineral formations around Dallol, a potash mine turned ghost-town in northern Ethiopia, *is* the Earth we are xeno-forming. We are the interlopers. We no longer belong here.



Anna McFarlane on *Ex Machina*

2015 started on a high for science fiction cinema with Alex Garland's directorial debut, *Ex Machina*. After his international success with his first novel *The Beach* (1996) Garland turned to screenwriting on films such as *Twenty-Eight Days Later* (2002), *Sunshine* (2007), and *Dredd* (2012). *Ex Machina* combines Garland's talent for a tight script with a clear directorial vision. The opening shots show sweeping views of mountainous landscape taken from a helicopter as computer programmer Caleb (Domhnall Gleeson) travels to meet technology genius and the CEO of the company he works for, Nathan (Oscar Isaac). Garland creates a claustrophobic environment in Nathan's isolated house, one that goes into lockdown whenever the power supply fails; which it does frequently, thanks to Ava (Alicia Vikander), an AI and Nathan's latest tech project. As Caleb subjects Ava to the Turing test, Garland draws comparisons between the ethical difficulties posed by AIs and women's oppression under patriarchy, a point hit home in the film's climax as the mute AI, Kyoko (Sonoya Mizuno), teams up with Ava to destroy their creator. The film's twists and turns rely heavily on the perfect performances of the four actors whose subtlety allows for misdirection and believability. Nathan walks a line between megalomania and laddish 'banter', Caleb is a naïf, but one who expects Ava to flatter his masculinity by conforming to his rescue narrative, and Kyoko successfully hides her intelligence and determination behind the stereotype of the silent, Eastern woman. Alicia Vikander in the lead role uses her experience as a ballet dancer to produce an intensely physical performance whose emotional power charms the audience as much as it does Caleb. The tagline is 'there is nothing more human than the will to survive', and this film is an excellent exploration of that theme, albeit not the first.

Tony Keen on *Fantastic 4*

Fox attempted to kick-start a new superhero franchise here, based on the classic Jack Kirby/Stan Lee Marvel comic. Unfortunately, they failed. According to director Josh Trank, *Fantastic 4* was the victim of studio interference, in the belief that it would improve the movie. It didn't, and *Fantastic 4* opened to harsh reviews and poor box office. The movie has serious structural problems. Changing the group dynamic of the original comic so that all four members are the same age raises questions – why is Ben Grimm in this government exploration project if he isn't a test pilot? what does Sue Storm see in Reed Richards if he's not a father figure? who thinks Jamie Bell can pass for eighteen? – that aren't satisfactorily answered. Characterisation is paper-thin, much of the plot is implausible, even for a superhero movie, and the pace is glacial. The effects sequences are nothing new. It's not quite as bad as the reviews at the time said, but it is ordinary and dull, the sort of movie superhero fans might have put up

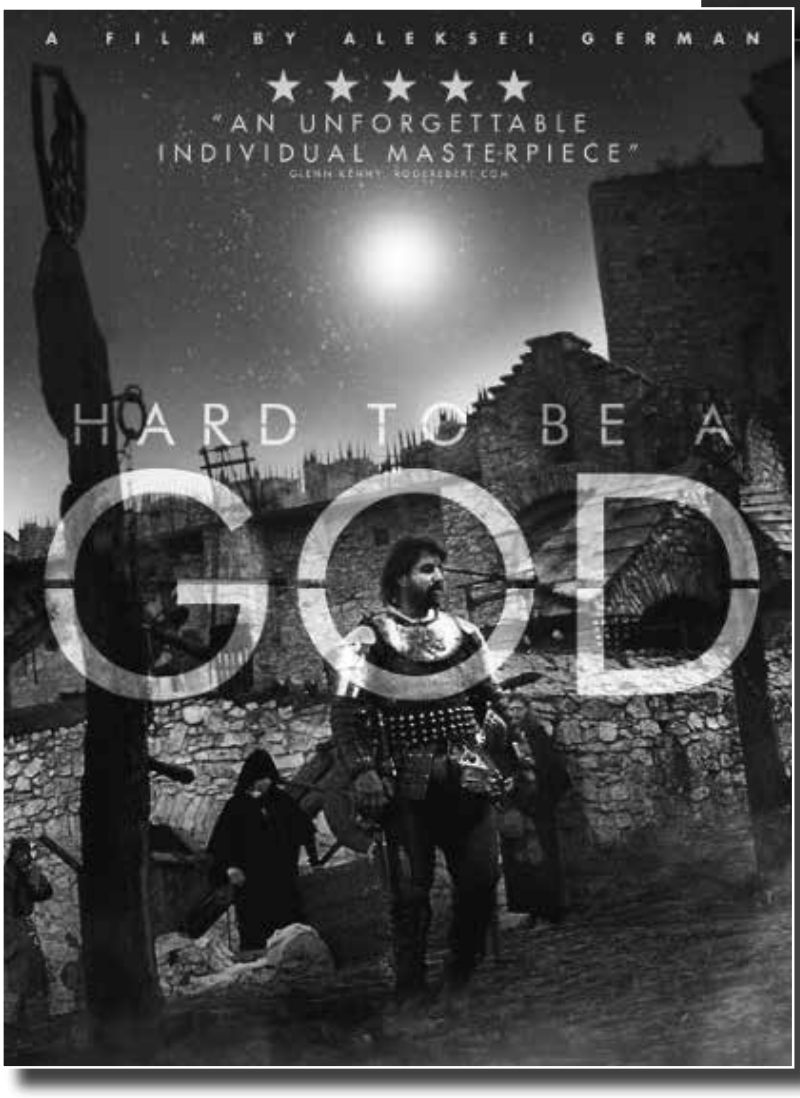
with a decade ago. But since then the Marvel Cinematic Universe, Christopher Nolan and Bryan Singer have shown what can be achieved in the superhero genre, and 'ordinary' no longer cuts it.

Andrew M. Butler on *Fehér isten* (*White God*)

This film begins with an extraordinary image of the post-adogalyptic: a girl in a blue hoodie, a brass instrument on her shoulder, cycling through empty streets and chased by a pack of hounds. The girl is Lili (Zsófia Psotta), former 'owner' of Hagan (Luke/Body), a pooch who has been kicked out of the family home and lost. Hagen, abandoned by the roadside, has so far evaded the evil dogcatchers but has fallen into the seedy and traumatising world of dog fights and is now named Max.

Mad Max: Furry Road.

All of this is leading towards a moment of revolution, of the mutts and mongrels of the world fighting back – and a series of more extraordinary visuals. The director, Mundruczó, has spoken in interviews about anti-immigrant backlashes; there's an anti-gypsy/Romany theme and the chimneys of the dog shelter put me in mind of concentration camps. It's always tempting – post *Animal Farm* and *Watership Down* (or indeed Aesop) – to read animal narratives as allegories and metaphors, and this is no exception.



It offers a warning against the mistreatment of those who are at times dependent on us. It explores the nature of companion species, those we break bread with, our mess mates – whilst Wagner's *Tannhäuser* is woven through the soundtrack, a tale of redemption refused, selfless sacrifice and salvation through love. It is an extraordinary experience.

Mark Bould on *Hard to Be a God*

From the moment it was published, Aleksei German was the Strugatsky brothers' choice to adapt their 1964 novel. Circumstances, ranging from the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia to another (disastrous, europudding of an) adaptation, got in the way. German finally started a six-year shoot in 2000, but died in 2013, leaving his namesake son to finalise the editing and soundtrack. The film gnaws on the novel's bare bones – human observers living secretly on a medieval-esque alien world, where an emerging Renaissance is being brutally expunged – and transforms them into an overwhelming encounter with the materiality of the universe. The humans are not some *Enterprise* Away Team, distinct from the place they visit. They are immersed in it. Mired. It is a world of ambiguous encounters and obscure events, shorn of the consolation of story. It is a world that is all rain and mud and fog and smoke and shit and piss

and snot and blood and sewage and stench and deformity and grotesquery and brutality and violence and death. The film, like the world, like the universe, demands endurance and grim humour. And, yet – thanks to Vladimir Ilin's and Yuriy Klimenko's black-and-white cinematography – it is also the most beautiful film you will ever see.

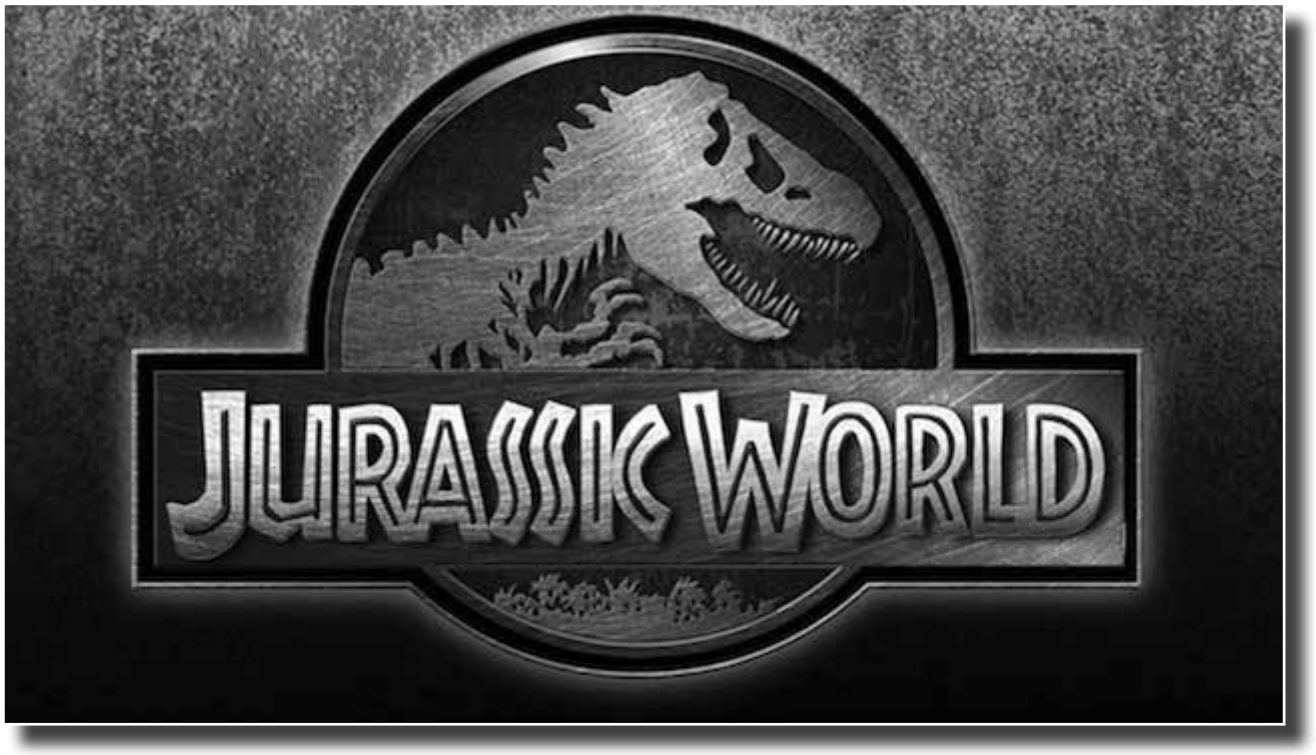
Jennifer Harwood-Smith on *Jurassic World*

The plot of *Jurassic World*, the fourth film set in Michael Crichton's dinosaur-cloning world, is as inevitable as a Hulk film; while everything seems to be in control at the start, the endemic hubris of the human race inevitably leads to the chaos of prehistoric monsters devouring all in their path. Despite this predictability, *Jurassic World* proves to be far more entertaining than expected, and not only for the expertly-realised special effects. For this entry in the series, the writers have dispensed with the ponderous scientific discussions of the earlier films and instead posited a fully functioning park, with an ecocritical focus on a partnership with the natural world, rather than ruling it. The Velociraptor pack is probably the most extraordinary example of this; in no way are the raptors actually safe - and again, hubris in regards to them is still rewarded by death - but their training suggests they can be negotiated with. In comparison, the unsocialised, inherently unnatural Indominus Rex is at odds not only with the humans of *Jurassic World*, but also with most of the dinosaurs. Despite this ecocritical approach, it remains an adventure film, and the dinosaur attacks are as thrilling as the first Tyrannosaurus Rex attack in *Jurassic Park*, and the Velociraptors are as terrifying as they were in 1993. All that remains is to give the Tyrannosaurus Rex more chances to wreak havoc in the next film; she is, after all, the true queen of the dinosaurs.

Andrew M. Butler on *Jurassic World*

2015 was the year of going back to the well at the risk of poisoning it – new entries in the *Star Wars* and *Mad Max* franchises after decades, further instalments for *The Avengers* (and not an Emma Peel in sight). We're back to the island of Jurassic Park, the theme park filled with genetically recreated dinosaurs, Michael Crichton's efficient reworking of his earlier androids-go-wrong-in-theme-park *Westworld*. We know what is going to happen, but perhaps that's the point: the sublimity of CGId dinosaurs, the struggle between work and family of an authority figure, the kids who will be put in jeopardy, a boo-hiss villain… And *Jurassic World* has an even more bad ass dinosaur than the original trilogy, the Indominus rex (no, really), cloned from an exotic mix of dinosaurs and tree frogs and who knows what. What could possibly go wrong?

Fortunately there's Owen (Chris Pratt) along for the ride as maverick dinosaur-whisperer (you can tell he's a maverick because he has a motorcycle and lives in a trailer home) who stands some chance of controlling the dinosaurs and might help spinster manager Claire Dearing (Bryce Dallas Howard) feel properly fulfilled if they get to live happily ever after. He's cool, but he's no Ian Malcolm. In the original film, a preteen girl got to save the day – here both the jeopardy kids are male and masculine values are reasserted in the film, along with family values. The frame narrative is about the impending divorce of the kids' parents; the kids have to learn to love each other as brothers and the *Indominus* has been raised alone, starving her of siblings and parents and the empathy such figures might create. Meanwhile the cloned dinosaurs are all female and Owen is distinctly an alpha male who knows how to treat the ladies. Although the film might really want this to be ironic.



But I guess we're meant to forget the gender politics and just wallow in the spectacle of recreated dinosaurs, to cheer at the fan services of nods to the earlier films, and to be taken in by the technology. Space is left open for an almost obligatory sequel – apparently scheduled for 2018.

Mike Grundman on *The Lobster*

I don't think 2015 saw any other dystopian jet-black comedies set in a bizarrely genteel yet heartless near-future where singletons are reviled so much they get 45 days at a relaxing spa hotel to find a partner or else be transformed into an animal (of their choice, you'll be relieved to hear). If there was, I guarantee it wasn't as good.

Colin Farrell plays the lead, pudgy and bespectacled, as he half-heartedly joins in with the hotel activities all designed to promote the benefits of coupledom. You try eating your breakfast with one hand manacled behind your back...much easier with two, eh? Part of the prescribed fun involves hunting in the nearby forest where the quarry are individuals who've failed to conform to society's rules - and for each refusenik brought down, guests receive an extra day's stay at the hotel, and thus more time to find that elusive life partner, the one, who is surely lurking there somewhere, near the breakfast buffet, the swimming pool or the dancefloor.

The whole delirious yet deadpan film is beautifully played by an international cast directed by decidedly maverick Greek director Yorgos Lanthimos (*Dogtooth*). The Irish setting places the film in the English-speaking world but this is a film with much to say about the nature of relationships in modern life, the compulsory feelings of inadequacy that single people are supposed to endure and the extent to which people will delude or harm themselves in order to enter into the blessed sanctuary of coupledom. One of 2015's best.

Mark Bould on *The Signal*

To begin with, it is indistinguishable from some indie road movie about a college-age couple; Nic – who has a degenerative disease – and Haley, breaking up as they drive across America with a friend, Jonah. There are thwarted, inarticulate emotions, misunderstood motivations, beautiful landscapes, small kindnesses. There are ellipses as the miles are steadily devoured, and a dreary indie soundtrack.

There is some scandal in their past, involving the computers at MIT and a hacker known as NOMAD. Disgruntled and cocky, Nic and Jonah decide to take a side-trip to track him down. Everything changes, and changes again, and again, as William Eubank – like some slightly emo alt-rock A.E. van Vogt – pulls the rug out from under your feet. Repeatedly. *The Signal* jumps from genre to genre and, when it hits sf, from sub-genre to sub-genre, and each switch involves a pitch-perfect change in visual style. There is something about it all that is not just confident, but cold and calculating. The film culminates in a conceptual breakthrough that is so unexpected and visually ravishing that it might take you a few moments to realise it is all breakthrough, devoid of meaningful concept. It is a pure formal move. Like the garage Kubrick is mocking you for being human.

Tony Keen on *Spectre* and *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.*

By an odd coincidence, 2015 brought two superspy movies that set part of their action in Rome.

Spectre is the most sfnal Bond movie since *Casino Royale*'s 2006 series reboot. The eponymous criminal-terrorist network, behind some of the more outlandish threats Bond faced in the 1960s and 1970s, is back though

its retconning as behind all the villains of the Daniel Craig era is awkward. More than that, with new government organizations and buildings on the Thames that don't really exist, *Spectre* feels like it's set in a sideways reality, almost as if it's in a superhero universe - and some of the poster shots of Craig appear to be trying to make him look as if he is wearing a superhero uniform.

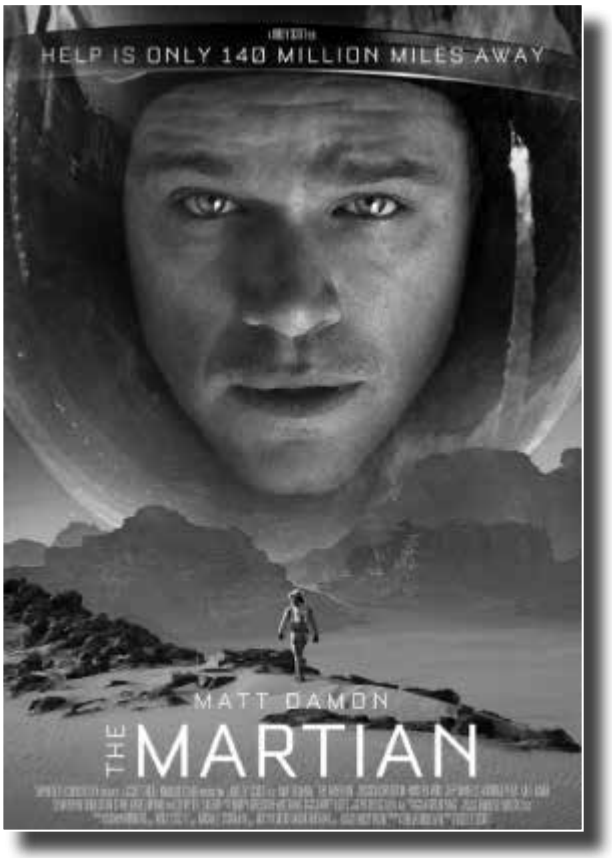
Unfortunately, after a bravura opening scene that references *Touch of Evil*, *Spectre* becomes Bond-by-the-numbers. The set-pieces are spectacular, but none feel like something that's not been seen before. The true identity of Christophe Waltz's character is very obvious. As in *Skyfall*, the female roles are underwritten. Director Sam Mendes had used *Skyfall* to reposition Bond in a more traditional and nostalgic mode, but it seems that he has little more to say in the franchise (he had originally not planned to return). This movie should have been glorious, but it ends up as merely run-of-the-mill.

Less eagerly anticipated, Guy Ritchie's *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* deliberately shies away from the more fantastic elements of the original TV series, instead preferring a Cold War action thriller approach, though one could argue for one of the MacGuffins that drives the plot being a bit sfnal. The resulting movie has little to do with *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* on television, in spite of Henry Cavill's strained imitation of Robert Vaughan – Ritchie has claimed never to have seen an episode, and he may not be alone there amongst those involved. But like the *Mission: Impossible* movies, *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* works well enough if taken on its own terms. Being a Ritchie movie, it is, of course, stylised almost into oblivion. What ought to be a climactic set-piece is dashed off quickly, as if the creators had run out of time and/or interest. Nevertheless, it gallops along with considerable energy and *joi de vivre*, so that, contrary to expectations, it ends up being a more effective movie than *Spectre*. And it is nice to see Hugh Grant, now too old to get to play Bond, at least landing the role, after a fashion, of M.

Amanda Dillon. Nostalgia All Over Again: *Star Wars Episode VII: The Force Awakens* and *The Martian*

JJ Abrams, on the heels of a much praised reboot of *Star Trek* and the controversial *Star Trek into Darkness*, has not so much remade the 1977 film as much as extended the original trilogy. Unlike George Lucas's prequels, Abrams manages to take the mythological underpinnings and workaday Saturday morning serial grubbiness of the Skywalker saga and pay homage to what went before with a brilliant mixture of CGI and practical effects, delivering an updated Star Wars for the twenty first century. We are given a female lead in Rey (Daisy Ridley), a brilliant turn from John Boyega as Finn, and the return of all but one of the major characters from the original series. There is more than just an attempt to hit the high points of the original series here: yes, there is a beautiful sense of nostalgia when old friends show up, when famous shots are repeated or inverted, but the film stands on its own two feet. There is joy in repetition, in familiarity, and in making both of these things new again.

