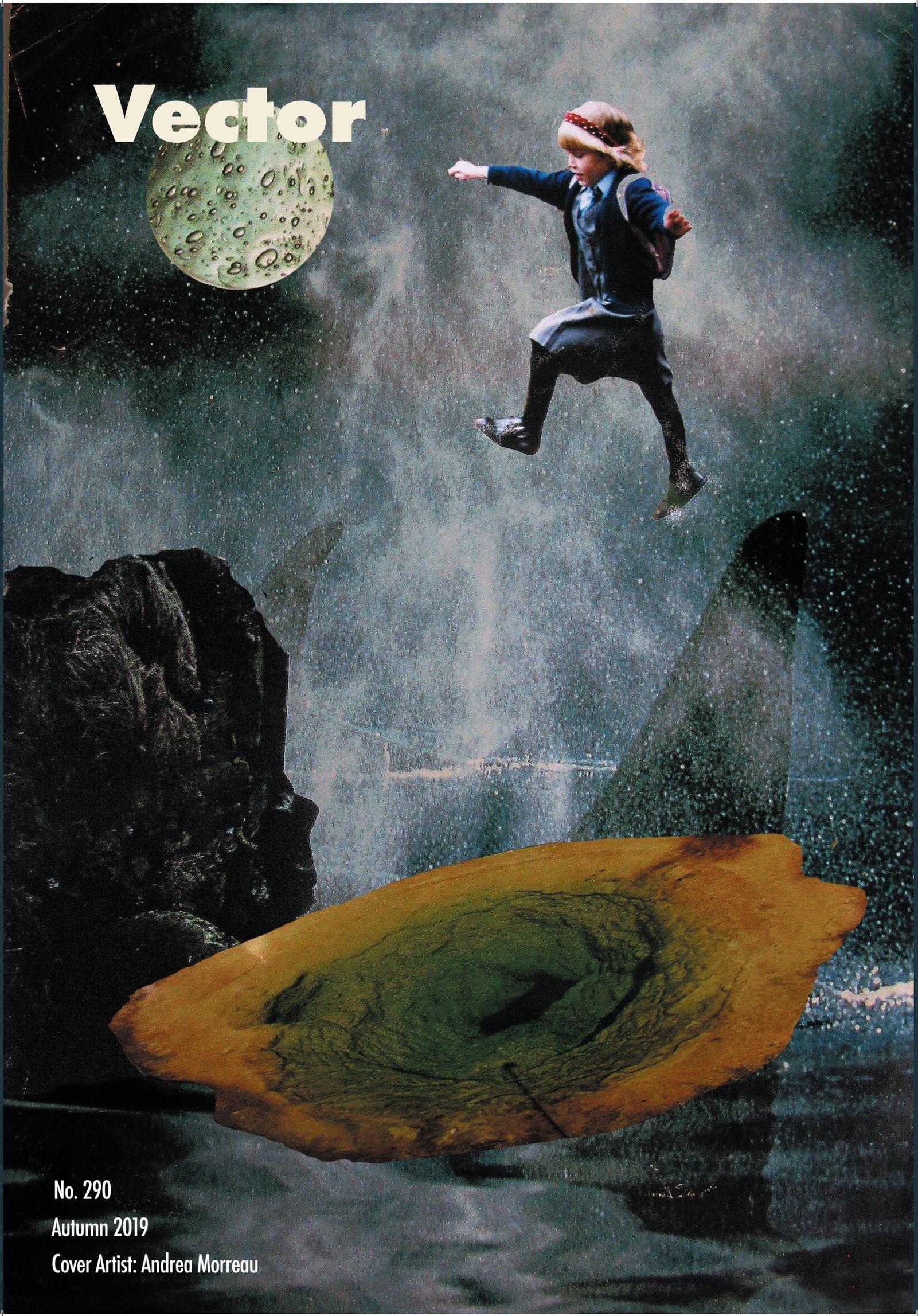


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Torque Control

Jo Lindsay Walton

The last two issues of *Vector* had themes — #288's 'Future Economics' and #289's 'African and Afrodiasporic SF' — but this issue is once more a Deck of Many Things. Andrew Wallace reveals all about judging the Clarke Award. Christina Scholz recounts linguistic revolutions in Milton and Miéville. Stephen Baxter reflects on AI and *Thunderbirds* and Paul Kincaid discusses the late great Iain [M.] Banks. Katie Stone reviews Sophie Lewis's *Full Surrogacy Now*, while *Vector Recommends* brings you Paul Graham Raven on Nick Harkaway's *Gnomon* and Nick Hubble on Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*. We've got interviews with Emma Newman and Yoon Ha Lee, and glimpses from SF fandom around the world with reports from WorldCon 2019 and IceCon 2018. We hope you enjoy. As always, *Vector* welcomes submissions, pitches, and queries for future issues: vector.submissions@gmail.com. Meanwhile, Allen Stroud is the BSFA's new Iron Throneperson, the inestimable Donna Bond having slipped away discreetly by hopping on a dragon, then beaming the dragon to a starship, then uploading the starship to a flash drive, then swallowing the flash drive. There are plans afoot for an Extraordinary General Meeting in late 2019, to discuss future ideas for the BSFA, and perhaps fill one or two new volunteer roles. The BSFA Awards are now open for longlist nominations, till the end of the year. Keep in touch! There's the BSFA Facebook group, Twitter (@bsfa), the email newsletter, the *Vector* website (www.vector-bsfa.com), and the BSFA main site (bsfa.co.uk).