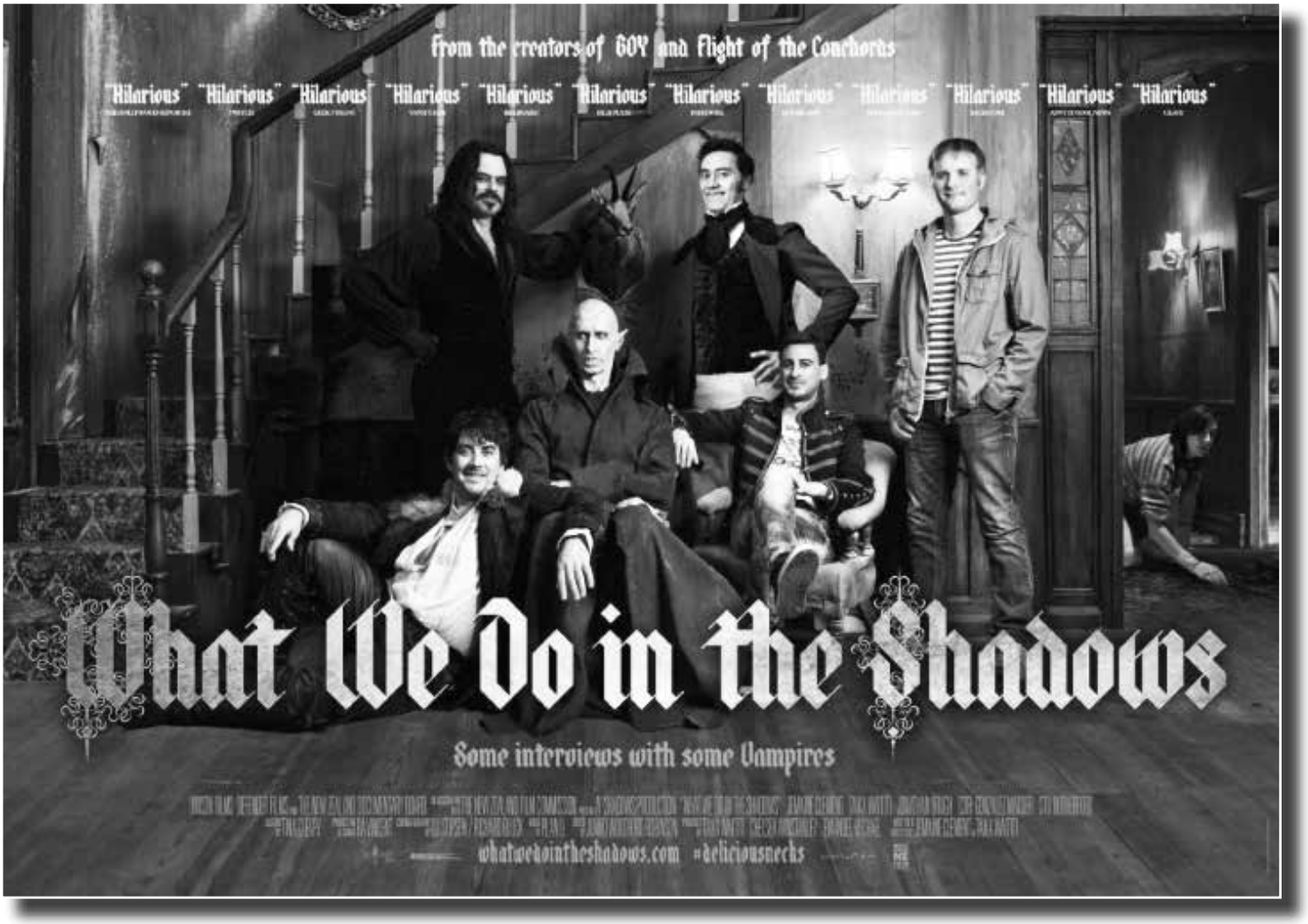
Ridley Scott's *The Martian*, meanwhile, takes the trend for nostalgia in a different direction. Based on Andy Weir's book of the same title, *The Martian* is not a familiar franchise but it *is* a familiar piece of hard science fiction, the likes of which are rarely seen in contemporary science fiction films. Mark Watney's (Matt Damon) story of survival on Mars is pure thought experiment, fleshed out with hard science and considerable technical expertise that the scientific community has largely praised for its accuracy and realism. Despite this, the centre of Scott's film, as was the case with the source novel, is actually that of Watney's struggle to survive and the toll it takes on him. Whether he is going to 'science the shit out of this' or declares himself the 'best botanist on Mars', it is this personality, and Damon's ability to carry a film almost entirely on his own, that makes both narrative and spectacle enthralling to watch. This film wears its nostalgia for classic hard science fiction proudly, but it has updated the genre with wise-cracking botanists and such a sublime climax that even those familiar with the novel will be caught up in the drama.



Reece Dinn on *Terminator: Genisys*

Terminator: Genisys, or to give it its true title, *Terminator 2: The Rehash*, is an entirely pointless film. Cited as being a true sequel to the original James Cameron films, Genisys is more like a worse re-imagining of them.

The film begins with John Connor (Jason Clarke) rallying his troops to lead a final attack on the main Skynet core, which is inconsistent with the events of *Terminator 3*, where Connor discovers that Skynet has no core. Regardless, they attack, defeat the Terminators and Skynet. Inside however they discover Skynet's time travel machine has been activated to send a Terminator back to kill Sarah



Connor, and thus bringing the story full circle. Kyle Reese (Jai Courtney), Connor's future father, volunteers to travel back and stop it. So back in time he goes. From here on the plot devolves into pure nonsense.

The writers display little knowledge of time travel theory as what ensues is a confusing mess, and the worst part is doesn't seem to even care, instead relying on nostalgia and rehashed scenes from the earlier films to keep it going. Somehow Sarah has her own Terminator (Arnold Schwarzenegger, of course), lovingly renamed Pops, the reason given for this is that in another timeline a Terminator was sent back to kill Sarah as a child. But this makes little sense whatsoever as the whole *Terminator* story would play out differently, meaning the first four films would have changed, which would lead to a different outcome, meaning nothing that has transpired would likely lead to the events that begin this very film. Nonsense.

Sarah and Kyle then travel to 2017 to stop Skynet activating. Sound familiar? In the future they find John Connor waiting for them, transformed into a Terminator, to try and stop them. Are you still following this?

The film concludes similarly to *Terminator 2*. Skynet is stopped, seemingly, the world is saved, and Pops, sacrifices itself to stop the bad Terminator. The only difference is that Kyle and Sarah get together, but we don't see if they conceive John. The viewer is left wondering what on earth they've just sat through, and why a franchise that was really great was allowed to become so awful and absurd.

Anna McFarlane on *What We Do In the Shadows*

What We Do In the Shadows which received a release in the UK and US in 2015, was hotly and perhaps apprehensively awaited by fans of television show *Flight of the Conchords* (2007-09), which featured Jemaine Clement as half of a New Zealand music-comedy duo trying to make it in America. *What We Do in the Shadows* is told in a mockumentary style that can often fail to sustain a feature length film with *This is Spinal Tap* (1984) being the most famous exception. Happily, *What We Do in the Shadows*, directed and written by Clement and Taika Waititi, is warm and funny throughout. The film tells the story of a group of four vampires living in New Zealand: their hunting grounds, love lives, and their friendships with new vampire, Nick (Cori Gonzalez-Macuer), and his non-vampire friend Stu (Stu Rutherford). The film shows the vampires' rivalry with a local group of werewolves led by Anton – played by Rhys Darby, previously known as Murray Hewitt, the manager of the Flight of the Conchords in the show of the same name. As werewolf leader he is the alpha male but uses his position of authority to offer his followers self-help style support to overcome their baser urges, a hilarious subplot that will soon take centre stage in a reported sequel to be entitled *We're Wolves*. The film is certainly the funniest horror-comedy of the year, and perhaps the funniest film of the year in any genre.

Best Science Fiction Games of 2015

"Moving Forward While Standing Still"

by Conor McKeown

Another Year On...

Given the dependence upon technology in the majority of science fiction narratives the videogame seems a fitting medium in which to tell these stories. Over the years there have been a number of undeniable classics that have made this hypothesis ring true, too many to begin to list, but videogames have allowed us to explore the dystopian, fantastic and, on occasion, the human elements of science fiction in a new and engaging manner. 2015 was no exception with many excellent titles that continued to push the boundaries of science fiction, asking questions about the nature of exploration, advancement and their ramifications upon the human mind and soul. While these titles will be discussed shortly, it is first worth mentioning the other type of science fiction videogame that continues to be made and, perhaps, always will be. These games prove that, for some, the familiar tropes and themes of science fiction adventures can act as a crutch for the uninspired, excusing all manner of impossible technologies and superhuman abilities. *Star Wars Battlefront*, *Halo 5* and *Evolve* all displayed the same approach to ray guns, alien races and other planets whereby one is continuously left with the feeling that if the developers pushed the right button these trappings of the fantastic could simply be exchanged for something more immediately familiar to planet Earth. These games are by no means bad and should be sought out if they take your interest but they are presented here for their superficial use of science fiction settings and elements for the sake of convenience. They represent the litmus test against which the other games I will discuss will be judged. While the following titles are all far from perfect, they represent an attempt at taking next steps into an exploration of ideas particular to a medium; they use the characteristics of their form to push the conventions of their genre and particular themes therein.

The year's most pivotal sf game was undoubtedly *Fallout 4*. Rapidly becoming one of the most lucrative games of all time, garnering both critical and popular acclaim, this seventh instalment of the franchise perfects some of the older tenets of the series while picking up a bug or two (perhaps I should say, 'radbug' given the context) along the way. This latest iteration of the retro-futuristic series sees the player taking the character of a member of a 1950s-style nuclear family in the year 2077. As usual with the franchise, it isn't long before starry-eyed visions of a seemingly post-scarcity paradise give way to a nuclear apocalypse wrought from American Cold War-era paranoia. The destruction of the world (or at least the United States) pits the player into a radiation ravaged wasteland attempting to find your kidnapped son with the help of your trusty canine companion, Dogmeat. For the most part, *Fallout 4* delivers healthy portions of what long-time fans have come to expect from the series. The game is still filled with the charismatic dialogue, detailed scavenging mechanics and wastelands that leave the player with the feeling of a believable post-nuke ecosystem in which humans are no longer on top of the food chain. The game's central questions revolve around themes of family, isolation, totalitarianism and the need to redefine humanity in the face of cloning and other transhuman technology. This depth made it a game that was difficult to forget and even more difficult to stop playing.

In spite of the sweeping plot's intellectual rigor, there was a lot I found hard to like. It is worth noting that throughout the development of the seven titles, the intellectual property of *Fallout* has changed hands numerous times and there is something about *Fallout 4* that reminds me of the often frustrating *Fallout 3*. Although the now defunct Black Isle studios were behind the first two main titles in the series, both this game and *Fallout 3* are the property of Bethesda studios of *The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim* and *Oblivion* fame. Of course, these are good hands for an intellectual property to be in given that *Skyrim* was, for many, a pinnacle achievement of videogaming history. However, if you happen to be one of those few people for whom the tell-tale signs of Bethesda design are deterrents (if for example, you cannot stand a central plot in which you, for some reason, are the 'chosen one') then this latest *Fallout* may fail to please in some respects. One issue I couldn't ignore and cannot help but blame on the Bethesda team was the somewhat oppressive narrative frame used to make the game into a cohesive whole. Though I cared much more about some of the more witty non-playable characters I was ostensibly searching for my lost and beloved son. On more than one occasion I was non-too-subtly reminded that I was supposed to be deeply invested in his wellbeing. While the game's ending reveals that, in many ways, getting lost

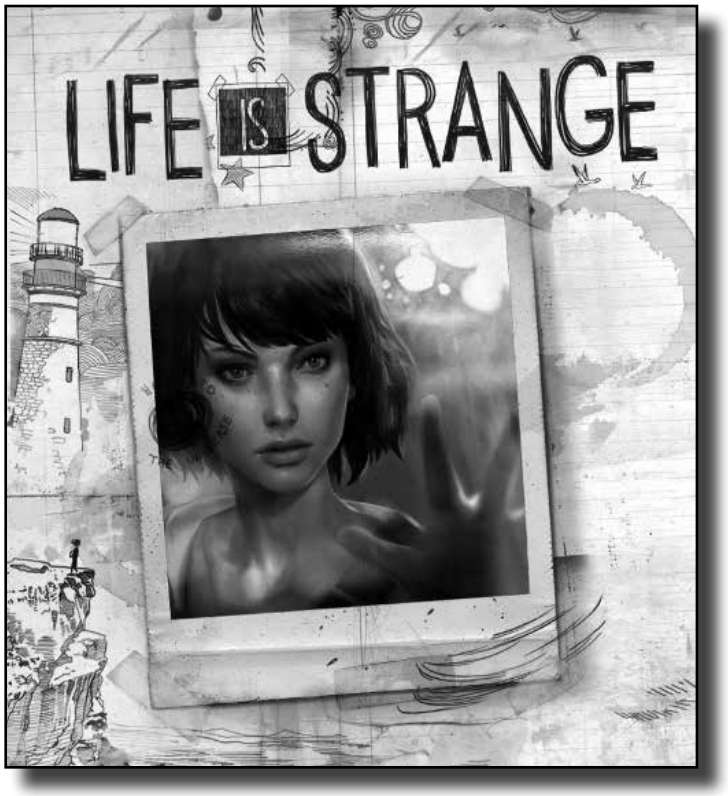
in the wasteland and losing your original motivation is the point, I found the prospect of exploring a near endless but still detailed expanse an enticing enough prospect without having to be told my name, my partner's name and that I was a loving parent before I even made it into the game proper. What's more, none of these characteristics ever really seemed to fit how *I* chose to play the game. This niggle became most evident in the continuous attempts to thread all the various possible actions I could take into one logical story. In the end, this resulted in all the different cultures I met seeming to share disarmingly similar goals; each tribe wished to topple one or another of the other tribes and each one needed me to play a certain role. Given that I had spent most of my play time having my dog fetch things, I was unsure why that was. Rather than being given the feeling of a vast open world that had been scorched by nuclear war, I was rather left with the feeling that I was living in a small village. Everyone seemed to know each other and I couldn't help but feel they had all been talking about me behind my back. Far from bringing to mind the sprawling worlds of science fiction classics, I was reminded of a Millington Synge play as this surprisingly closely knit world shuddered from the impact of my arrival. This, of course, is only subjective criticism as in many other ways *Fallout 4* is an astoundingly satisfying post-apocalyptic survival adventure.

Shifting tack slightly, 2015 also offered up one of the most interesting advances in sf gaming in recent memory. *Life is Strange* eschews videogame conventions of genocidal characters with bodies like an industrial-waste bin in favour of a less beaten path. Players take control of troubled but talented teenager Maxine Caulfield (spot the none-too subtle reference). Opening with Max having a nightmare that involves a superstorm consuming her home town of Arcadia Bay, players are soon witness to a traumatic event that unlocks Max's unexplained abilities to travel through time. Following through five different episodes, the player must help Max save the life of her best friend Chloe Price and learn the full extent of the consequences of her superhuman actions. On the face of it, *Life is Strange* falls somewhere between a 'point-and-click' adventure game and a playable movie, allowing players a certain freedom to explore environments and learn about the characters that inhabit this virtual world. The playable movie elements, however, keep this story firmly on the rails so that you can never venture too far for too long without being forced to move the story forward in exactly the way the developers intended. As mentioned above, *Life is Strange* allows the player to rewind time to attempt different solutions to problems. However, unlike in other games where time-travel mechanics are inserted to provide players with new solutions to in-game dilemmas in *Life is Strange* these mechanics are really there for you to come to terms with the weight of your choices. The division between what players may expect of a time-travel videogame and what the game provides does cause a few problems. While the point of the game seems to be to learn how actions are interconnected, your actions appear to be of little consequence within the game overall. In its finale, in contrast to the many dozens of branching paths your previous choices may have led you to predict, the game offers up only two possibilities, neither of which I found at all satisfactory. Perhaps it is to the game's credit, but the hard lesson our character was supposed to learn was one that I attempted *not* to learn by replaying the game again and again in a desperate attempt to find any other resolution. In all the game felt like it was created by cutting up several different drafts of one whole story and reading them simultaneously. On replaying, the novelty of the above-par voice acting wore thin and I just wanted to *play* the game rather than be told how. That being said, *Life is Strange* is, above all, a game about friendship that pushes against the often gendered and unwelcoming videogame stereotypes. What's more, it uses its science fiction magical

realist edge to drive home its messages about the entwined nature of reality and the insignificance of human will. While I have time travelled in games before, I have never done so wondering what it is that I am changing and whether I would have been happier had I just stayed put.

In line with *Life is Strange*'s subdued example, *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* delivers sf in a calm and introspective manner. Taking after its cohorts in the 'walk 'em up' genre, *The Stanley Parable* and *Dear Esther*, *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* places the player within an idyllic but deserted English village that they must explore in an effort to piece together the central puzzle of the game: namely, what happened to all the people? For the uninitiated, gamers and non-gamers alike, 'walk-'em-up' is the, not always flattering, term for a recent slew of games characterised by first-person perspective game play and an emphasis on exploration and discovery over specific puzzles, missions or objectives. While similar to early titles such as *Myst*, these games abandon short-term puzzles blocking progress, favouring instead the slow reveal of an overarching mystery. As such it is no surprise that *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* uses the player's natural curiosity to propel the narrative forward without unnecessary intervention. This is accomplished with enough skill and nuance that the free moving player can piece together the entire story by themselves with only occasional scripted events. Throughout the, admittedly gorgeous, game we are drawn like insects towards bright glowing shapes, sometimes in almost human form. This behaviour is encouraged as coming into contact with them provides us with hints about what could have happened in the fictional town of Yaugton. Without the added complications of combat or excessive puzzle solving the game is a relaxing, if unsettling, experience akin to a multisensory novel as much as a videogame. Though the game has received criticism for being a little too dry, players will have the best experience if they leave their expectations at the door. *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* excels at using its limited mechanics to great effect. By walking, exploring and – most importantly – listening you come to organically appreciate the full extent of the supernatural occurrences that just preceded your arrival.

Of course there are lingering questions; who 'you' are remains unanswered as far as I can tell. While this may be



unsatisfactory for some, as a fan of science fiction classics in the form of recovered post-apocalyptic journals, I was never really bothered by this. The game's greatest strength is also its biggest weakness as, at times, I was crying out for the painstakingly well-established mood to be pushed just over the edge by a surge of action. That the game never resorts to such tactics did, however, add a sense of class to the proceedings. Every time the central antagonist 'the pattern' didn't show up around a corner to jump-scare me, I was reminded that I was playing a grown-up's videogame and grinned smugly. I wanted to show the game to my non-player friends and to my parents, hoping to get them involved in this novella-and-then-some experience. It makes one wonder if, perhaps, the 'walk 'em up' is to videogames as documentary is to cinema? By withholding action the player is never confronted with a tacky alien or laser-blaster to pierce their suspension of disbelief, and by setting the events of the story in the 1980s the player could quite happily entertain possibilities of government cover-ups without wondering why no one tweeted about it. I left the game with a palpable sense that what I had just witnessed could have been real, could have been covered up and could likely happen again.

Switching to a more recognizably Lovecraftian tone, *Soma* manages to achieve much of what the above titles were reaching for while adding horror, suspense and challenge to the mix. Ostensibly a John Carter-style story of an everyman being transported to an unfamiliar world, *Soma* sees head wound victim, Simon Jarrett, transported to the future as the result of experimental treatment. What follows is

again a discussion of artificial intelligence, the nature of humanity and the extinction of the human race, this time in an altogether more focused and streamlined approach. While not introducing anything beyond now familiar sf and cyberpunk motifs, I was impressed at just how clued up the team at Friction Games appeared to be as they introduced and mashed together concepts. For instance an important story object is 'the ARK', a Matrix-like virtual world that was designed, not to enslave, but to save the human race in a digital form after planetary conditions became unlivable. With regards playability, the game uses the somewhat dichotomous relationship between the player and our on-screen avatar to full effect, prompting users to question the relationship between the brain function and action. At one point in the game having been subjected to a form of cloning that duplicates rather than replaces the mind, you are asked whether or not to kill off the human form you had previously inhabited. I was shocked at the attachment

I felt for a form that I had previously seen very little of and forcefully reminded of the destruction of the companion cube in *Portal*. Though I chose to spare myself, I was left wondering what would have occurred had I chosen differently. *Soma*'s combat with biomechanical monsters comes with a twist familiar to those who played Frictional's previous game, *Amnesia: The Dark Descent*. Though you control the game in a similar manner to a first-person shooter, you cannot sustain eye-contact with the beasts for fear of death. While it brings a welcome dose of adrenaline, whether or not this form of slasher-movie style horror needed to be added to *Soma* is another question entirely. The game surprises you with conflict at the least opportune and most tonally conflicting moments. Perhaps it was just this reviewer's opinion, but when I seemed moments away from the conclusion having to challenge more of the same monsters to more of the same combat from earlier in the game was an annoyance, not a thrill. That being said, it was a nice reminder that the game had not forgotten to provide me with *something* playable rather than switching into full playable film territory.

On the whole, though the year was troubled with business as usual for some, other game designers went the extra mile to present games that were as innovative as they were enthralling. While there are a wealth of games developers willing to go over the same old ground, simply reskinning familiar game systems with a 'sci-fi themed' makeover, many others have seen the potential for the particularities of game design to lend themselves to making an experience that adds depth to the narrative they allow to unfold. Not all of these attempts have been successful of course and those listed above are not without their flaws, certainly. They provide, however, the promise of something better; of steps taken in the right direction, providing users with experiences of something beyond the realms of the familiar and the everyday. When these games are at their best they are provocative and imbued with that particular ability of science fiction to rupture the familiar and expose the unknown. There are several smaller games that deserve honourable mentions such as *Transistor* which, though originally released in 2014, was reincarnated as a mobile game this year and provided a thought provoking examination of a world not just digitised but encoded by culture. Another game definitely deserving mention was *Kerbal Space Program*, a fantastic game more science than fiction giving players a comical but educational insight into the realities of space ship construction. While technically only released this year, I have been playing it in its various early access forms since 2012 and didn't wish to go over old ground. Beyond all of these great titles, the year just past provided us with hints of what is to come. With new interfaces the HTC Vive and Oculus Rift promising immersive virtual reality experiences and games such as *No Man's Sky* promising to provide players with quintillions of different worlds to explore through the use of innovative technology known as 'deterministic procedural generation', 2016 is already shaping up to be a landmark year. To my mind, while this year provided users a lot to contend with, a lot to play and explore, it hinted at the continuing development of the science fiction genre through interactive fiction. Above all, this year asked us to continue looking ahead and never stop moving forward.

Best of 2015 in Young Adult SF

by Ashley Armstrong

ONCE AGAIN YOUNG Adult (YA) fiction has been the talking point of many conversations about our reading habits this year, from the discussion about the need for more diversity within the genre to the growing question 'Who is YA actually for?'. With some books getting bolder in their exploration of sex and other mature themes, it seems like the genre itself may be separating into two separate genres; teen books for those under the age of 16 and young adult where authors are allowed to be a little more risqué.

It was once again the blockbuster movies such as *Insurgent*, *The Scorch Trails* and *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay: Part Two* breaking box office records that helped catapult the genre into mainstream awareness and with even more movie and TV adaptations expected in 2016 including Cassandra Clare's *Shadowhunters*, Rick Yancey's *The 5th Wave* and the continuation of the Divergent series, it appears that this trend of adapting young adult books into major blockbusters won't be slowing down anytime soon.

I said last year that the genre was growing from strength to strength and, whilst this is still true in terms of contemporary stories, for sf in YA, 2015 felt like a little bit of a stalling point. Don't get me wrong, we still had some fantastic releases but I feel like 2015 was lacking in some strong, classic sf stories and only one or two that stayed faithful to the genre. In fact I would go so far as to say the without a couple of major series in the genre that we wouldn't have any sf in YA at all; the genre is definitely starting to lean towards being more fantasy-based.

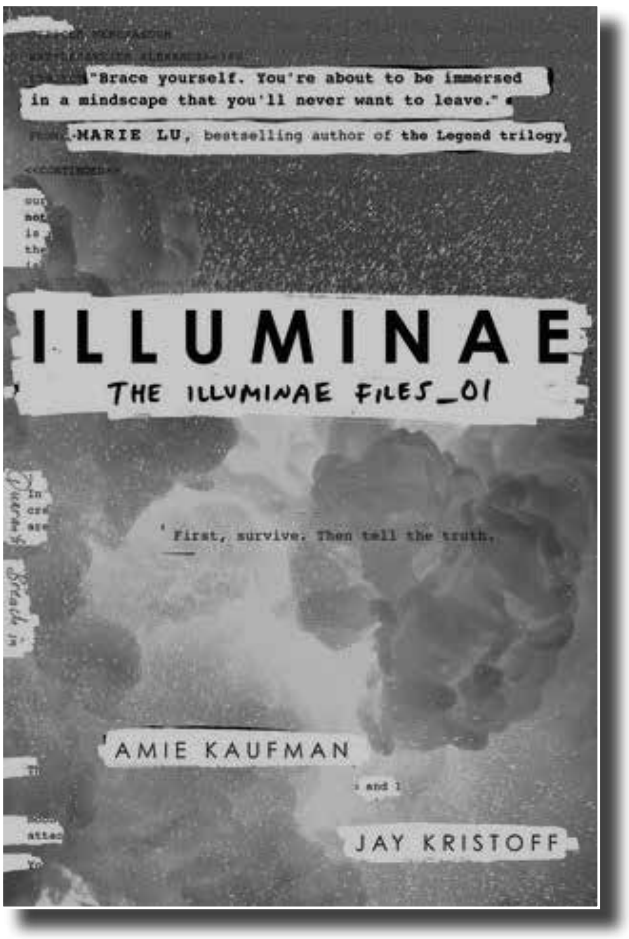
2015 was an astounding year for fairy tale re-tellings with a slew of authors releasing their own take on classics, including major hitters like Sarah J. Maas with *A Court of Thorns and Roses,* a dark and delicious take on *Beauty and the Beast* and plenty from debut authors; such as *Mechina* by Betsy Cornwell, *Wrath and the Dawn* by Renee Ahdieh and *1001 Nights* by E.K. Johnson, both of which retell *Arabian Nights*. We've had some amazing new books released by the likes of Pierce Brown, Ransom Riggs, Rainbow Rowell, Jennifer Armentrout, Kiera Cass, Leigh Bardugo and Marie Lu. There have also been a few awesome debut YA titles showcasing some amazing new talent, such as Victoria Aveyards's *Red Queen*, Sabaa Tahir's *An Ember In the Ashes* and *The Girl At Midnight* by Melissa Grey.

It's also been a year of finales with Marrisa Meyer's Lunar series coming to an explosive conclusion in *Winter* and Amie Kaufman and Megan Spooner's Starbound series ending with *Their Fractured Light* and Susan Ee concluding her Penryn series with *End of Days.*

Despite me complaining about the lack of sf in the genre, there are actually some stand out sf books from 2015. They vary in subject from futuristic fairy-tale retellings to grand space operas to an *X Men*-like race of silver elites. Here are some of the best books I think the year had to offer:

Illuminae *by Amie Kaufman and Jay Kristoff*

Illuminae by Amie Kaufman and Jay Kristoff is visually spectacular, a beautiful and immersive book. It's a space opera told from many points of view, through a variety of unique mediums – collections of emails, schematics, military



files, IMs, diary entries and more. It's a heart-stopping, high octane ride about lives interrupted, the price of truth and the courage of everyday heroes.

The year is 2575, and two rival megacorporations are at war over a planet that's little more than an ice-covered speck at the edge of the universe. This is Kady and Ezra's home planet and it has just been attacked by the mega-corporation, Beitech. Forced to flee onto separate space-crafts, what follows is a race across space to make it safely out of Beitech's reach. But as Kady hacks into a tangled web of data to find the truth it's not long before she realises something more sinister is at work, and, she's willing to do whatever it takes to get to the bottom of it.

Despite the fact that the book is pretty unconventional in its writing method, it doesn't take away from being able to connect to the characters; you still feel their emotions, the conflict and the rise in tension throughout the book. You are still able to build up a picture of who each character is; Kady the brave, fierce and intelligent hacker and Ezra, the hilarious, romantic, and loyal solider. Through their IMs you see their flirty, snarky banter, their fears for each other and how much they care for one another.

This book also has AIDAN, one of the best AI you'll ever meet. He's neither bad nor is he very good, he speaks in a very poetic tone, void of any emotion, but as the story progresses you start to feel like he actually feels, and cares about human life. He is definitely one of the best things about this book.

Illuminae though is not just a love story, it's a space opera (with the added bonus of zombies). It places you at the helm handing you all the crumbs to try and figure out what is happening to these poor survivors. *Illuminae* surpassed all of my expectations, the book itself is stunning, a visual treat with beautiful artwork and strong relatable characters. It won't disappoint.

The Red Queen *by Victoria Aveyard*

The Red Queen may be mistaken for being another YA dystopian story and whilst it is like its predecessors, it's highly enjoyable, telling a gripping tale of the imbalance of power in society and a fight for a new world and a better life.

The world is divided by blood – the reds and the silvers. The Reds are commoners, ruled by a Silver elite in possession of god-like superpowers. Mare Barrow, our fiery protagonist, bleeds red yet she finds she possess a deadly power of her own, one that threatens to destroy the Silvers' perfect society.

Mare finds herself trapped in the Silvers' palace playing a dangerous game with so much intrigue and deception that every character's action, every deed and every whisper is questioned, for '*anyone can betray anyone'.* Mare is an admirable heroine who is brave, intelligent yet vulnerable at the same time, she is rough around the edges and was very much flawed.

The Red Queen is a strong debut, a fast read with the political intrigue of *Game of Thrones*, the action of *The Hunger Games* with the added bonus of *X Men*-like powers. It's

basically an *X Men* high fantasy. The world-building is remarkable and vivid, and combines modern sf elements whilst remaining high fantasy. Victoria Aveyard delivers an imaginative thriller, an exhilarating and action-packed story, with twist and turns that you won't see coming.

Spinning Starlight *by R. C. Lewis*

Spinning Starlight by R.C. Lewis is part of the very popular fairy tale re-telling trend in YA fiction at the moment. It is based on a Hans Christian Andersen classic, *The Wild Swans*. It is a re-shaping of a legend in a futuristic sf setting.

Spinning Starlight tells the story of Liddi Jantzen, the youngest child of a very famous inventor. In a world where technology rules the Jantzens are the most powerful family in the galaxy. With eight older brothers, Liddi worries she won't live up to the high expectations of being a Jantzen, she is the over-shadowed girl in a family of technological geniuses. Unexpectedly Liddi gets pulled into a complicated situation she has no idea how to handle, one that leaves her with an implant in her vocal cords and the wrong move (or word) could end up killing her brothers. When Liddi escapes to another world, she has to find a way to fix the problem and save her brothers, but without the use of her voice.

I thought the character development was well done. Liddi grows from a frightened young girl with doubts about what she is capable of to a strong young women who has learnt how to communicate despite some pretty big obstacles to overcome. Despite some minor flaws in pacing and world building I really enjoyed Liddi's story. One of my favourite aspects of the story was despite all the technological

advancements Liddi can't read or write which, despite being integral to the story arc, is an intriguing idea in itself, that one day we will become so visual and dependent on 'Siri'- or 'Cortina'-like technology to control our lives that we will phase out our written language.

With space travel, strange portals, aliens and a whole bunch of science Lewis has managed to create a beautiful retelling of a classic tale, which weaves the original story and the sf elements in an interesting way. I definitely recommend you try this clever and spectacular retelling for yourself.

Golden Son *by Pierce Brown*

Golden Son is the second book in the *Red Rising* series by Pierce Brown. Two years after the events of *Red Rising*, Darrow has finished with the Institute and is now in the Academy, where the Golds are tested further to see who is fit to lead. With betrayal around every corner Darrow will have to fight to continue his work to bring down Society from within.

The better a book is the more difficult I find to write a review about it; *Golden Son* puts *Red Rising* to shame! It's a jaw-dropping, fast-paced roller-coaster ride of emotion, full of intrigue and courage that will leave you hanging until the very last page. Most sequels suffer from 'second book syndrome' but *Golden Son* definitely doesn't have this problem, if anything it ups the stakes, it had everything I loved about *Red Rising* but on a much grander scale. You'll fall in love with characters you ought to hate and be screaming at the

incredible twists. *Golden Son* is utterly amazing, a life-or-death tale of vengeance with an unforgettable hero. If you haven't started this series yet, I can't recommend it enough.

Publishers have noted the success of YA fiction in recent years and its correlation to the rise of sf and fantasy in popular culture, with big blockbuster movies helping to increase book sales and interest in the genre. Whether you are a teenager or an adult the core themes of a YA book resonate with us all. YA novels externalise evil as an enemy that can be seen and understood, whether that's as a monster that can be defeated or, as is more popular now, an evil in the world the character lives in, from political and economic repression to a world that has escalated to such technological advances that they are lost within it.

Whether you want a futuristic fairy-tale retelling, an epic space opera told through a unique medium, or to overthrow a corrupt government, the books I've chosen have something for everyone.

2015 was an amazing year for publishing, we said goodbye to some of our favourite series, said hello to some outstanding new ones and continued on with stories of some of our favourite characters. We still have lots to look forward to though in 2016, with the epic conclusion of Pierce Brown's *Red Rising* trilogy, the second book in Victoria Aveyeard's *Red Queen* series and the start of a brand new series from Cassandra Clare. YA isn't for everyone just as science fiction in general isn't but there is one thing that's certain; its popularity with all ages certainly isn't showing signs of slowing down.

recurrent: SEQUENTIALS

Laura Sneddon

2015 in Science Fiction Comics

THE TRENDS OF comics and films are often closely aligned, and this was especially true in the year of our lord, *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*. While the world continued to dissect the 90-second teaser trailer at the end of 2014, reports came in that Marvel's new *Star Wars #1* comic by Jason Aaron (*Scalped*, *Southern Bastards*) and John Cassaday (*Planetary*) had already sold more than one million copies in pre-orders.

Sure enough the end of year reports confirm that the January-released *Star Wars #1* was the best selling monthly comic of 2015 in the US market, with four other *Star Wars* comics grabbing top ten positions. Outside of licensed properties and Disney mouse ears though, there were plenty of other space-age stirrings in the comic book world.

Image Comics in particular, known as the primary rival to the DC and Marvel powerhouses, put out a number of critically acclaimed new and exciting SF works.

Michael Moreci (*Burning Fields*) and Vic Malhotra's *Roche Limit* finished its initial 5 issue arc, with each subsequent arc smartly re-titled as separate books of the same series. The billionaire Langford Skaargard promised to lead humanity to the stars but twenty years later his colony situated on the cusp of a mysterious energy anomaly is decaying from within. Amidst the crime and rot of the underworld, our protagonists seek to track down a missing woman and unravel some frightening secrets.

The twin loves of *Blade Runner* and *Dark City* bleed through the pages while Malhotra underscores the claustrophobia of the settlement with glorious spreads of the system as it sits in space. It's an intriguing start to an ongoing and successful series.

Image continued to fire out hit after hit throughout the year: *Drifter* by Ivan Brandon (*Viking*) and Nic Klein, described as *Unforgiven* meets *Dune*, and one of the most captivating comics of the year; the hilarious *Kaptara* by Chip Zdarsky (*Sex Criminals*) and Kagan McLeod, a homage to wild and wacky sci-fantasy cartoons and gorgeously drawn; Corinna Bechko (*Deep Gravity*) and Gabriel Hardman's (*Kinski*) clever political thriller *Invisible Republic*, where one reporter investigates the downfall of a planetary regime; and the utterly terrifying *Nameless* by dynamic duo Grant Morrison (*Batman*, *The Invisibles*) and Chris Burnham (*Batman Incorporated*).

Each of these have first volumes – or in the case of *Nameless* one complete volume – that make for essential and immediate reading. Amongst all this space adventuring and planet exploring one other Image comic stood out in particular: *Descender*.

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Written by Jeff Lemire (*Trillium*, *Sweet Tooth*) and gloriously painted by Dustin Nguyen, *Descender #1* had a concept and cover that immediately stole my heart. A young boy of robotic build stands alone against the backdrop of a full moon and the black void. He looks up as colours fall towards him, optimistic in his naivety and the urge to protect him, to shield him from the dangers of the darkness is inescapable.

TIM-21 was created to be just like a real little boy. When he and his dog Bandit awaken to find that years have passed, alien robot Harvesters have attacked humanity, his old family is gone and all robots have been outlawed by the remnants of society, things really don't look good. Unfortunately for TIM-21 he may also hold the secret as to what the previous attackers were after, and why they'll be back. Fortunately, he's good at making friends.

The beats of the concept will certainly sound familiar, with a strong echo of Spielberg's *A.I.* in particular and *Mass Effect* close behind, but the similarities are mostly superficial with the execution injecting a great deal of emotion, world-building and great characterisation into proceedings.

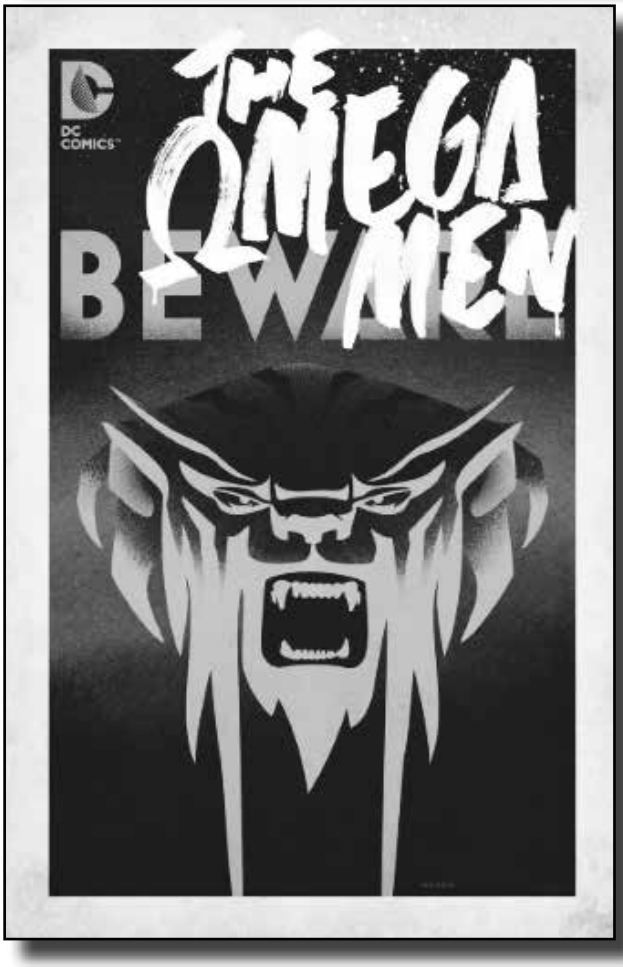
The story of humans reacting to large-scale trauma is a tale as old as time, and remains as relevant today as ever before, particularly when seen through the eyes of a child caught in the crossfire between opposing factions that seem of equal ugliness.

Feels and plot aside, Nguyen is a revelation. Desolate landscapes capture the loneliness of the characters, flashbacks are muted with bright spots of emotion, and TIM-21 sparkles with humanity.

Best known previously for his work on all-ages titles such as *Batman Beyond Unlimited*, *Batman: Li'l Gotham*, and *Justice League Beyond*, there was little indication that behind such fun and peppy pages lay the sheer beauty of these watercolour strokes. With Lemire himself being an exceptional artist, hand painting his own *Trillium* the previous year, it is a joy to see another artist successfully put their own firm spin on this script.

Meanwhile at the publishers formerly known as the Big Two, DC and Marvel had their own hits, with the former putting out the uncharacteristically interesting *The Omega Men* by rising stars Tom King and Barnaby Bagenda. Ostensibly built upon *Green Lantern* mythology and storylines, this comic requires absolutely zero prior knowledge of any comic, cosmic or otherwise. The titular group are a gang of intergalactic criminals who appear to have murdered Kyle Rayner, a White Lantern space-cop, but things are not entirely as they seem. Refreshing, King drops the readers in right at the deep end with little explanation as to what is going on – events unfold naturally with no handholding and no chunky exposition – bliss!

Unsurprisingly this did not sit well with many superhero fans, but if you enjoy reading between the lines and following storylines that gradually reveal themselves amidst the misdirection and chaos, welcome aboard. This was a big gamble for DC and one that ultimately they decided didn't pay off, electing to cancel this book after its first (complete) run. Strong collected edition sales may well have them regretting that choice.



The art here is extremely accessible as Bagenda sticks mostly to the classic nine-panel grid with plenty of strong action and reaction shots and absolutely glorious colours courtesy of Romulo Fajardo (*Midnighter*).

Tom King was riding high in 2015, debuting the wartime drama *The Sheriff of Babylon* that pulls from his own experience as a CIA operations officer, and continuing his popular run co-writing the super-spy thriller *Grayson* with Tim Seeley. 2016 has had an auspicious beginning too; with his unique take on *Vision* moving him to the Marvel side…

Star Wars may have stolen all the headlines at Disney's conglomerate subsidiary but the best Marvel comic flew somewhat under the radar. *Bucky Barnes: The Winter Soldier* by Ales Kot (*Zero*, *Wolf*) and Marco Rudy (*Swamp Thing*) is a trippy journey across the galaxy as Barnes settles into his new role as space sniper – the Man on the Wall. Keeping the world safe from threats that must remain unknown to us Earth dwellers, this comic requires no previous knowledge of the Marvel Universe or even of the character himself.

Paired with Daisy Johnson, the two agents of humanity work to take out risky targets that paint them as little more than space terrorists to non-human eyes. This is not your typical superhero book, as high concept action nestles next to surreal sf and ventures into dark political territory as Barnes carries out his duty with empathy rather than zeal.

Kot is a renowned and celebrated writer of complex and rewarding works, and pairing him with the gorgeous paints of

Bucky Barnes

Marco Rudy is a stroke of genius. Rudy, always a fan favourite, brings the best pages of his career to this comic, rendering characters, action, alien worlds and galactic spreads in equally wonderful, expressive strokes. Every page turn is a revelation, and frequent re-readings are required just to soak up the taste and texture of every inch.

There are spiralling pages, experimental configurations, and dancing panels – this is not only a comic but a piece of living, breathing new art that twists and turns under any attempt to pin labels to its tail. Vibrant and surreal with a kaleidoscope of colours, textures and ever shifting line weights, Rudy ensures that *Bucky Barnes: The Winter Soldier* looks like no other Marvel comic in the history of the publisher.

The smaller monthly publishers held a handful of gems last year too, with Black Mask Studios bringing the bombastic *Space Riders* from Fabian Rangel and Alexis Ziritt which looked like the joyful rude offspring of Jack Kirby and classic *Heavy Metal* magazines. It's the kind of vibrant, expressive, chaotic comic that is near impossible to describe without swearing in sheer glee.

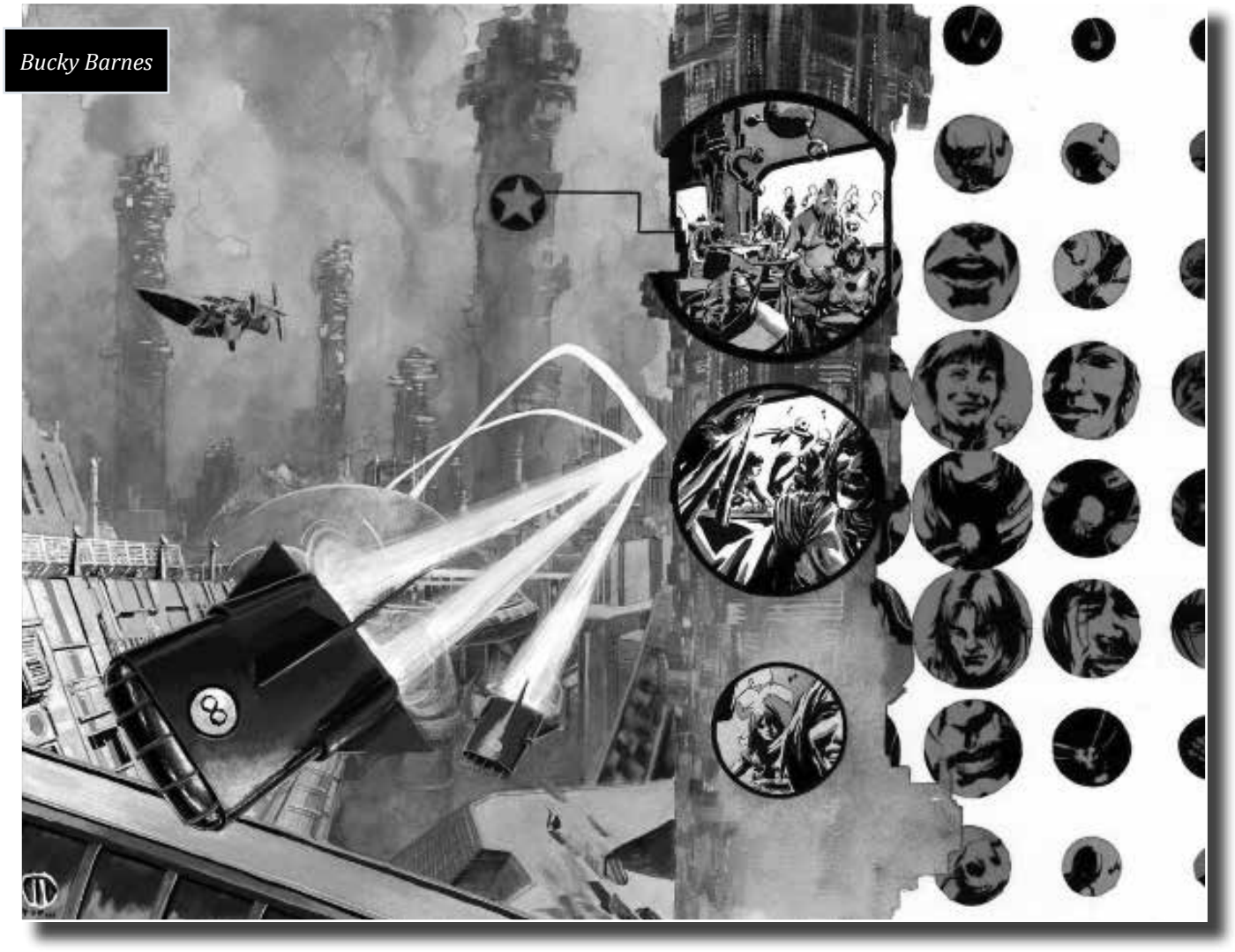
Similarly, Oni Press revealed the excellent *Kaijumax* by Zander Cannon (*Heck*), a loving tribute to the Toho kaiju films of the '70s. A maximum security prison island houses the enormous monsters of Japanese origin, with plenty of shout-outs for Godzilla fans throughout. The wisecracking 'monstas' have their own unique lingo, a gym where they lift skyscrapers and treadmill-stomp over buildings, and Cannon cunningly uses the goofy visuals and concept to juxtapose a scathing look at the social strata and power exchanges that develop within the destructive prison-industrial complex.

Finally, Boom Studios continued to add to their impressive roster with two comics in particular: *Wild's End: The Enemy Within* by Dan Abnett (*Sinister Dexter*, *Warhammer* novels) and sf favourite INJ Culbard, and The Spire by Si Spurrier (*X-Men: Legacy*, *Cry Havoc*) and Jeff Stokely (*Six-Gun Gorilla*).

The previous first volume of *Wild's End* was a reimagining of Wells's *War of the Worlds*, set in the sleepy *Wind in the Willows*-esque Lower Crowchurch in the '30s. The anthropomorphic residents of the village must deal with the terrible arrival of an invasion from the skies, and the resulting book was both fabulous and thrilling.

The Enemy Within follows these events, with the surviving band that faced down the alien enemy now held as 'guests' on-site by British forces. But is the invasion really over, and can the plucky heroes escape their new and paranoid captors? Abnett has a lot of fun bringing in two experts to help the hapless army types here – a pair of befuddled sf novelists.

Culbard is a master of the sequential form, having previously won great praise for *Celeste* and *Brass Sun* in particular as well as his numerous adaptations of Lovecraft and Sherlock tales. His smooth, crisp art is a pleasure to behold,



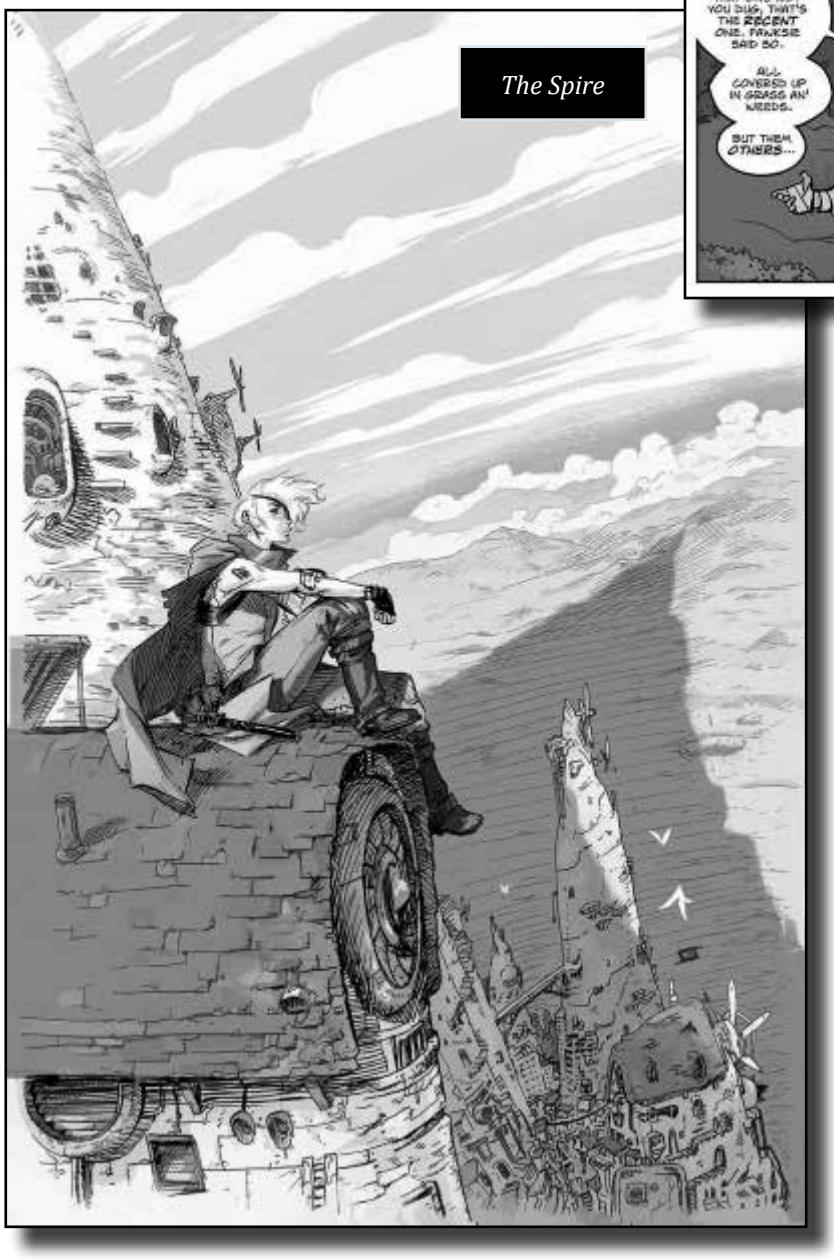
Bucky Barnes

effortlessly imbuing each animal with full character from their very first appearance, and the colours set tone and foreshadowing with ease.

The Spire, alternately described as fantasy and science fiction depending on the reader, is a seamless blend of both. As Spurrier puts it, this comic is '*Dark Crystal* meets *Blade Runner*', a murder-mystery set in an alien dystopia that might be a fantasy world but could just as easily be a distant-future Earth. The dregs of humanity remain within a towering city, stacked by social class with the rich grinding down upon the poor.

Various non-human types and tribes exist; allowing artist Stokely to have a grand time with incredible creature design as well as world building while political, racial and immigration tensions bubble and explode. The pastel palette of colourist André May compliments the sketchy inks of Stokely wonderfully, and experimental layouts remain easily accessible. There are hints of Moebius here, a distinctly European feel to the flow and composition.

Main character Shå is a police officer and a mutant of some kind, familiar with the city and its inhabitants both. Her latest investigation, a string of grisly murders,



throws her into the path of the soon-to-be - and very xenophobic - Baroness. An external threat rises in the Nothinglands while the Zoarim, a nomadic tribe of religious zealots, make their play.

The world building in *The Spire* is truly extraordinary, and brings classics like *Dune* and, again, the works of the great Moebius to mind. It's a classic in the making and like almost every comic previously mentioned here it presents a very naturally occurring diverse cast and world.

And that perhaps is the greatest achievement of sf comics in 2015, that great stories and great art are to be found alongside casts that are truly representational of the audience they most appeal to. Characters of all sexualities, genders, races and age walk vibrantly across these pages and stand in stark contrast to the superhero comics where progress encounters frequent setbacks. No token efforts these, but fully fleshed and realised roles. Monthly comics are of course only a fraction of the comic mediums output, but with a disproportionate share of mainstream media attention, it's encouraging to see such steps being taken by a younger generation of creators.

recurrent:
KINCAID IN SHORT
Paul Kincaid

On the Windsor Branch

by Dave Hutchinson

> *My great-grandfather, on the other hand, wrote of* all possible *landscapes underlying each other like the pages of a book, requiring only the production of a map of each landscape to make it real.* (157)

There can be, I think, little doubt that Dave Hutchinson's *Europe at Midnight* was one of the best genre titles of 2015. It provides an innovative and satisfying sequel to *Europe in Autumn*, but the origins of the novel go back a decade or more to a little-known but equally satisfying story that has, so far as I know, appeared only in Hutchinson's 2004 collection *As the Crow Flies*. But that story is well worth considering in its own right, and not just because it provided the intellectual groundwork for an excellent novel.

The majority of stories have someone narrating the tale, whether it is a first-person actor caught up in the events related, or a god-like observer looking down imperiously upon the doings of a set of puny characters. A narrative of this sort implies observation; someone is relating a tale in such a way that we, the readers, are put in the place of a spectator. But varieties of non-fiction, from catalogues to academic texts, from advertising brochures to religious commentaries, provide other ways of relating a story, imply a different sort of narrator. Where a narrator traditionally suggests the immediacy of a spectator watching events unfold (whether in present tense, where events march in lock-step with the narration, or in past tense, where they are recalled at leisure); other forms suggest distance from the events, so they are less immediate and perhaps less clear. Where the familiar narrator offers the possibility of unreliability, these more distanced forms allow for gaps in the evidence or multiple interpretations.

There are, inevitably, strengths and weaknesses in both forms, though these may come down to the strengths and weaknesses of the individual author. But what is interesting is that they put the reader in a different relationship with what is being told.

'On the Windsor Branch' is a classic example of a non-narrative story form, though what form has been adopted for the tale is not altogether clear. Ignoring the title, whose form fits more readily with traditional storytelling than it does with any of the possible models for this particular story (the title is by far my least favourite part of what is otherwise an intriguing and well-realised work of fiction), the opening paragraph suggests, perhaps, an extract from the catalogue for an auction, or possibly an exhibition catalogue:

> Of particular interest to cartographical students, Sheet 2000 – the so-called 'Millennial Sheet' – is the only surviving sheet produced by the 'Alternative Survey' begun by General H. Whitton-Whyte in 1770. (149)

The tone is brisk, no-nonsense, matter-of-fact, exactly the voice one would expect to encounter in such a catalogue. There is nothing personal in this, we are not sharing an experience. Everything is precise – Sheet 2000, begun in 1770 – and yet everything is mysterious – what was the Alternative Survey? Why is this the only surviving sheet? The phrasing implies that the story of the Alternative Survey and the Millennial Sheet is well known, particularly to cartographical students; but they are not known to us, so the unusual voice that Hutchinson has adopted for this story immediately places us *in media res*, aware that there is something strange and different but not exactly clear what it might be.

The tone is brisk, no-nonsense, matter-of-fact, exactly the voice one would expect to encounter in such a catalogue.

After this opening paragraph, the tone changes slightly. There is a voice now, but not that of someone engaged in the events related. It is an academic voice, the tone is that of someone who has researched this material and is laying

down, as briefly and as clearly as possible, the results of that research. It is a dispassionate voice: this, in outline, is what we know; whether we believe any of it, how we might choose to interpret the material, how we might fill in those gaps that the record does not provide, all of this is beside the point. This is not a story, it is a recitation of incongruous facts, take it or leave it.

And just as the voice withholds engagement, so the approach withholds story: what it is that makes the Millennial Sheet strange, what piques our interest is not even hinted at until nearly half way through what is, after all, a very short fiction.

So, as we move into the body of the fiction, we encounter a sequence of bland subheads, each accompanied by a paragraph or so of explanatory text, just the sort of thing we would expect from a minor academic who has spent a few hours in the library but has no great commitment to the enterprise. We are told about 'THE ALTERNATIVE SURVEY', 'SURVEY', 'DRAWING AND ENGRAVING' and 'PUBLICATION HISTORY'; just the sort of dull, technical information we might expect to encounter accompanying a map of some mild historic interest.

Though this mild interest quickly proves to be of a curious sort. The very first thing we are told is what is not known: 'Quite why General Whitton-Whyte undertook his own survey of the British Isles, when the same work was being carried out by the Ordnance Survey, is not known' (149). But then, this is appropriate as most of what follows is an account of what is not known. The early history of the family is 'shrouded in mystery' (149); no one understands his eccentric system for numbering the sheets of his survey, 'Some of these numbers ran to many digits (forty-seven in the case of the Birmingham sheet)' (149); and all we really know about the process of his survey is that 'Apocryphal stories abound' (150). In fact, how much surveying was done would appear to be a matter of conjecture: Whitton-Whyte is reported to have remeasured 'the Hounslow Heath baseline measured by General William Roy in 1784' (151), but it is not known whether he undertook any other measurements. Indeed, there are reports of his survey teams copying or even stealing the data being compiled by the Ordnance Survey at the same time.

So far, this would seem to be the story of an elaborate cartographical fraud. And not a particularly successful one, since only one full set of the Survey was ever collected, and that was destroyed in a house fire in 1912, except for Sheet 2000, which was on loan to the British Museum at the time.

We begin to suspect that something more is going on here only when we learn about Whitton-Whyte's disputes with Henry Hoskyns, who 'undertook the reduction of the field drawings to a form ready for engraving' and was heard to exclaim that 'the detail of the drawings was "as inaccurate as it is possible to be"' (151). (The sense of casual mastery of technical detail implied by that job description is one of the incidental joys of this story.) The question of accuracy is clearly of importance: Whitton-Whyte dismisses Hoskyns and reinstitutes all of the details from his original drawings, and on delivering it to the engraver charges him to 'change not one line nor one triangulation point' (152). But we are still some way from learning the actual significance of these changes, or their substance.

Only in the section headed 'PUBLICATION HISTORY' does a vague sense of mystery resolve into anything approaching story, and it does so slowly and quietly so that at first it is not altogether clear what is actually going on. In a series of numbered passages, the various iterations of Sheet 2000 are catalogued as they are amended and revised by different generations of the Whitton-Whyte family. Again the confident use of technical language serves as a distraction, so that we notice the authority rather than the oddity. So Sheet 2000 is first issued in 1822, less than a month after the death of General Whitton-Whyte; the first revision, of 1833, brings it 'into line with the James Gardner printings of OS Sheet 7 between 1824 and 1840' (153); the 1849 revision is the first electrotype printing; the 1863 'Black Sheet' 'became the only map in British history to be banned by order of Parliament' (155); and only two examples of the final 1890 Natal Sheet were ever printed, 'of which this is the single survivor' (155), a comment which again suggests that this might belong in an auction or exhibition catalogue.

But our sense of what causes this notoriety develops only slowly. The Millennial Sheet covers that area west of London that includes Windsor, Slough and, more recently, Heathrow. In Whitton-Whyte's original 1822 map, the one that caused his split with Henry Hoskyns, the details seem to conform largely with those of the contemporary Ordnance Survey map, except for one 'inexplicable error' (152): a village called Stanhurst is shown just north of Colnbrook. 'No such village appears on the OS sheet, and indeed no such village has ever existed in this location' (152).

While the author of this account continually laments the fact that subsequent revisions of the map only compound this error, we watch a new landscape come into being. By 1833, Stanhurst has been joined by the hamlet of Adam Vale. By 1849, Colnbrook has disappeared from the map, while Adam Vale has grown into a substantial town and Stanhurst has acquired a cathedral. By this point, the map is in the charge of the third member of the Whitton-Whyte family, Charles, 'a reclusive man … presiding over a family fortune mortally damaged by the cartographical endeavours of his father and grandfather' (154) who lived in Datchett and 'spent many hours walking in a countryside which, according to his map, did not exist' (154).

Paddington sometimes calls at Stanhurst, and … "confidantes" among the staff of the Windsor Branch of the South Western Railway … will ensure my safe passage to a county which does not exist' (157-8). He records instructing his solicitors to trace and prosecute the perpetrators of this madness, but is then killed at the Somme. And the letters referred to in his journal were destroyed when the offices of his solicitors were burned down 'shortly after the deaths of all three senior partners in the Staines Train Disaster' (158). We recall the fire at the London home of the Whitton-Whytes that destroyed all but one sheet of the Alternative Survey, and are struck by the amount of convenient death and destruction that seems to have

While the author of this account continually laments the fact that subsequent revisions of the map only compound this error, we watch a new landscape come into being.

Cartographically, we are assured that Whitton-Whyte's attention is exclusively on this small corner of Middlesex, where 'the spurious villages of Vale, Minton and Holding have obliterated Harmondsworth' while West Drayton has been replaced by 'the legend "Drew Marsh" and the symbol for a large pond' (154). As for the rest of the map, this seems to have been reproduced from earlier sheets or simply copied from the Ordnance Survey. By the time of the Black Sheet of 1863, the one banned by Parliament, Windsor, Staines, Uxbridge and Brentford have all disappeared (along, presumably, with Queen Victoria's residence at Windsor Castle, which is probably though not explicitly why the map was banned), to be replaced with a new county, Ernshire, 'complete and entire with towns, villages, hamlets, roads, streams and a rail link to Paddington' (155).

The final Natal Sheet (so named because it was published on the day that Charles's son, Edwin, was born), simply consolidates this new county. It is worth noting that the physical features of the landscape, the hills and rivers, remain unchanged, it is only the political and social organisation imposed upon the landscape that has been altered. The appearance of this final map is accompanied by 'a curious wave of hoaxes' (155), though we might like to ponder whether this isn't a case of fiction affecting reality. Letters from addresses in Ernshire are delivered to newspapers, the Queen receives an invitation to review the garrison at Eveshalt, and 'South Western Railway produced posters advertising day-trips to the "historic" town of Stanhurst' (156). (Some of these make a further appearance in *Europe at Midnight*.) In response, an Act of Parliament forbids 'any member of the Whitton-Whyte family from ever publishing another map' (156), and shortly after that Charles Whitton-Whyte walks away from his home and baby son and is never seen again.

But that isn't quite the end of the story. It transpires that Edwin Whitton-Whyte, who changes his name to separate himself from the family obsession, records in his journal receiving a letter from someone purporting to be his father, assuring him that 'the eight-seventeen from accompanied this cartographic anomaly. Staines, of course, lies within what should be Ernshire. But the author doesn't notice this; in the rather dull recitation of events there is no space for coincidence or conspiracy. Thus, in a final anecdote, there is a story that, in old age, Charles Whitton-Whyte's sister in law was visited by a young man claiming to be a nephew, who left with her a railway timetable and a map marked 'Whitton-Whyte and Sons. Mapmakers. Stanhurst' (159), though no trace of either was found after her death. This is absence of evidence, but is it evidence of absence? One of the joys of the form that Hutchinson has chosen for this fiction is that it allows us to recognise the real story in what we read, but which the author does not recognise in what is written.

For the author, therefore, Sheet 2000 'may be the last remaining example of a peculiarly English sensibility, the same sensibility which induced landowners to build "follies" on their estates' (158). But we recognise that there is more truth than is realised in the conclusion that the Millennial Sheet 'recalls a time when maps did exercise a power over the landscape' (159). 'On the Windsor Branch' would not have worked so well had Hutchinson chosen a more conventional form in which to tell it; it is a story whose revelations require quiet and distance rather than vigour and engagement to work their insistent magic. And it is a form which allows gaps in the narrative. Some are gaps in which the reader is encouraged to discern the true story; some are gaps that reveal the unanswered mystery still at the heart of the story: did Whitton-Whyte's mapmaking conjure Ernshire into existence, or was it always there just waiting for a mapmaker to discover it?

Quotations taken from "On the Windsor Branch" by Dave Hutchinson in *As The Crow Flies*, Wigan, BeWrite Books, 2004, pages 149-159.

recurrent: FOUNDATION FAVOURITES

Andy Sawyer

Out of This World: an Anthology of Science Fiction
edited by Amabel Williams-Ellis and Mably Owen (Blackie, 1960)

PART OF MY personal science-fiction education was moving from country to country, library to library, and finding copies of the *Out of This World* anthologies ready for me. A look at the Science Fiction Foundation's copy of the first volume brought two things back (or, rather, three things, but we will get to the third thing later).

First – the SFF only has eight of the ten anthologies between 1960 and 1973. If anyone has copies of the second and the ninth they want to give us, please get in contact!

And second – Amabel Williams-Ellis is frustratingly overlooked by a whole bunch of people, not only we sf readers.

The anthology consists of eight stories, culled from a number of sources, author collections, magazines such as *Fantasy and Science Fiction* and *New Worlds*, and other anthologies (John Wyndham's 'No Place Like Earth' headlined John Carnell's 1954 anthology of that title. At least two stories – Fredric Brown's 'Placet is a Crazy Place' and Arthur Porges's 'The Ruum' – I remember coming across in other anthologies. The other stories are Arthur C. Clarke's 'Breaking Strain', John Kippax's 'Friday', Murray Leinster's 'The Middle of the Week After Next', Jack Williamson's 'Chemical Plant', and Jack Vance's 'Men of the Ten Books'. Perhaps most noticeable now, though I would not have paid any attention to this when I was ten, is the introduction by the philosopher Bertrand Russell. Russell seems to be writing somewhat by-numbers, but he does vouch for the pleasure the stories offer – not only to him, but to his grandchildren and their school-friends. His final paragraph is worth quoting:

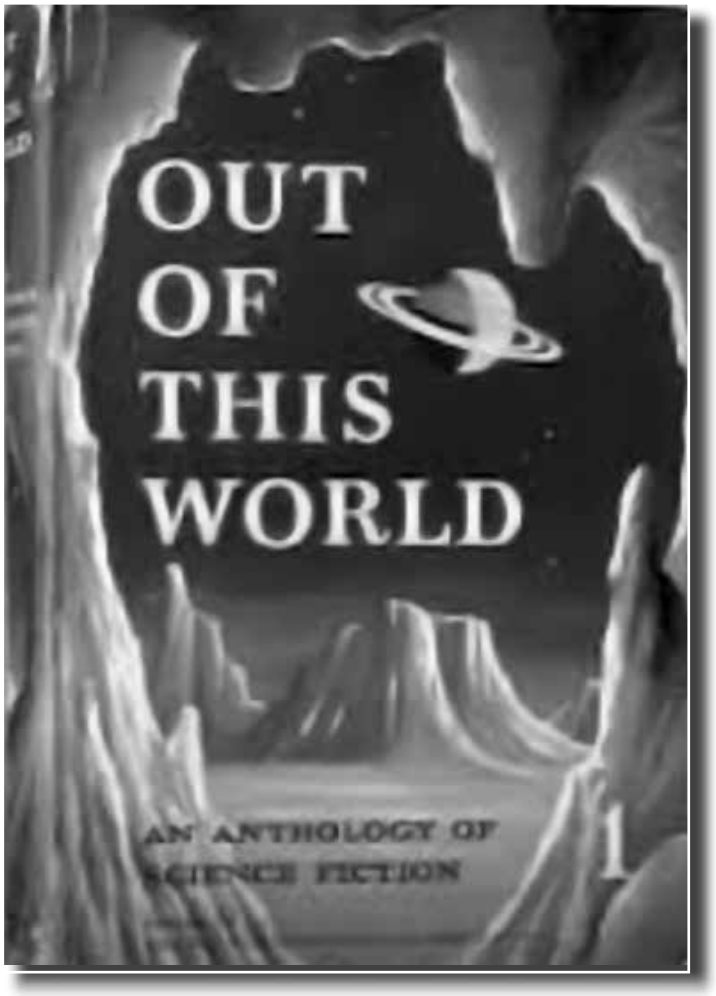
> *Today a rocket-ship is nearer to us than Apollo's chariot, a blaster-gun than Apollyon's sword, but the story-teller's prime business remains the same. It is to myths, fantasies and symbols that mankind has, since the dawn of history, always looked for support when confronted with the terrors, immensities, absurdities and paradoxes of the universe. (p. 10)*

After this, the stories are perhaps something of a let-down to modern readers, although Clarke's 'Breaking Strain' is a classic problem-solving sf story – how to deal with the fact that a meteor-strike has resulted in the loss of a spaceship's oxygen reserve? – mixed with an unusually interesting study of human tension, and Wyndham's 'No Place Like Earth' is an equally classic post-colonial anxiety (Earthman stranded on Mars after destruction of the Earth) of the sort which reads extremely awkwardly now but makes much more sense in its 1950s context. My own favourite stories in the anthology ('The Ruum' and 'Placet is a Crazy Place') still gave me the pleasure Bertrand Russell celebrates on a re-reading. Porges gives us a nightmarish chase through the Canadian wilderness by a predatory artefact left behind by an alien exploration team. The twist at the end comes from a rather arbitrary answer to the question 'How was the ruum set?' (the ruum is some sort of specimen-collecting machine) but getting there is suitably exhausting and the solution a suitably 'Oh *yes*! Why didn't I think of that?' moment for the young reader. The inadvertent play on words which results in all turning out for the best in Brown's 'Placet is a Crazy Place' is possibly a similarly artificial construction, but Brown's surreal setting – on Placet, the 'Blakeslee field effect' caused by the interaction between normal and "negative" matter creates a weirdly psychedelic effect – was a remarkable stumble-upon years before I ever came across the term 'psychedelic' and the scientific logic which solves the fundamental problem makes the story still stand out.

The remaining stories offer less, though each has its moments. The 'Robinson Crusoe' undercurrents in John Kippax's story of castaway space-travellers 'Friday' are played too obviously (Crusoe's 'Friday' as a robot: how incisive?), and Murray Leinster's 'The Middle of the Week After Next' too simply sets itself up as an 'amusing' story in which disappearances from a taxi are the cause of experiments in penetrating matter resulting in being pushed through the fourth dimension. Jack Vance's 'Men of the Ten Books', though, has a husband-and-wife team of explorers finding that a new world is actually inhabited by humans who were stranded there nearly 300 years previously. During the intervening period, they have become scientifically and artistically advanced way beyond the rest of humanity – but their only contact with what human civilisation *is* has been a set of encyclopaedias of human achievement, which of course presents that achieve-

ment in glowing, hyperbolic terms. The result: what appears to be a massive inferiority complex, although Vance cleverly manages not to lead us to the *obviously* obvious. Ian Williamson's 'Chemical Plant' gives us yet another 'stranded spacecraft' story, but the interest here is the series of lakes which are the evidence of intelligent plant-life and (again) the scientific deduction which solves the mystery.

What do we know about Amabel Williams-Ellis (1894-1984)? She was Mary Annabel Nassau Strachey, a prolific writer, at one time (1922-3) literary editor of *The Spectator* for which she also wrote leading articles on a variety of subjects. She was associated with the Bloomsbury Group and the post-war Labour Government: Lytton Strachey was her cousin, the MP John Strachey her brother. She published novels, non-fiction works and – especially anthologies of short stories and fairy-tales for children. According to the *Spectator* archive, her first book was an *Anatomy of Poetry*, perhaps her first love. In the 1930s, she and her husband, the architect Clough Williams Ellis were part of a delegation which visited the U.S.S.R. and came back full of praise for Stalin's achievements. (Perhaps it was this left-leaning element which caused Amabel Williams-Ellis to include the Russian Valentina Zhuravlyova's 'The Astronaut' in *Out of This World* 4?) They were also committed environmentalists and propagandists for rural preservation and, over several decades, designed Portmeirion, the site of the TV series 'The Prisoner' and a noted holiday resort. Notice this 'they' and 'her cousin/brother/husband . . . was'. Her *Who's Who* entry is scant. Her husband and daughter have *Dictionary of National Bibliography* entries: she does not. There are hints that some of this exclusion from history is her own choice, but her wide range of interests and publication sparks interest.



Amabel Williams-Ellis clearly had a fascination with science and science education. Among her books were *Laughing Gas and the Safety Lamp: The Story of Sir Humphry Davy* (1951); *Darwin's Moon: A Biography of Alfred Russel Wallace* (1966); and, (for children) *How You Began: A Children's Introduction to Biology* (1933), *Changing the world: Further stories of great scientific discoveries* (1956), and *Magic, Science and Invention* (1957). She also wrote several historical books on 'Life in England' at various periods during the 1960s. How far was she a science fiction fan? She wrote a few short stories herself (two of which appear in the 'Out of This World' sequence), and the introductions by her and Mably Owen show some engagement with what sf does. Looking further at *Out of This World 4*, there is also a Welsh story (translated by Owen) and, in the foreword some of the lyrics to Ewan McColl and Peggy Seeger's ballad 'Space Girl' are quoted as evidence of how sf has reached other areas, so the team clearly had a sense of the imaginative expanse of the field. But we seem to know so little . . .

She does not even have an entry on Wikipedia. There is a blog, 'Beware of Magpies' which is the source of much of the information I have on her, and which is worth reading for its own sake, and there seems to be much information on the subscription-only Orlando website of women's writing. We know even less about her collaborator Mably Owen (1912-1969), who seems to have been a Welsh teacher who ended up as an English Lecturer at a teacher training college in Bangor. Amabel Williams-Ellis was responsible for many young British readers being exposed to quite a wide range of 'adult' sf in the 1960s, and it is frustrating that the SF field knows so little about her. (A detailed and perceptive commentary by Farah Mendlesohn edited from her *The Inter-Galactic Playground* but available on academia.edu is the most substantial, virtually the *only* piece I have come across.) For those who think Portmeirion can only be celebrated for *The Prisoner*, it is time to think again.

Oh, and the third thing that strikes you. It is not unusual that science fiction anthologies of this period are low on women writers, but you will have noticed that this first anthology has none. I will leave it to others to do detailed comparisons, but certainly the first issue of Kingsley Amis and Robert Conquest's *Spectrum* series (1961) includes Katherine MacLean in the 10 stories featured, and the first of Edmund Crispin's *Best sf* series (1955) has three (Mclean again, plus C. L. Moore and Margaret St Clair) out of 14. I don't think this necessarily contradicts what I say in the above paragraph. What comes out of looking at *Out of This World*, though, is that Williams-Ellis seems to have been one of those relatively unsung people – Naomi Mitchison and Clemence Dane come to mind -- who, often behind the scenes, shaped how we who came to science fiction in the 50s and 60s came to understand it. It's a pity we (or at least, *I*) do not know more about her.

recurrent: RESONANCES

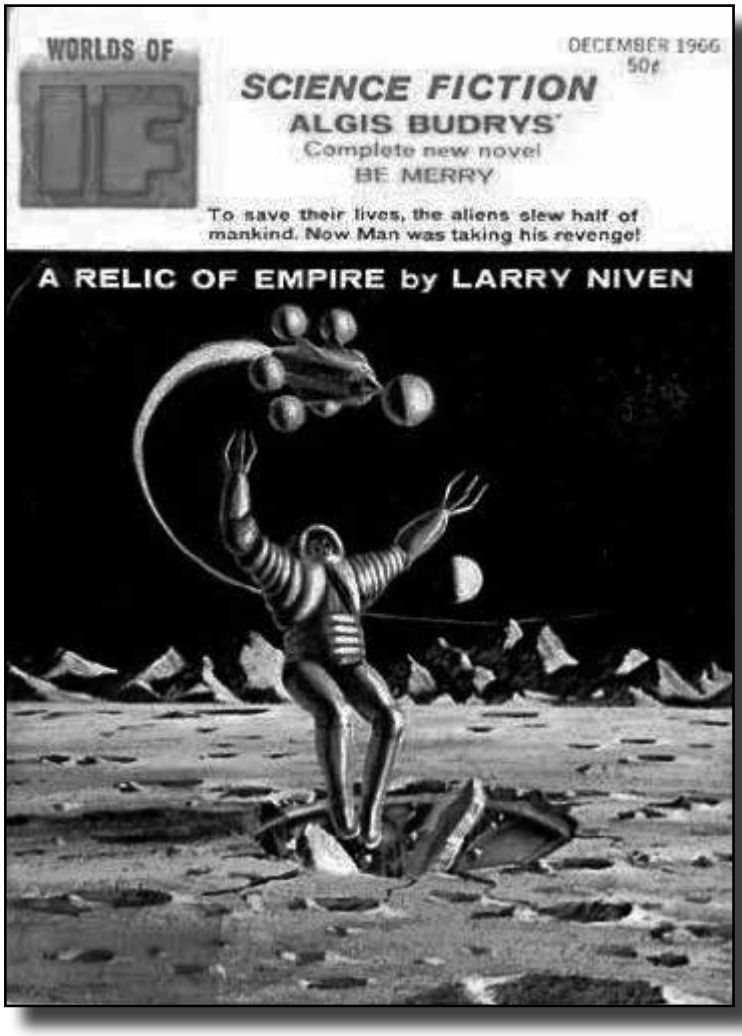
Stephen Baxter

Known Space: Fifty Years On...

In 2016 Larry Niven's 'Known Space' future history sequence is fifty years old.

Well, kind of. In his afterword to the *Tales of Known Space* collection (Ballantine, 1975) Niven says that 'the first [story] of the Known Space series' was 'A Relic of the Empire' (*If*, December 1966).

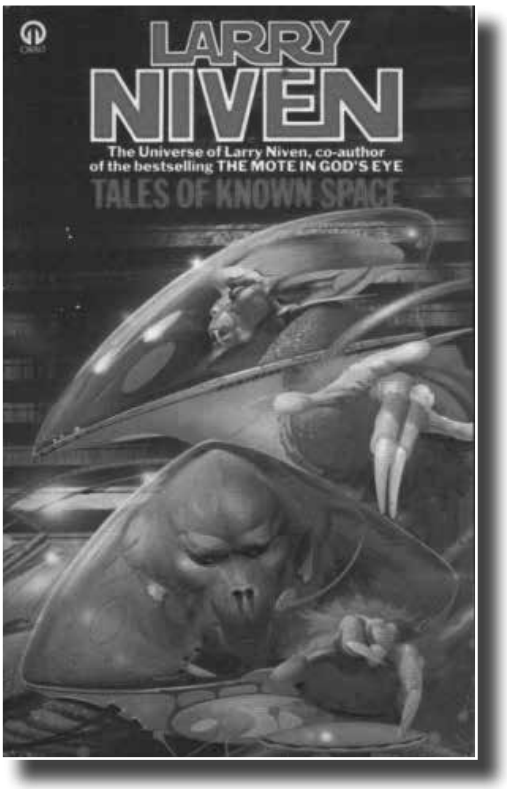
'Relic' was actually the eleventh of the now-canonical stories to see print, the first being 'The Coldest Place' (*If*, December 1964), after which the story ideas seem to have emerged in a spontaneous fashion, self-organising into two sets: the 'cosmos of Lucas Garner' (tales mostly set in the early 22nd century) and 'the cosmos of Beowulf Schaeffer' (mostly set in the 27th century, such as the Hugo-winner 'Neutron Star' (*If,* October 1966)). But Niven says 'Relic' was the first story to link these two emergent sets of stories. In 'Relic' the interstellar culture of 'Neutron Star' discovers a marvellous artefact left behind by the vanished 'Slaver' race – but the Slaver backstory was introduced in the 'Garner' story 'World of Ptavvs' (*Worlds of Tomorrow*, March 1965). The Slaver artefact itself is a 'stage tree', a kind of natural biotech rocket booster, much evolved after two and a half billion years of abandonment: an invention made marvellous by the depth of time and space behind it, and Niven's ingenious logic.



Clearly before 'Relic' the continuity had emerged spontaneously, or semi-consciously. But 'from that point ['Relic'] I was writing a future history,' says Niven. Thus, Known Space was born in 1966 - and who am I to argue?

Laurence van Cott Niven was born in California in 1938. 'I started writing [in 1963]', he wrote in 1974 (dedication to *A Hole in Space,* Ballantine, 1974). 'I lived off a trust fund … My great-grandfather once made a lot of money in oil.' Financial independence enabled Niven to write what he wanted: hard sf, which was pretty unfashionable in 1963.

Niven was working in a venerable tradition. For an American writer like Niven the most influential future history project was probably Robert Heinlein's (1939-62, as collected in *The Past Through Tomorrow* (Berkley Medallion, 1977)), which presented a progressive future out to the 22nd century shaped by technological innovation and the new frontier of space. But there were other precedents. Olaf Stapledon's *Last and First Men* (Methuen, 1930) contains timescales showing the rise and fall of species of mankind over billions of years, embedded within a grander cycle of cosmic evolution. Patrick Parrinder (in *Shadows of the Future,* Liverpool University Press, 1995) has argued persuasively that there is a future history embedded even in that ur-text, Wells's *The Time Machine* (Heinemann, 1895). The Eloi-Morlock future date of 802,701 AD, seems to be a composite of the Time Traveller's start date, 1901 AD, plus 800 years as a



timescale for social change – the division of mankind into aristocratic and underground labouring classes – and then 800,000 years as an evolutionary scale for these social divisions to produce new species.

The point of a future history is to explore fictionally changes to humanity and human society on a long timescale – that is, much longer than a human lifespan, and so ideal meat for science fiction. Such changes, for Niven, include the more complex social as well as the straightforward technological: 'Our society depends entirely on its technology. Change the technology, and you change the society. Most especially you change the ethics' (*A Gift from Earth*, Ballantine,1968; 1992 Orbit edition p174). Thus he developed a series of stories and two whole novels (*A Gift From Earth* and *The Patchwork Girl*, Ace, 1980) about the moral distortion of what was ultimately an interstellar society by the widespread practice of harvesting transplant organs from condemned criminals, with illegal 'organlegging' one consequence.

By 1970 these years of creativity had come to a peak for Niven with the writing of what would probably be considered his masterpiece, *Ringworld* (Ballantine, 1970). This saga of the multi-species exploration of an astounding alien artefact was thoroughly soaked in the Known Space continuity, but so assured was the writing by now that you needn't have read a word of the precursor stories to appreciate the novel.

The Ringworld is a ring around a star, the depiction of which itself is a triumph of disciplined imagination: 'But this star wore a barely visible halo … From the edge of the system, the Ringworld was a naked-eye object' (1973 Sphere edition p86). And from the ground the ring looks like an arch in the sky. There is no vague 'fine writing' here; Niven makes us see what he imagines with direct verbs and specific terms, and shows us the object's meaning too: 'The Ringworld was obtrusively an artefact, a *made* thing. You couldn't forget it, not for an instant; for the handle rose overhead, huge and blue and checkered, from beyond the edge of infinity' (p127). Down on the Ringworld there is breathable air and exotic humans, and the story becomes a planetary romance, sf with a deep root going back to the explorations of Captain Cook. And Niven draws on another favourite trope when it proves that civilisation has fallen and the Ringworld is a romantic ruin. Niven could hardly have made his book of ideas more appealing.

And yet Niven was unsure about his novel's reception. Niven was probably the only significant hard sf writer to emerge at a time of great controversy in sf, when advocates of the 'new wave' argued against the attitudes of the past. Yet *Ringworld* won a Hugo and a Nebula, expressions of approval from both fans and writers.

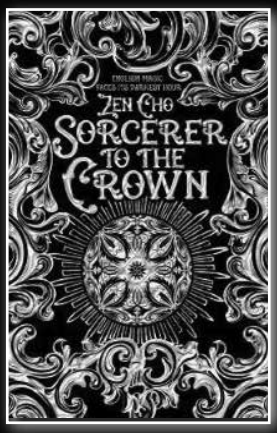
The significance of the Known Space project for me was that Niven's work was being published in my own young-adult reading lifetime: *Ringworld* was published in 1970, when I was thirteen years old. For a novice hard-sf fan like me, who had already burned through many of the classics of the past - such as Heinlein's prototypical future history with stories decades old - this was exciting new stuff. And while to some it may have looked as if Known Space was a harking-back to past, pre-New Wave glories, in fact it served as a kind of bridge from that vanished era to a new development of such techniques in later times.

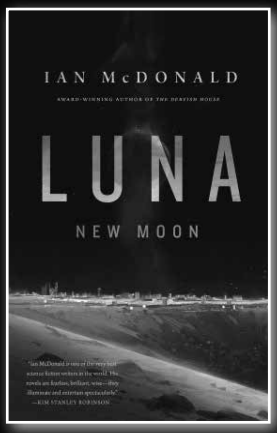
Thus writers like myself and Al Reynolds have produced multi-volume future histories. Paul McAuley's stupendous *Confluence* trilogy (1997-99) is an intricately constructed future history which spans an interval from humanity's restriction to the 'Nine Worlds' to the point where we have rebuilt the Galaxy and are anticipating the Big Crunch at the end of time. Even Iain Banks' 'Culture' novels (1987-2012) conform to an overall timeline.

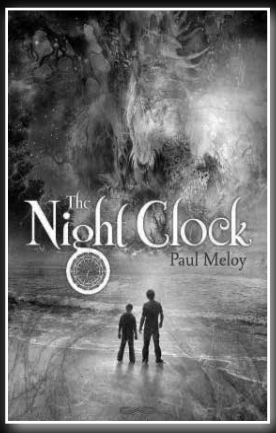
When the Known Space series was in its peak years, leading up to 1970, Niven created his future history in big, exciting strokes: a galactic core explosion that would ultimately shape the destiny of all living things was revealed in a short story, a tale of a dramatic voyage of discovery ('At the Core', *If*, November 1966). Perhaps it's not surprising that the series quite soon began to generate its own boundaries. What seems to have finally blocked Niven is the (outrageous!) revelation in *Ringworld* that the puppeteers had been breeding humans for luck – the 'Teela gene'. Niven said (commentary in *Tales of Known Space* pxiii), 'A fundamental change in human nature – and the teelas are that – makes life difficult for a writer. The period following *Ringworld* might be pleasant to live in, but it is short of interesting disasters.' Nevertheless Niven would revisit his future history, in *Ringworld* sequels and prequels, including most recently novels co-written with Edward Lerner beginning with *Fleet of Worlds* (Tor, 2007).

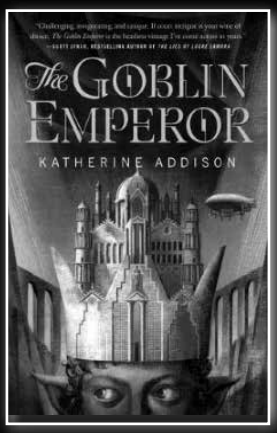
Niven was pivotal in the development of modern hard sf, and went on to bestseller-dom with books of more mainstream appeal, such as *Lucifer's Hammer* (with Jerry Pournelle, Playboy Press, 1977). But in the end he may be best remembered for the marvellous, joyful, technophilic perspectives of the Ringworld, his most famous creation.

recurrent:
THE BSFA REVIEW
Edited by Martin Petto









Book Reviews in the Age of Amazon...

I am writing this - my last editorial - in the aftermath of Mancunicon, the 67th British national science fiction convention. As usual, there was a strong BSFA presence, including (obviously) at the BSFA Awards which were announced on Saturday. The Best Artwork award went to Jim Burns for his cover for *Pelquin's Comet* by Ian Whates. I think this was all Ian's fault. As chair of the BSFA, he challenged me to put up or shut up and get involved with the organisation. The result was a special BSFA booklet, *SF Writers On SF Films: From Akira To Zardoz* (remember that?). The experience was obviously a good one as I came back for more when the role of reviews editor was advertised.

I wasn't sure how long I would be doing the job for when I started but it turned out to be almost six years. At Eastercon I managed to catch up with three of the four *Vector* editors I served under during that period: Niall Harrison, Shana Worthen and Glyn Morgan. Glyn was actually on a panel with me, Book Reviews In The Age Of Amazon: "In place of relatively few "gatekeeper" reviewers in relatively few venues, we have a commons where anyone can review if they choose." Everyone is entitled to their opinion and it is a positive thing that the internet has provided a democratic platform for everyone. But it isn't either/or, there is still a space for informed, considered and - crucially - edited opinions.

So perhaps it was fitting that straight after that panel I met my successor as reviews editor, Susan Oke, for the first time (in the slightly unexpected location of the *Strange Horizons* tea party in the Deansgate Hilton's Presidential Suite up on the 22nd floor). My aim was to leave the reviews section in better shape than I found it and I think I've achieved this. I'm sure Sue will improve further on what I've done and I look forward to watching that journey as a member. And also contributing since I will be experiencing life on the other side of the table as reviewer, rather than an editor. Go easy on me, Sue, I'm a bit rusty!

Martin Petto
Outgoing Editor, BSFA Review

I must admit, I'm excited to be taking over the role of Review Editor for *Vector*. As a long time reader of the journal and active book reviewer, it's both a challenge and an honour to be 'on the other side of the desk'.

A bit about myself: born and bred in Yorkshire, I've spent the last thirteen years working in the Higher Education sector in London. Now a full-time writer, I spend most of my time beavering away on my novel, although I have been known to release a few short stories into the wild, where happily most have flourished. Why did I apply for the role of Review Editor? Well, the instant I saw the advert my sensible head started shouting, 'No distractions! Finish the book!' But this role ticks all the boxes: books (lots of them), quality writing, and the satisfying discipline of editing. How could I resist?

I've spent the last few weeks getting to know (as much as you can via email) the journal's dedicated team of reviewers, and introducing myself to the myriad publishers out there, both large and small. If you have any contacts that you think would be useful, by all means let me know. Or perhaps you'd like to try your hand at writing book reviews for *Vector*? Send me a sample of your work, and we'll take it from there.

So, what does the future hold? Building on Martin's excellent work, *Vector* will continue to offer critical reviews of a diverse range of titles and genres, sampling the rich and prolific output of writers from across the world. There's such a wild and wonderful array of talent out there, both established and emerging. Let's explore it together.

Susan Oke
Incoming Editor, BSFA Review

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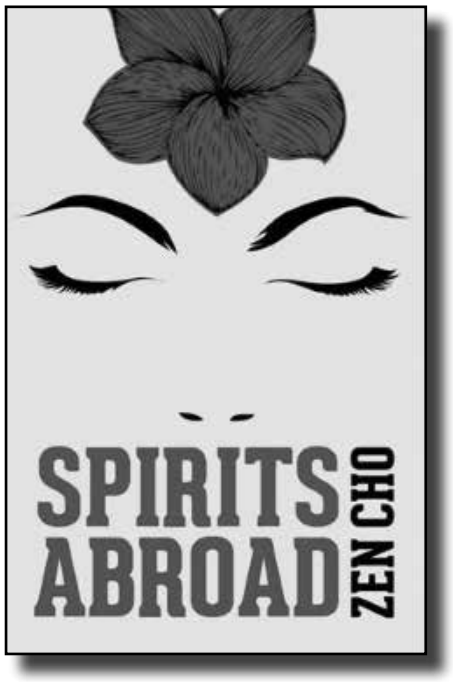
Spirits Abroad by Zen Cho (Fixi Novo, 2014)
Reviewed by Aishwarya Subramanian

One of the difficulties with reviewing a book that exists in two separate editions is that in some crucial ways you might well be reviewing two different books. Zen Cho's *Spirits Abroad* is a paperback published in Malaysia by maverick publisher Fixi Novo, consisting of ten short stories divided into sections titled "Here", "There" and "Elsewhere". Zen Cho's *Spirits Abroad* is also an internationally-available ebook consisting of fifteen stories (divided into sections titled "Here", "There", "Elsewhere" and "Going Back"), as well as commentary from the author. The second of these is, naturally, the more readily available; the first is the original book, and all that added content in the ebook is classified under "extras". The ebook as a form is flexible enough to make this possible, of course, and I'll willingly accept all the fiction Cho is willing to give me, but it's hard to see this much added material as merely supplementary.

Place is important here, as those section headings show. The three stories that make up "Here" are all set entirely in Malaysia; "There" consists of four stories of Malaysians in the UK. There's an implicit statement being made about where this book's cultural centre is, about what is normal and what is strange. It's a statement that chimes with Fixi Novo's manifesto, published at the front of the (paper) book, in which they pledge, among other things, that they "will not use italics for non-American, non-English terms. This is because those words are not foreign to a Malaysian audience […] italics are a form of apology." As the necessity for such a manifesto indicates, globally, fiction (including SFF) is still dominated by a sense of the West as cultural centre, so that even for those of us from (or in) other parts of the world, placing ourselves in that position can feel a bit radical. Here, *if* there's a culture that needs to explain or justify itself it's that belonging to England, not Malaysia. ("'People brought sambal?' Hui Ann noticed people hastily squirrelling away jars of dark red paste. 'You brought that all the way from home? Eh, here in England they also got food one, you know or not?' 'I don't like fish and chip,' said one of the sambal smugglers defiantly.") More usually, though, Cho draws on both cultural sources, the "here" and the "there", as do her characters who realistically, because that is what the world is like, inhabit them both. One of my favourite moments in "The House of Aunts" comes when Ah Lee, its protagonist, has revealed her supernatural identity to the boy on whom she has a crush, and asks him "You want to say it? You want to tell me what am I?" It's funny because it's an inversion of a similar scene in *Twilight* (one of "The House of Aunts"' more obvious intertexts); it's great because so much of what is good about the story rests on the precise differences between "vampire", the western cultural concept both of these teenagers are relatively comfortable talking about and "pontianak", which is what Ah Lee really is.

Two of the stories in the collection have supplementary stories included as ebook extras. "The Persistence of Angela's Past Life" takes a side character from "Prudence and the Dragon", Prudence's best friend Angela, and gives her a back story that not only fleshes out these characters and their history but reframes the original story as well—the reader of "The Persistence of Angela's Past Life" is reading a different "Prudence and the Dragon" entirely. This may all seem obvious; of *course* stories exist in relation to one another, and of course increased knowledge of a world/context changes how we read the stories it contains. But all this is also crucial to Cho's larger project—this opening up of the worlds that we "know" and reminding the reader that other characters, other stories, already exist (have always existed) within it. It's most evident in her dealing with British history; in *Sorcerer to the Crown*, in her romance novella *The Perilous Life of Jade Yeo*, and in this collection in "



(Rising Lion – The Lion Bows)", a story about a ghost-busting Lion Dance troupe in England, hired to exorcise a haunted cabinet. The ghost in question turns out to be a small African child, a legacy of British imperial history, whom the troupe choose to adopt, even if it means carrying an unwieldy cabinet around forever after.

The "Going Back" section of the collection, exclusive to the ebook, rather destabilises the tidy geographical demarcation of the "original" book. If Here, There and Elsewhere are Malaysia, Britain and fantastic (or SFnal) spaces respectively, from where and to where does one return? All three of the stories in this section are set in Malaysia, but they speak of other sorts of return as well. "The Fish Bowl" revisits adolescence, "Balik Kampung" involves a return to the world of the living. ("The Many Deaths of Hang Jebat" revisits myth and Cho's fanfiction roots, possibly, or may be where this neat reading breaks down). But the theme of homecoming bookends the main body of the book as well—it's as integral to "The First Witch of Damansara" (which opens Here) as it is to the closing section of "The Four Generations of Chang E" (with which Elsewhere closes). "Balik kampung" (returning to the village), Cho explains in her notes to the story of that name, is a tradition "embedded in the urban Malaysian psyche"; it's tempting to read this theme of return, the impossibility of return, and the various inconveniences encountered in the attempt, as equally embedded in this collection.

Those same story notes, however, left me conflicted. On the one hand, it's fantastic that the ebook allows the author to annotate and provide extra information about the stories and their genesis—whether or not that information is particularly helpful. For example I'm not sure "The Earth Spirit's Favourite Anecdote", which works mainly by being told in a really charming tone, is much improved by the information that it's Legolas/Gimli slash, as amused as I was by this fact—whereas the revelation that "The Many Deaths of Hang Jebat" is a "five things" story changes everything. Too often, though, the notes take a tone that feels to me contradictory to the joyous, unapologetic spirit of the book—they *explain*. The presumed reader of the ebook, unlike the presumed reader of the paperback, has to be told what Balik kampung means culturally rather than knowing/inferring/being content in their ignorance; needs to be reminded not to read "Chang E" as "the one true narrative of diaspora". And if such a reader needs to have it explained to them that "First National Forum on the Position of Minorities in Malaysia", the best story in the collection with its crotchety, vulnerable old lady protagonist and its deadpan reporting of committee proceedings, is

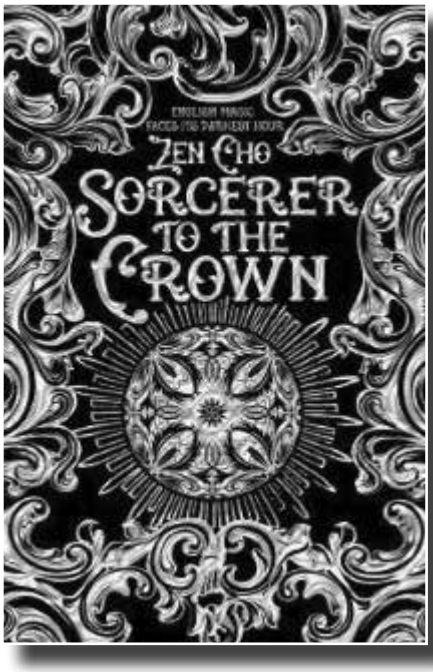
supposed to be funny, then they do not deserve to read it. It's tempting to read the inclusion of the notes as a reflection of the ebook's wider audience; in reality, they're probably just there because the format allowed them to be.

In part because of her constant engagement with earlier literature, Cho has tended to attract the Author X + Author Y sort of review ("Susanna Clarke plus Georgette Heyer–with a soupcon of P.G Wodehouse and infused with the Mitford sister of your choice"). I feel guilty for adding to it, but I'm just going to come out and say it—a good Zen Cho story has the charm and the precision of a good Joan Aiken story. And there are several good Zen Cho stories in this collection.

Sorcerer To The Crown by Zen Cho (Macmillan, 2015)

Reviewed by Maureen Kincaid Speller

I may as well admit that I am impervious to the charms of Georgette Heyer and her kin. Not even a heavy seasoning of magic can improve Regency romance, other than to transform the tedious into the merely twee. This is unfair of me, I'm sure, but while I understand it is about the anxiety attendant on ensuring a secure future for oneself I'd rather read fiction that does not, in the end, re-establish the status quo. Jane Austen's happy-ever-afters, conventional as they appear to be, always come with a sting in the tail. Formulaic Regency romance? Not so much.



It's been something of a struggle, then, to get past the persistent description of Zen Cho's *Sorcerer To The Crown* as Regency romance, with magic, not least because on one level that is precisely what it is. Cho acknowledges the influence of Heyer, alongside that of Terry Pratchett and PG Wodehouse. However, she also notes that she spent much of her adolescence reading 19th Century literary classics. So Jane Austen, the Brontes, George Eliot, they're also present, and most particularly, Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*. However, the dominant influence on *Sorcerer To The Crown* is Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange And Mr Norrell*, a novel that Cho loves. Cho herself began as a writer of fan fiction, and to some extent *Sorcerer* can be seen as emerging from that tradition of addressing perceived gaps in a fictional world. But, given the issues it's dealing with, *Sorcerer* can also be seen as writing back in the postcolonial sense – Salman Rushdie's now famous argument that writers working within the former British Empire, and later Commonwealth, turn imperialistic literary forms on that empire.

One of the more troubling aspects of *Jonathan Strange* is the man with thistle-down hair's preoccupation with Stephen Black, son of a slave, now butler to Sir Walter Pole, and the man's prophecy that Black will become a king. On the one hand, the man recognises Black's ability; on the other, in his capricious desire to assist, he consistently fails to consult Black himself as to what he wants. The same is true of Zacharias Wythe, whom Sir Stephen Wythe bought from a slaver and raised as his own child, with the specific aim of showing that 'the African' is as capable of being trained to perform magic as any Englishman. Mysterious circumstances have led to Zacharias succeeding Sir Stephen as Sorcerer Royal but although the title is powerful, Zacharias is acutely aware that the colour of his skin undermines any authority pertaining to his position. As a result, he struggles to maintain control of the Royal Society of Unnatural Philosophers when it faces a crisis: the falling levels of magic within the kingdom. Zacharias is also aware that whatever Sir Stephen may have wanted, for his own part he did not wish to become Sorcerer Royal in order to prove someone else's point, and would have preferred to remain Sir Stephen's secretary.

Prunella Gentleman is also acutely aware of her lack of position; at any rate, we are asked to believe that she is mistreated as much because of her mixed-race parentage as for the fact that she is a young woman without means, abandoned at a girls' boarding school by her improvident father. In fact, Prunella's sense of injustice seems mostly to be brought out for the sake of the plot, although there are moments when she genuinely struggles. But like Becky Sharp, she has a talent for survival, and alongside that a talent for magic, which should theoretically be suppressed because nice girls do not perform magic, rather as they're not supposed to enjoy sex. The discussion of women's magic is actually more interesting, partly because women's magic is so nakedly class-ridden, partly because of the way in which it is also intentionally orientalised. Zacharias's project is to promote the magical education of women, with Prunella as his prize pupil, but whereas he deals in theory, Prunella is presented as the embodiment of intuition. That Zacharias is about to fall into the same trap as his own mentor seems to have passed him by. It is the intervention of the Malayan witch Mak Genggang that allows Prunella to develop her own style of magical practice. Irascible Mak Genggang serves as a corrective, reminding us that magic is not the exclusive purview of the English gentleman, and that other very powerful magic exists in this world, magic that cannot be dismissed simply because it is practised by women.

I seem to have forgotten to mention so far that *Sorcerer* is also extremely entertaining. Cho comments on the Coode Street podcast that as a fanfic writer her speciality was pastiche, and she is especially good at faux-Wodehouse. Aunt Georgiana Without Ruth is the equal of any of Wodehouse's own aunts, while Rollo, 'a typical specimen of the younger son in avid pursuit of mediocrity', genuinely wouldn't look out of place at Blandings. One feels too for Zacharias, much put upon and longing only for a quiet life.

Sorcerer To The Crown is by no means perfect: the plotting is rather lumpy in places, and as noted, the characters are on occasion driven to act for the convenience of the plot rather than the other way round. And yet there is great … I was going to say 'charm', but I think the word is actually 'vigour' at play. This is a very muscular kind of romance, very full-on in the way it explores feminist, postcolonial and, if I don't mistake one particular relationship, queer issues. I don't think it always hits its mark but it's a novel to argue with, and that's always valuable. After Cho's *Spirits Abroad*, it is perhaps not what people might be expecting, but Cho's point is that it emerges directly from her own reading experience, shaped by what was available to her. That in itself tells us something about the pervasive imperial influence and why it needs even now to be constantly challenged.

IF THEN by Matthew De Abaitua (Angry Robot, 2015)

Reviewed by Shaun Green

There's a tendency for events of great historical significance to be packed away behind a noun and the definite article. So it is here: The Seizure. The Process. The War. Behind these words lurks unspeakable trauma on a scale beyond human conception. How do we unravel these complex webs of suffering and causation? How do we prevent their recurrence?

An unspoken number of years into a possible future, the world as we understand it comes to an end. The economic value of most human beings declines; the closure of public assets follows, as does the eviction of the majority of people from their homes. All social contracts are sundered. The wealthy and powerful survive, as they always do, but for the majority - the 'excess' population - there is nothing.

Alternatives emerge. The residents of the Sussex town of Lewes are subject to one such, following the sale of their town and all its assets - population included. They have surrendered themselves to the Process, an omnipresent cloud of algorithmic idiot intelligence which directs their community. Its calculations purportedly determine communal fairness from a position of machine objectivity, and if its decisions may seem incomprehensible, or even cruel, well: an ordinary human cannot comprehend the Process. Those it chooses to evict must be evicted for a reason; resources are finite, after all, and the good of the group trumps that of the individual. This is surely fair. Besides, elsewhere in England the aftershocks of the Seizure remain daily reality.

James and Ruth, a married couple whose relationship barely survived the Seizure, live on in Lewes. Ruth teaches children at the school, whilst James is the town's bailiff. Most Lewesians, like Ruth, are implanted with 'the stripe', biotech allowing data pertaining to their emotional state to be fed into the ceaseless calculations of the Process. As bailiff, however, James has been given an implant allowing the Process greater access to his mind; when he enforces evictions he becomes its living avatar. This has had the side effect of rendering him somewhat emotionally inert; he is often unaware of the strain this places upon his wife, although he is well aware of the fear with which his community regards him.

This has been life for some years: the village endures. But when James finds a mute soldier who is not quite a man caught on barbed wire outside of town, and recognises him as a creation of the Process, it becomes clear that great change is coming. It is to be war: a war never forgotten, but long since passed.

This is Matthew De Abaitua's second novel, following *The Red Men* (2007). His first novel examined questions of conscience in times of great political conflict, where authoritarianism and technology collided with revolutionary resistance. For a time it appears *IF THEN* will do something similar, devoting as it does a third of its length to portraying life in a largely pastoral society governed – perhaps 'autocratically managed' is a better description – by complex algorithms working with data derived directly from the governed. However, it soon becomes apparent that De Abaitua's concerns are less with a possible future than with a possible past.

The novel is divided into two parts. First there is *IF*, which explores the aforementioned Lewes township through the eyes of James and Ruth. This part of the novel builds slowly, devoting much time to James' inner life and his ponderous thoughts on both the Process and his role within it. It explores also Ruth's feelings of helplessness, of living subject to socio-political forces far greater than any individual. And it examines the slow awakening of Hector, the soldier whom James rescued from the wire outside town. At times, the sense of tension just underneath the bucolic setting is positively Ballardian - if less sharp than Ballard at his best. *IF* ends when James leaves town in pursuit of Hector, pursued in turn by Ruth.

THEN concerns itself with a small part of the Great War: Suvla Bay, the Dardanelles campaign. James, now a stretcher-bearer in the 32nd Field Ambulance, works alongside Hector to rescue the wounded. Among his fellow stretcher-bearers are many who will serve but will not fight: Quakers, pacifists, intellectuals, or those who cannot "abide the shame of the white feather". As the campaign unfolds, events from James' memory begin to push through to the surface, leading him to question his own firsthand experiences. Meanwhile, on the home front, Ruth experiences quite different horrors as she attempts to find her husband.

Despite beginning with an exploration of an unusual post-collapse society, one driven by a speculative model that will be familiar to anyone passingly familiar with contemporary futurist expositions of zeitgeisty concepts like social algorithms and Big Data, *IF THEN* is far more interested in the past. Its fusion of the pastoral and the high-technocratic twists aside, becoming an assortment of plot drivers as the novel gets stuck into what its author really wants to explore: the revolutionary ideas of a largely forgotten collection of "trench mystics" who emerged from the Great War. And so it is that a novel which initially presents itself as looking forwards, beyond the trauma of our collective futures, turns instead to the traumas of the past, suggesting that human history turns in great cycles; that suffering is the only real constant.

Among the themes of *IF THEN* are the acts of great endurance and small kindness that characterise the individual human response to industrialised suffering; of the spaces that constitute the cracks in social control and of the humanity that flourishes there. These ideas are beautifully explored in the responses of the novel's characters to the frankly ghastly situations they experience, and stand in stark contrast to the grossly self-destructive initiatives of those who seek to influence the path of history, whatever their rank or role.

IF THEN is not an easy novel. The experience of reading involved, for me at least, regular re-triangulation and re-alignment; as a reader I never quite settled into a sense of moral surety. This in itself is an impressive achievement, if a repeatedly unsettling one, which makes me question my own implicit faith in authorial narration. The prose is also sometimes beautifully observed, and the Suvla Bay chapters are enormously evocative of the tremendous disorientation and dislocation of mass combat.

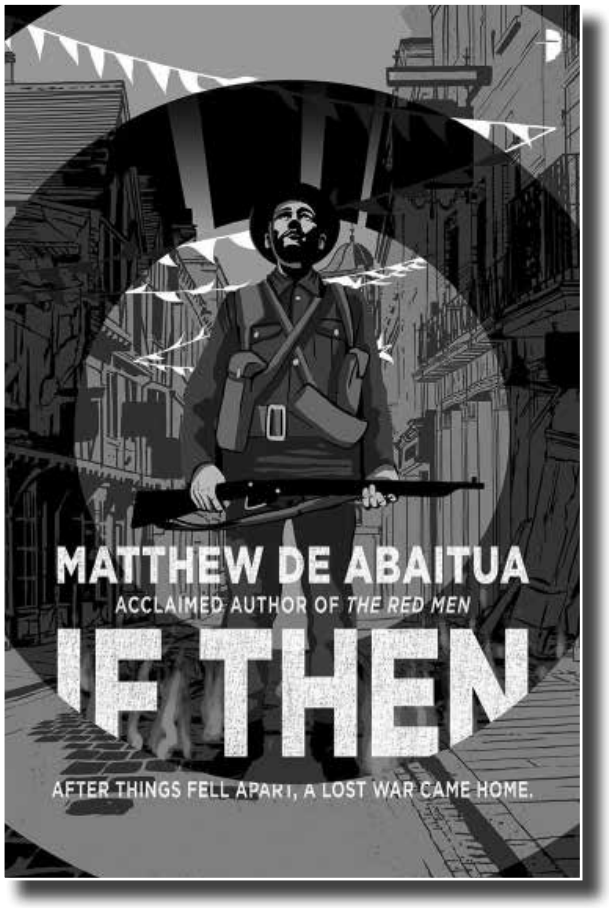
Other difficult elements of the novel are less worthy of celebration. Another of the novel's themes concerns the cycles of history, here exhibited through history being repeated in order that, er, history not be repeated. Systems

designed to prevent suffering determine they must reproduce that same suffering in order to fully understand what they are to prevent – all in the name of the greater good (*the greater good*). I struggle with this: when summarised as I have it sounds absurd, and so I hope it is intentional irony. But whilst irony is a helpful survival mechanism it rarely has anything of useful specificity to offer concerning the future.

And if it is not ironic it is more unsettling, for it suggests that high-minded efforts to produce positive change are somehow doomed by destiny, or corrupted by the creeping cynicism that takes root in aging men of influence. I am reminded of something China Mieville said in 2014 when speaking of utopias: "The smear that the visionary aspiration for better things always makes things worse. *These canards serve stasis.*" (My emphasis.)

Such thoughts are compounded by the realisation that despite the entire backdrop for this novel concerning the acceleration of late capitalism to its logical conclusion - the absolute concentration of wealth and the arbitrary de-assignment of 'value' from the majority of human beings, rendering them wholly vulnerable and manipulable in their desperation and dispossession - there is no trace of any systematic or politicised critique present. The protagonists appear to have been crushed down so far that they no longer have the perspective to contextualise anything beyond their immediate experience. Words and concepts such as "capitalism", "exploitation", "revolution", "class war" and more are noticeably absent.

In this unspoken, unexplored context, the idea of those who are willing to serve but not to fight takes on a different and more chilling meaning.



It is entirely possible that all of this is quite deliberate: that we are to read *IF THEN* as a dystopian critique of offering our selves and lives up to the new gods of data science and the benevolent dictatorship of machines, and a critique of what capitalist values could make of us if we do not work to change our present course. But such readings are undercut by the novel's obsession with history, with its suggestion that responses other than endurance and kindness lead to more exploitation and more suffering, and with its tale of atomised individuals detached from any form of communal or collective identity.

I don't feel that all of this is deliberate. Rather, *IF THEN* feels like a novel that has lost track of what it is attempting to articulate. This is betrayed by the way it lingers throughout; the opening third drags, repeating character beats and concepts that have already been presented, whilst some parts of the latter segments appear to add little to either the narrative, its characters or the ideas it is attempting to explore.

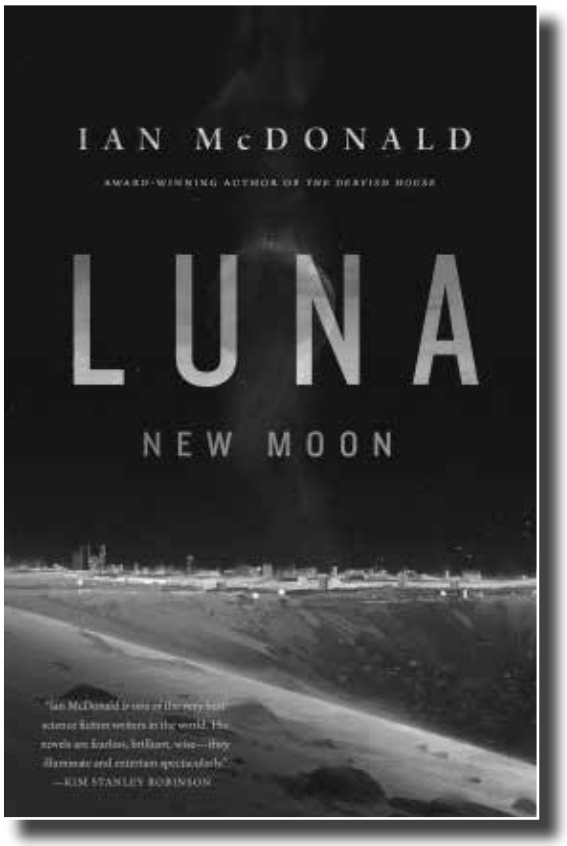
The end result is something I'm ambivalent about. As a novel that purports to be science fiction *IF THEN* is dissatisfying, looking deeply at the past in order to present nothing revelatory or interesting about our present or future. The Process as algorithmic governance turns out to be nothing of the sort, whilst the novel's title, deliberately recalling the syntax of programming, is a red herring, serving solely as a framing device. As drama it falters, with most events of interpersonal significance existing solely in characters' internal narration. As a thriller it stumbles around the tropes of the genre, its characters largely stumbling along in the tyre tread of larger events, rarely able or even willing to exercise agency. As a novel of ideas it is terribly muddled, sometimes overstuffed, contriving to culminate with a *deus ex machina* wandering off into the sunset, the world largely unaltered by recent traumatic events, and leaving no suggestion of what ordinary people should do in the face of historical or political forces beyond 'endure'. And this despite so many on-target observations regarding our civilization today, and the way human beings can behave when subject to external forces.

Perhaps all of this is the point. Perhaps this is the lesson: there are no answers to questions such as these, and solutions should always be distrusted for they will bring suffering in their wake. It is not as if such arguments lack for historical precedent. Yet I can't help but regard that argument, when it comes hand-in-hand with a psychic-mystic fantasy of change, as a surrendering to nihilistic ahistoricity.

I don't know whether I like *IF THEN*. But as a novel it has provoked from me a mix of opprobrium, introspection, disgust, re-examination, criticism and respect. Further, this review has only touched on the overall sweep of the novel's themes; it is replete with smaller, discrete ideas that are of great interest; for example sacrifice, both in war and different ritualised contexts, and similarly the role the bailiff plays as a partially symbolic lightning rod for the expression of social conflict. So if only for the experience of grappling with ideas that defy easy solutions and the disagreeable conclusions the novel appears to suggest, I can't help but grudgingly recommend it – to anyone who can endure discomfort in search of kindness and beauty.

Luna: New Moon by Ian McDonald (Gollancz, 2015)
Reviewed by Duncan Lawie

Luna: New Moon is one of a number of recent novels which have helped me develop 'planet consciousness'. When reading about a lunar society where the sky is stone and almost everyone stays well away from the sleeting danger of exposure to sunlight, it is a great pleasure to look out at the towering sky and a distant storm.



This seems an odd feeling for science fiction to engender. I'm sure I used to read the field for the chance of brave new worlds and alien landscapes, rather than to feel smug that I can look out a window into a protective pillow of atmosphere. Still, there are many modes to SF and perhaps Margaret Atwood's 'ustopia' (combining utopia and dystopia) is a good one to describe *Luna*. There is sexual freedom which enables a broad spectrum of behaviour – or is it a new "spectrum" expectation which attacks traditional binaries? There is only contract law, removing the rule of the state – but surely contract law only supports those who can afford the best lawyers? Anyone can rise to the top of society – but mostly only the allies of those who are already there. The latter two points hold a mirror to current globalised capitalism, with the attenuating power of state actors beside seemingly unconstrained corporates and personalities. The nominally broad sexual freedom of *Luna* is constrained through marriage contracts (nikahs), while marriage and divorce in myriad forms reflect the gossip page descriptions of today's rich and famous. Sexual freedom has other limits, too, engendering the moment of moral panic which kicks the plot into action.

Up to that point, halfway through this first of a two-novel diptych, the book is busy introducing the world and its characters. The moon might seem like a big move from the 'developing nations' of most recent McDonald, but neither is this society dominated by an Anglo-American sensibility. The oldest of the Five Dragons, the families who control the moon, has developed from the Lunar Development Corporation, a Chinese government agency. Next is the Mackenzie family, from Australia, who have transferred their mining prowess to this new frontier. They make great antagonists, drawing from a halo of archetypes of outback Australia and roughneck mining. It is tempting to see a caricature of Rupert Murdoch in the hard as nails Mackenzie patriarch. He refuses to die and his medical devices also give a flavour of Davros, bound to his mobility platform to keep him alive. There are also the Russian and Ghanaian families, who control extraplanetary transport and biological innovation, further enriching the mix.

The Fifth Dragon – Corta Hélio – is the centre of this story. McDonald folds in the back story of Adriana Corta, who came to the moon with nothing, who schemed and built an empire and established her family company. She is from Brasil, so her family and the inner circle of the corporation speaks Portuguese. Oddly, this means much of the novel could easily fit into Paul McAuley's *Quiet War* sequence – another future where Brasil comes to prominence. Of course, this is not that future, but another gem in McDonald's ongoing love affair with Latin American culture (see *Necroville* (1994) and *Brasyl* (2007) for other examples). The cultural context leads to a temptation to see this book as a latin telenovela, but the entwined boardroom and bedroom drama are as much in the best tradition of *Dallas* or *Dynasty*. There is the loving son, the shrewd one, the fighter and the black sheep. There is also the daughter – perhaps most brilliant, but who has tried to escape the family trade. Everything is done for the family, for the company, even when it involves endangering family members or undermining the board structure.

Still, we would be stuck in the boardroom, in the family drama, without Marina Calzaghe. The story is built through multiple close viewpoints, most of which are the perspectives of those who have lived their whole lives on the moon. It shows how lunar life is lived but there is much that those born on Luna have no comparisons for. Marina is a recent arrival from Earth, disempowered and impoverished, and she can take nothing for granted. This angle allows McDonald to say much more about the underpinnings of lunar society, as Marina learns her way. When air and water cost money, she is literally short of breath – adjusting her breathing down to reduce expenditure. She begins in the favelas of the moon, close to the surface within reach of the cosmic rays which can damage DNA. But, plucky and lucky, her life changes as she is drawn into the orbit of Corta Hélio. They give her the privilege of being able to breathe easily – but there are other costs in being allied to a Dragon.

They operate in what seems an established society at the start of the book, the rich and the poor, industry and leisure, rules and traditions. Each of the Dragons has their spheres of influence, which should create a stable pattern. Lucasinho, the privileged grandson, seems to think so too. At first his teenage rebellions provide another view onto lunar lives. However, as the book develops, the frontier, arbitrary nature of the alliances, the limits of law in the face of vendetta, begin to show. The Mackenzies overlap with the Cortas in being miners. They clearly still hold a grudge for Adriana Corta's innovation, her recognition that material the Mackenzies were wasting could make her rich, whilst Lucasinho doesn't seem to learn any real lessons – until it is probably too late.

The ending pushes hard, slamming into a cliffhanger that left me gasping, wondering what shape the other half of this story could have, now that all equilibrium has been destroyed. Whatever happens, I know I am in safe hands as McDonald's reader – even if his characters are not.

The Word For World Is Forest by Ursula K Le Guin (Gollancz, 2015)

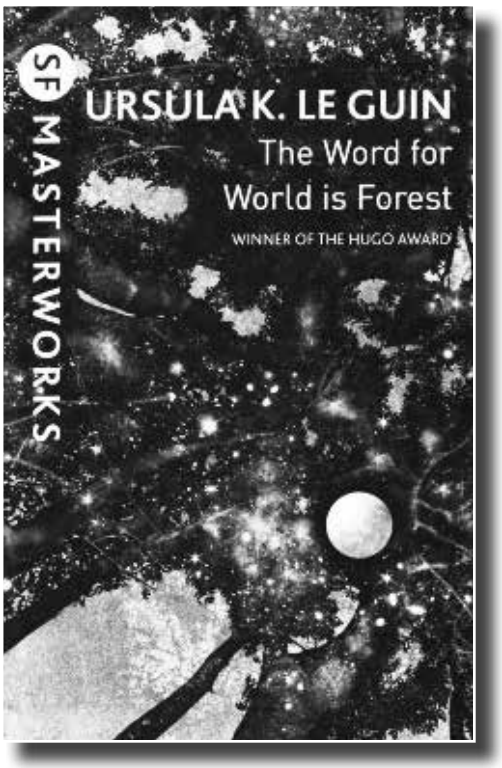
Reviewed by Paul Graham Raven

In his introduction to this Masterworks edition of *The Word For World Is Forest*, Ursula Le Guin's classic novel of indigenous resistance, Ken Macleod observes that "the author's sympathy is entirely with the enemy", and that Le Guin gives us herein the side of the coin less seen:

> "[T]hat oppression corrupts the oppressors is well enough known. That resistance to oppression can profoundly change those resisting, and for the worse, is less widely recognised – particularly among those who give that resistance their sympathy and solidarity."

Throughout this tumultuous summer, Macleod's point has stuck with me. The absence he indicates is everywhere: it can be found in hand-wringing "hot takes" on the Ferguson riots and the #BlackLivesMatter movement in the United States, just as it was found in the aftermath of the London riots of 2011; it rippled through the public discourse around the Greek debt bail-out; and it lurks beneath the surface of the refugee crisis to which Europe is belatedly waking up.

In all of these situations we observe what seems to be some sort of systematic oppression, and tend to sympathise with the oppressed. That sympathy seems for the most part to vanish, however, once the oppressed group takes actions which we ourselves would not countenance, as can be seen in the bourgeois response to pretty much every riot there's ever been: we get that they're poor and that cops can be assholes but why set fire to your own neighbourhood?



We like our victims to stay passive; that way we can feel good about choosing to recapitulate the role of the Good Samaritan. We like it much less when victims have their own ideas about the appropriate response to their victimhood, or when they are so bold as to ask directly for the sort of help they want, rather than waiting patiently for the sort of help we believe they need. The victim-with-agency is not a legible category; indeed, it is anathema. We'd rather cure the symptoms than the disease, thankyouverymuch.

I get a sense from Le Guin's introduction that she feels – or at least felt – that the specificity of the book's concern (namely the conflict in Vietnam) undermines its allegorical role: that it was an artefact of its time, and that its moral clarity is not portable to other contexts. From the perspective of 1976, with that conflict still fresh in the collective imagination, it may well have seemed inconceivable that the West could ever find itself in the same bind. Four decades later, however, and it looks rather like the West never learned how to do anything else – although there has been a significant shift in marketing strategy, with resource colonialism and the imposition of global commodity markets deftly repackaged as liberation, globalisation, or the dissemination of the capitalist-democratic memeplex.

And if war is the continuation of policy by other means, then the international development industry is surely the continuation of war by other means. While the enslavement of the Athsheans in Le Guin's novel may not be *very* reminiscent of recent Western adventures in the Middle East (well, so long as you overlook that whole Abu Ghraib business, which we have been encouraged to do), it nonetheless looks remarkably similar to the more economic colonialisms playing out all across the global South: indentured peasants tending vast monoculture estates on land that until recently belonged to them (or, rather, to which they belonged), for the enrichment of far-distant shareholders.

What I'm trying to get at here is that, despite a number of high-profile Panglossian claims to the contrary (yes, Steven Pinker, I'm talking to you), violence is not in decline. On the contrary: violence is a far broader and more subtle category than the gory-glory spectacle of war movies would have us believe. There is the violence of assumptions upended, of freedoms curtailed; the violence of fences and checkpoints and identity papers; the violence of the profit margin and the cost-benefit analysis. There is the violence of being separated from one's land, from one's language, from one's culture; there is the violence of having a new language or culture imposed upon you; the violence of new maps imposed on ancient territories. There is the violence of being put in the box labelled 'victim', and being expected to stay there, peacefully, in perpetuity.

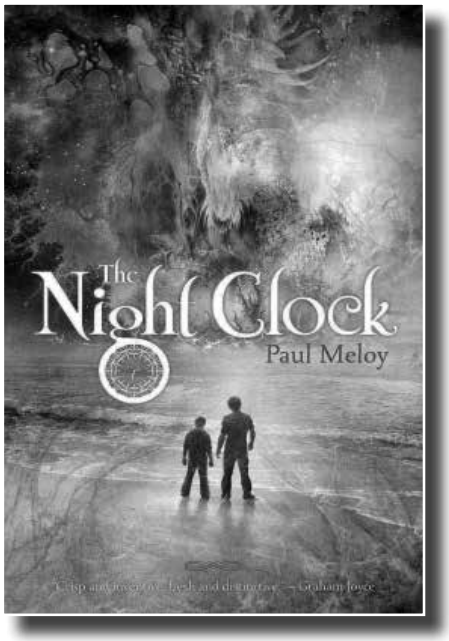
These are the violences we do unto others with, in many cases, the best of intentions. These are the violences with which we fill the gap of understanding highlighted by Macleod, the violences with which we punish the victims of more obvious violences, for failing to perform their victimhood in the properly sanctioned manner. The results are all over the headlines as I type: a world full of our victims, turning to us in great extremity for the compassion we claim to have had for them all along. I suspect they will be less surprised to encounter our hypocrisy than we ourselves turn out to be. Our victims have no need of novels to sustain a narrative of our perfidy; that story is scratched and burned into the land itself.

In her introduction, Le Guin regrets the "moralising aspects" of her story, "but [does] not disclaim them either", arguing that the work must "stand or fall on whatever elements it preserved of the yearning that underlies all specific outrage and protest, whatever tentative outreaching it made, amidst anger and despair, toward justice, or wit, or grace, or liberty." If the presence of those preserved elements might be correlated with the ease with which *The Word For World Is Forest* mirrors the common aspects of conflicts and occupations far more recent than Vietnam, then I would say it stands – and I wonder whether, at the risk of gainsaying Le Guin, it isn't in fact its moralising aspects that leave it standing where so many others have fallen. The master's tools may never dismantle the master's house, but they can still leave lasting gouges in the walls.

The Night Clock by Paul Meloy (Solaris Books, 2015)

Reviewed by Maureen Kincaid Speller

This is a novel that demands a certain amount of patience before it yields up its pleasures. Four chapters' worth of patience, to be precise, before things finally start happening. Until that point, *The Night Clock* feels remarkably like a novel that hasn't the faintest idea where it wants to go. The Prologue sets an intriguing tone but the novel immediately takes a detour via a series of overwritten vignettes (which I fear are supposed to be funny) in order to meet the ineffectual inhabitants of a down-at-heel council estate. All of these people will, thanks to an authorial sleight of hand, become connected with Philip Trevena, a social worker on a local mental health Crisis Team as they undergo a series of odd and unpleasant experiences. Trevena is a man who is already struggling with demons of his own, as the result of a divorce, when his clients begin dying mysteriously. Trevena's line manager, Stibbs, is unsurprisingly eager to get rid of Trevena, while Trevena himself has a sense that something is happening that is entirely beyond his control, not least because it seems one of his patients apparently rang him fifteen minutes after he was found dead. The answers lie, according to his dead patient, with Daniel.



Daniel's arrival kicks *The Night Clock* into life (and it is noticeable that the standard of the writing also improves markedly, which I suspect is no coincidence). According to Daniel, a war is being fought for the minds of humanity, in the mysterious Dark Time, which lives somewhere between reality and our nightmares. Daniel, who announces himself as the Hypnopomp, and Trevena find themselves working with the Firmament Surgeons to overcome the Autoscopes, who apparently want to overrun our world. This does, I admit, sound as though someone has run wild with a set of steampunk tarot cards but the best, indeed the only, thing to do is to trust to the author at this point and to run with it. And it is worth the effort as the narrative takes the reader and a curious assortment of people and talking animals through the elaborately – perhaps too elaborately – structured world of Dark Time on a mission to save the as yet unborn Chloe and her parents from the Autoscopes.

The question is, how should we choose to read this novel? The presence of a Hypnopomp suggests that we should read *The Night Clock* as a dream narrative of some kind; perhaps it is Trevena's way of making sense of the turmoil of his waking life. Beaten down by pressure of work and the stress of his divorce, this is the only way that Trevena can allow his emotions full rein. Alternatively, we might accept that everything described within the text actually happens beyond Trevena's consciousness. Or is he under such pressure that he has somehow managed to literalises the threats he senses within himself.

Should we even bother to make a choice? Normally, I wouldn't but in this instance, I can't help thinking that one reading, that it is all a dream, though a very hard-working, healing dream, too easily excuses the unevenness of the narrative in a way that other readings won't. Having said that, my impression throughout is that we are being encouraged to see the novel as set on a psychic battlefield – except, of course, that this doesn't account for what appear to be remarkable intrusions into reality. I cherish, for example, one character's announcement that another seems to have turned into an angler fish (not least because it is a remarkably apt summing-up of the second character's newly acquired dentition).

We are, I think, supposed to remain caught at a point of indecision, but here's the problem. Meloy is at times a very inventive writer, but this novel feels too much like a series of smaller pieces, linked together to provide a narrative that isn't quite consistent, on the assumption that this will count as a feature rather than present a problem. To me, the best moments emerge as Trevena travels across a dream world that looks remarkably like southern England stripped of its inhabitants, or when people gather at The Dog With Its Eyes Shut, ready to fend off whatever emerges from the other pub, The Night Clock. As Trevena and his companions fight their enemies, the camaraderie and tenderness they show for one another suggests we're dealing with a writer of considerable emotional depth. Similarly, there are some very tense moments, such as when Chloe is hiding from her enemies in an abandoned shop. The fear is palpable yet generated with impressive narrative economy. And there are moments of sheer, exhilarating dream-like wonder.

In the end, we are left with a so-so third of a novel, and two thirds of a novel that are really rather satisfying, with no idea whether this is a conscious artistic choice or simply the result of poor editorial direction. It is so tempting to try to excuse the presence of those first four chapters by claiming they're symptomatic of Trevena's breakdown, but I don't think that's good enough. They may be enough to earn the novel the 'horror' tag it seems to have acquired but I don't think that's fair to the novel as a whole. Instead, let us celebrate the excellence of the other two thirds of the novel , the parts that remind me a little of Graham Joyce's work, and hope for greater artistic coherence in Meloy's next novel.

The Goblin Emperor by Katherine Addison (Tor, 2014)

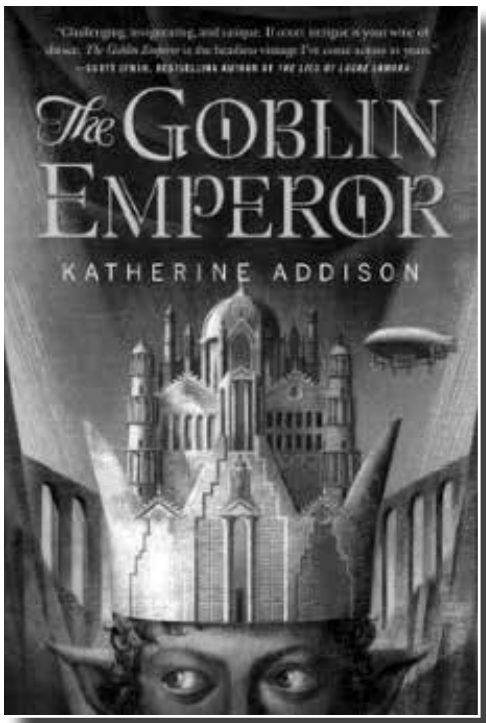
Reviewed by Sandra Unerman

Maia, a teenage half-goblin, becomes Emperor of the Elflands after his father and brothers are killed in an airship crash. Maia must deal with the discovery that the crash was no accident and face plots against his life, while he learns who to trust and how to become more than a puppet ruler.

The opening episode of the novel is compelling. Maia wakes up to be faced with a journey on an airship similar to the one which has just crashed. His feelings are vividly realised and his character sympathetic from the outset. He does not fight monsters or supernatural forces but has to retain his integrity and make decisions that will affect other people in a world he can never fully understand or control.

The story is told from Maia's point of view and is focussed entirely on him. He deals with a satisfying range of other characters, including the cruel cousin who brought him up

and the woman he agrees to marry, a spiky and determined personality in a society where women are very far from emancipated. His enemies are individuals, all with comprehensible personalities, although none depicted in great depth.



Most of the novel is set in and around the court, which adds a claustrophobic intensity to Maia's experience, more appealing to read about than to live through. Addison provides plenty of excitement, through Maia's struggles to face up to the challenges of his position, even though most of the violence is off-stage.

The court remains confusing for the reader as well as for Maia but the place comes alive through a series of small encounters such as those between Maia and the designer of his signet and Maia and the elderly lady who was kind to him at his mother's funeral. The characters talk with the formality appropriate to such a setting, very strange to us, for example, in the use of the first person plural by an individual to refer to himself. Addison carries this off effectively and uses the constraints to intensify the characters' feelings.

The peoples depicted have little in common with the elves and goblins of Tolkien or of fairy tales except in their looks. Both races have flexible ears, which gives them an extra means of expression. Their behaviour and their civilisation seem very human and the scope for discrimination on racial grounds provides one potential source of opposition to Maia. In the background are other tensions springing from the oppression of the poor and the changing balance of power between classes in the early stages of industrial development.

Addison also writes as Sarah Monette. Readers of her other books will enjoy this one and new readers should find this a very good place to start. The novel provides a gripping narrative and depicts a complex and intriguing world, in which steampunk is mixed with politics reminiscent of the Roman Empire, with characters believable in their setting, not merely twenty-first century people in fancy dress.

The Philosopher Kings by Jo Walton (Corsair, 2016)

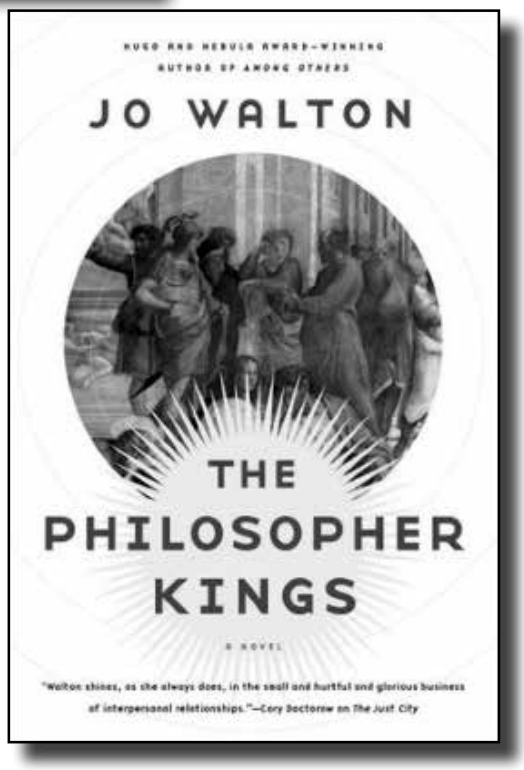
Reviewed by Sandra Unerman

The Philosopher Kings is a sequel to *The Just City*. I read the two books in the wrong order and enjoyed both but the other way round might have been better.

In the first novel, a group of time travellers are taken by the goddess Athene to the island of Santorini at a period before the Trojan War – and before the island is destroyed by an earthquake. Here they found a city on principles derived from Plato's *Republic*. *The Philosopher Kings* is set after the original experiment has broken down and rival cities have been founded, to try out different ways of living an ideal life. The cities come into conflict over stolen art treasures and religion. A tragic killing results in an expedition to find out what is happening in the wider world and to seek vengeance.

The two novels take Plato's thought experiment to a new stage, by imagining the experience of individuals living in such a society, which has many flaws as well as advantages derived from Plato's ideas. There are also complications introduced by the attitudes people bring with them to the city, both the travellers from different times and children bought from slave markets, who are not all grateful for their rescue. And then there is an incarnation of the god Apollo, who adds a further layer of reflection on what it means to be human.

In *The Philosopher Kings*, Walton is not interested in what life might have been like in the prehistory of Greece. We see the ordinary people of that world only through the eyes of the inhabitants of the city, who find them frighteningly primitive. She continues exploring one of the themes of the first book, which concerns gender relationships: how difficult it might be for men from Renaissance Italy or other periods to understand the behaviour of women who expect to be treated as equals. Plato's ideas about love, marriage and the upbringing of children have also led to some damaging encounters which have long term consequences in this book. But the greatest challenge to the Platonic experiment comes from a breakaway group who attempt to introduce Christianity hundreds of years too early.



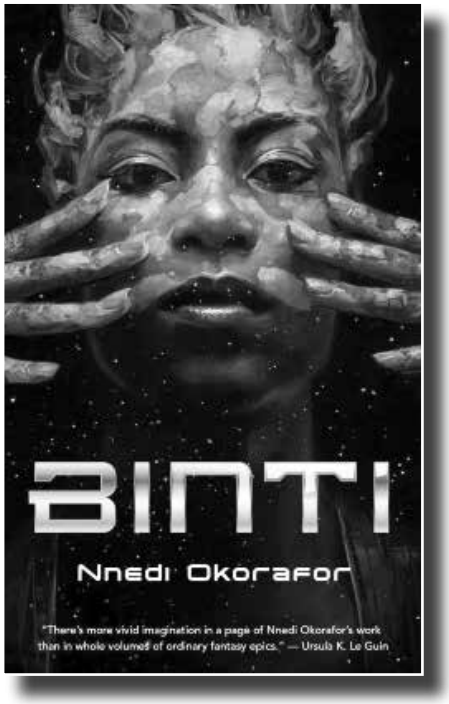
The Philosopher Kings has three narrators, Apollo himself, his daughter Arete, born in the city, and Maia, a young woman from Victorian England. All three struggle to live by their principles and to work out how best to live their lives. Grief makes Apollo dangerous, Arête and Apollo's other children discover that they have semi divine powers and the ultimate fate of all the rival cities come into question. But the heart of the novel lies in the arguments about the meaning of justice and love. The characters make the arguments interesting and their decisions lead to plenty of dramatic action. The two novels together are a very 21st Century version of utopia, dynamic instead of static, with plenty of drawbacks and scope for change. But they are both novels of ideas, rather than a fully realised world for the reader to enter.

Binti by Nnedi Okorafor (Tor, 2015)

Reviewed by Susan Oke

The opening of this novella effectively sets the scene, contrasting the use of high-technology with the protagonist's in-born traditional beliefs, placing the narrative clearly on its path. The book examines difference via the clash of cultures and belief systems, both Earth-bound and inter-planetary.

Binti has been offered a place at a prestigious off-world university—the first of her tribe to receive that honour—but her tears of joy soon turn into tears of frustration when her family refuse permission for her to attend. She sneaks away from home in the middle of the night, and arrives in the spaceport, out of place in her *otjize* covered skin and ankle bracelets.



Binti is a member of the Himba tribe; a people steeped in tradition, living on the edge of the desert in a future Namibia. Given the scarcity of drinking water, this tribe continues the ancient practise of cleansing their skin and braided hair with *otjize* (a mix of red clay and aromatic oils). The Himba people are also masters of complex mathematics and are obsessed with innovation and technology. They produce a highly sort after artefact called an astrolabe. This is a type of hand-held 'super computer' that is keyed to an individual.

Despite this the more numerous Khoush—pale skinned, in their veils and turbans—treat the Himba as second-class citizens. The Khoush travel the galaxy, whereas the Himba have never left, and never want to leave, their ancestral lands. Okorafor is adept at showing the ingrained nature of prejudice in us all. For example, Binti's skin is particularly dark, and she's not proud of the fact that she has some Desert People blood in her.

On board the starship bound for the university, Binti soon makes friends amongst the other students, discovering they have more similarities than differences. They practiced 'treeing': working fractals in their head until they get lost in "the shallows of the mathematical sea", pushing each other to achieve a perfect clarity of mind.

The Koush and the deadly Meduse have a long standing hatred, and a fragile truce. Partway through the journey, the Meduse attack the starship. It is Binti's ability to achieve a mathematical clarity of mind that helps her to both survive and communicate with the Meduse. That and an artefact called an 'edan'—a piece of ancient technology she found in the desert—that the Meduse refer to as 'the shame'. Binti uses her natural talents as a harmoniser to try and understand the aliens she has been taught to fear. Talking to Okwu, one of the Meduse, she recognises an echo of her brother's in-built stubborn prejudice in the alien. When she discovers the injustice perpetrated against the Meduse by the Khuosh, Binti offers to mediate to prevent further bloodshed.

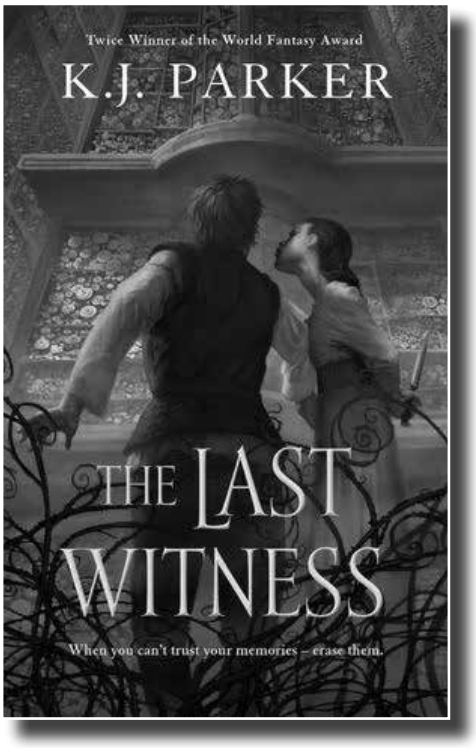
In just ninety-six pages, Okorafor presents a story that is both thoughtful and thought provoking. Highly recommended.

The Last Witness by K. J. Parker (Tor, 2015)

Reviewed by Andy Sawyer

The anonymous narrator of *The Last Witness* is a nasty piece of work, as he is himself the first to admit. The possessor of an unusual ability – to enter into someone's mind and remove selected memories – he makes a living out of charging large fees for discovering if crooks' accomplices have been skimming, for facilitating transactions which are so crooked it is best if no-one remembers them when they are done and, as a sideline, erasing the memories of past loved ones from people who find it too painful to live without them. And then he proceeds to gamble all those large fees away. He is so full of bitter and painful memories that he can't quite work out which are his and which are those he has erased from others, and he has become the regular, if not always willing, employee of a sinister pair, one older and one younger, who seem to be behind most of the crime in the country.

As he tells his story, we learn of the first time he used his power (on his sister, after a prank which cost her the use of an eye) and the painful memory *he* has of the lover whose death he inadvertently caused ("I think I'll let you live," says her father. "It'll be crueller.") At one point, after a bad time when the mother of a skinny girl hires him to erase her daughter's memory of rape, he retires to become the farmer he was always destined to be: but things get complicated and he is forced to flee to a nearby country, Scheria, where he becomes a celebrated flautist. Then the news arrives that his country's government has been overthrown and among the new regime are an old man and a younger one. There is also someone else who appears to have the same powers he has, and she is using them against enemies of the regime. And he, as Scheria's star flautist, has to play in front of visiting dignitaries from his old country…



And at this point, though personally I don't care about spoilers, it becomes hard to go on without giving *everything* away, so let me say that things get even more complicated and our antihero gets (almost) everything he deserves in

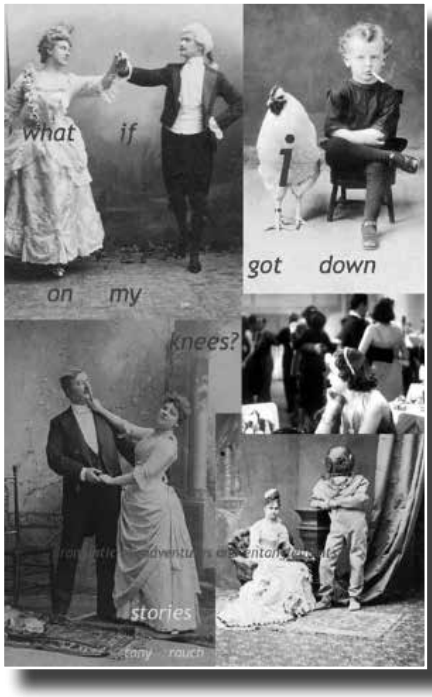
a story which is ingenuously about memory and love and the memory of love and (perhaps) what we might choose to remember if we could and (almost certainly) about manipulating others. It bears all the hallmarks of KJ Parker: breathtaking cynicism, equally breathtaking wit, a heartbreaking underlying morality and a nigh-perfect example of that fascinating sort of fantasy that doesn't actually contain magic. ("There's no such thing", as the protagonist tells his prospective clients in the first few pages.) It's over in 135 pages but in its brevity it packs a punch which most heavyweight fantasy epics never get near.

What if I got down on my knees? by T Rauch (Whistling Shade Press, 2015)

Reviewed by Kate Onyett

Rauch is a name not unknown on the speculative fiction circuit, having tackled morality and fairy tale formats with great aplomb, creating an interrogative space of uncompromisingly active engagement between story and reader. His stories will make you think, whether you realise it or not. As the master Terry Pratchett said, "fantasy is an exercise bicycle for the mind. It might not take you anywhere, but it tones up the muscles that can." Rauch may move into out-and-out surrealism on occasion, but his stories remain true to Pratchett's idea; they work mental muscles, and blessedly, it is a highly satisfying exercise to be put through.

What if I got down on my knees? is a collection that explores the human heart; it's loves and losses and the comedies and dramas that ensue. Not stinting his category's vast and flexible potential, these are relationships of *all* kinds. Rauch turns over romance, friendship, loyalty, betrayal, and the familial ties that bind. Under it all, after all the dust settles and the big babies of confession float and sink with man's truths and lies, there lies Rauch's tenderest proposition: the fundamental need in all of us for human contact. As a collection, these are tales from different times and places in the author's creative life, yet it holds together in a cohesive whole; Rauch has returned many times to similar themes. His re-examination adds to the feast, rather than detracting or breaking away from it. Although some stories sit more comfortably together, Rauch throws in a few of his more obviously metaphorically surreal tales to loosen it up.



Most surreal of all is Rauch's unwavering use of the first person. Of course, this is not new, but I have not read in the voice of the protagonist such raw and honest thinking before. I could be horribly ill-informed, however it strikes me that to be so completely in another's mind *is* surreal.

As a writing hook, 'I' is an easy move into character without a lot of heavy-handed background information. But is it? Always, always, there is a removal of self; the friction between the character-as-is and the author's design in producing only certain parts of that character for the purposes of narrative. Rauch plunges deep, and we, as readers, plunge with him, right *into* these voices, these lives. As directly conned by the protagonist of 'an idiot's guide to morons' is the realisation that we *cannot* know another person. We live entirely in our own minds with all the bias that entails. To be so privy to inner lives is surreal. It dances among the tensions of authorial creation, character life and readerly expectation. It is a thing alive, and taken to its most logical extreme in one tale as a Joyceian stream-of-consciousness.

Rauch makes us believe that we are seeing everything; warts and all, of a situation. 'Here it is, this is the emotion and situation that goes with it- now what do you see?' Throughout is this question; what *do* you *see*? We will all see something different, but you *will* see…

A very recognisable sense of regret, lost opportunities and the bittersweet pull of remembrance figures in some of his most romantic stories. The expression of his male protagonists is one of lucid, forgiving clarity. It is an enviable state of calmness, a Zen acceptance. In retelling the past, these are characters that can live with its fading barbs; to forgive a younger, more confused self. This is story as catharsis, and not just for those who have loved and lost (or never quite won) within the narrative, but pulling on a resonant chord within anyone who has ever lived around other human beings and struggled in their formative years to impress. In other words, pretty much any teenager who has ever lived. The magical, terrifying stage of life that is adolescence is one of Rauch's favourite tropes. It is in this state of not yet cynical adult, not anymore the amazed child, that he finds the playground of human emotion at its most powerful. His stories of loss and change in the lives of young men facing upheaval are told with an epic tenderness and an emotional clarity I for one cannot recall from my teenage years! With author as god-like eye watching over his charges, Rauch's authorial intent focuses on inner life of turbulent and terrifying emotional landscapes. Rauch helps his young men find their voices in their circular arguments with their selves in attempting to find a way through, to convince the self of a course of action, to justify a way of thinking and feeling; all of this brought out and laid down in excruciating honesty. We feel for these young men- feel for them as young humans. This is not a place for combative gender politics.

Because in all his writing, Rauch hypothesises that what we crave, what we all need, is recognition. And recognition is the start of connection, and connection is love. The many variants of love are connections by many, many different names.

A challenging and ultimately satisfying author, he sends you curve balls of humour and nonsense just when you think he's playing the absolute straight man. This is a book of stories that will chime with lovers of all types of genre; there is not a total specificity to it being corner-shelved as 'speculative', and as Pratchett said, it's a way to work up those mental (and in this case, add; emotional) muscles. I had to dip in and out several times, but for a short story collection that is entirely applicable. What I found most challenging was that it made me carry on. Occasionally it pricked at a carefully nurtured angst I had filed away from younger days as a 'Truth', and thank goodness it did, or else I would not have had the release and pleasure of a well-timed narrative. It is neither wishy-washy, nor is it coldly self-aggrandising. It is tender, it is true, and it is wonderfully odd-ball. Above all, it is humane.

In Memoriam

Some of those we lost in 2015

Hazel Adair (1920-2015) screenwriter
Patrick H Adkins (1948-2015) editor
Paul Bacon (1923-2015) artist
Bill Baldwin (1935-2015) author
Ted Ball (1942-2015) bookseller
Dennis Barker (1929-2015) author
George Barris (1925-2015) designer
Harve Bennett (1930-2015) screenwriter, producer
Richard Bonehill (??-2015) actor
Moyra Caldecott (1927-2015) author
Joël Champetier (1957-2015) author
Perry A Chapdelaine (1925-2015) author
Brian Clemens (1931-2015) screenwriter, producer
Robert Conquest (1917-2015) author
John Cooper (1942-2015) artist
Yvonne Craig (1937-2015) actor
Wes Craven (1939-2015) director
Fiona Cumming (1937-2015) director
Peter Dickinson (1927-2015) author
Carl Djerassi (1923-2015) author, playwright
E L Doctorow (1931-2015) author
Suzette Haden Elgin (1936-2015) author
Brett Ewins (1955-2015) artist
Gerry Fisher (1926-2015) cinematographer
Dave Gibson (1939-2015) bookseller
Fred Hemmings (1944-2015) fan
James Horner (1953-2015) composer
Wolfgang Jeschke (1936-2015) author, editor
Michel Jeury (1934-2015) author
George Clayton Johnson (1929-2015) screenwriter
Hirai Kazumasa (1938-2015) author
Robert Kinoshita (1914-2015) designer
Christopher Lee (1922-2015) actor
Tanith Lee (1947-2015) author
Graham Lord (1943-2015) author
Patrick Macnee (1922-2015) actor
Robert E Margoff (1930-2015) author
Melissa Mathison (1950-2015) screenwriter
Colleen McCullough (1937-2015) author
Ib Melchior (1917-2015) screenwriter
Chuck Miller (1952-2015) publisher
Warren Murphy (1933-2015) author
Leonard Nimoy (1931-2015) actor, director
Ōrai Noriyoshi (1935-2015) artist
Mick O'Connor (??-2015) fan
Glen Orbik (1963-2015) artist
Terry Pratchett (1948-2015) author
Gerard Quinn (1927-2015) artist
Jeff Rice (1944-2015) author
Rex Robinson (1926-2015) actor
Charles W Runyon (1928-2015) author
Carol Severance (1944-2015) author
Jim Slater (1929-2015) author
Jannick Storm (1939-2015) editor
Ryder Syvertsen (1941-2015) author
Rod Taylor (1930-2015) actor
Melanie Tem (1949-2015) author
Nigel Terry (1945-2015) actor
Alice K. Turner (1939-2015) editor, critic
Don West (1945-2015) artist
Grace Lee Whitney (1930-2015) actor
John A. Williams (1925-2015) author
Christopher Wood (1935-2015) screenwriter
T. M. Wright (1947-2015) author