Worldcon 2019

Worldcon (formally the World Science Fiction Convention) was held in Dublin in August. Worldcon has been going for eighty-odd years. This time there were over a thousand programme items, including serious and silly discussion panels, talks, academic papers, readings from authors, workshops, musical performances, dressing up, dances, plays, games, 'parties' (more on that later), as well as hiding in corners. You also had a dealer

and exhibitor hall and an art exhibition to wander round. There were around six or seven thousand attendees ('members') over five days. Like most SFF conventions, Worldcon is a not-for-profit event, run entirely on volunteer labour.

Here's author and critic **Nina Allan** on her experience: "The 2019 Worldcon marked my first ever trip to Dublin — indeed my first encounter with the island of Ireland — so I was excited for all kinds of reasons. Although the problems with queuing for programme items were real and significant, I'm



Award-winning author Jeannette Ng at Wordcon 2019
(Photo: Chad Dixon)

happy to say I was impressed with the programming itself. There seemed to be a good balance of items on offer, designed to appeal to all sections of the SFF community. Indeed my only real disappointment programme-wise was that my schedule left no room for me to attend any of the innovative and potentially useful 'science for writers' panels. A real highlight of the convention for me came late in the weekend, appropriately enough in the shape of the panel on Irish science fiction, moderated by the always excellent Val Nolan of Aberystwyth University. Ireland shares with Scotland a necessarily radical approach to science fiction, a directness and urgency that seems more than averagely in tune with our present times — and that goes for Northern Ireland and the Republic equally. It seemed fitting that convention Guest of Honour Ian McDonald's work — his recent Luna trilogy especially — was much discussed amongst the panellists as a metaphor for the legacy of colonialism and corporate vested interests on Earth today. (Needless to say I am more than a little excited for his upcoming near-future novel *Hopeland*). But it was Sarah Maria Griffin's impromptu address on the significance in her work of her own Irishness that set the atmosphere ablaze. Taking in everything from the Magdalen Laundries, the repealing of the Eighth Amendment, and the systematic repression

of the Irish language, Sarah Maria spoke in a way that reminded everyone present of the many, invariable ways in which the personal is political. I was so impressed by Sarah's passion and commitment — the way she expressed the importance of speculative fiction in identifying truths that might otherwise remain buried — that one of the first things I did on arriving back home on Bute was to order and read her most recent novel, *Other Words for Smoke*. I was not disappointed. Some have described this novel as YA, but for me the richness and originality of the language, the ways in which the heightened sensibilities of poetry are brought together — it would seem effortlessly — with spoken vernacular serve to lift this book beyond categorisation, and ensure its value and appeal to readers of any age group. If you've read it already you'll understand why I am tempted to call it *The Owl Service* for a new century — it truly is that good. It's fantastic to have writers of such quality and forthrightness entering the field, all the more thrilling to encounter them for the first time at a Worldcon — what else are Worldcons for? As a bonus, when asked which book she would nominate as Ireland's most significant work of science fiction so far this century, Sarah Maria plumped immediately for *City of Bohane* by Kevin Barry. She won my heart right there."

Allen Stroud, BSFA Chair, describes the dealers and exhibitors hall: "We got to meet lots of really interesting people on the stands next to us. There's some incredible work in SF going on everywhere and hopefully some of those discussions will turn into some interesting collaboration projects between the BSFA and other organisations. The dealers and exhibitors hall was the centerpiece of the CCD, on the ground floor of the main hall. As you walked in, right in front was a replica of the Back to the Future DeLorean, gull wing doors open and lights flashing as if it were ready to go. Around the exhibitors hall there were plenty of stands and fan tables, showcasing some of the best SF available. The former are market stalls from publishers big and small, with Gollancz and Harper Voyager running their own tables. Forbidden Planet was also there, offering a selection of everything, right alongside some fantastic Irish small presses, bookshops and an assortment of other merchants promoting a variety of writing from across the world."

A montage from **Caroline Mullan**: "I had a blast in Dublin. I helped Serena Culfeather's team to set up the art show. They had new boards and LED lighting, lighter and easier to work with than the ones used in London in 2014, and these allowed an open layout for excellent viewing. Guest of Honour



Noelle Ameijenda
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Jim Fitzpatrick showed sister works: *Diarmuid and Grainne* shared a private glance, while the companions in *Conann of the Fianna* looked out of their painting with fierce public gaze. Maja Winnicka's drawings shape animals from twisted branches. Spring Schoenhuth's pepperpot Dalek earrings, and Sue Mason's enamel pins (and the mansplainer mansplaining them to his girlfriend). Chris O'Hara's huge, colourful abstracts. Fangorn's angel with the fabulous feet, and the terrified horse bolting in the painting titled *And this thing I saw*. Afua Richardson's bright mermaids and women gazing boldly from their frames. Sergey Shikin's gorgeous steampunk cities and bloody battles. My friends Lisa Konrad, Tom Nanson and Julie Faith McMurray getting better and better at the things they do as the years wear on, and the pleasure of watching their work develop and sell. The Lego installations: King's Landing, Tattooine, and Jessica Farrell's Fortress of Solitude. Astronaut Jeanette Epps speaking to her poster. Walt Willis's Enchanted Duplicator set to one side unexplained — an opportunity missed! — but it was there. Someone cosplaying Groot in the hallway. And not least, the chance encounters among the displays and the resulting conversations that make and deepen connections with friends old and new."

Cheryl Morgan, wearing her Wizard's Tower Press wizard's hat, comments: "I'm delighted that I sold all of the books I took to Dublin. Juliet McKenna is clearly becoming very popular. I'm also relieved that the proposal for creating a Hugo Award for Best Translated Novel was struck down. No one I know who publishes translations wanted this. We firmly believe that we can compete, and continue to win, in the main fiction categories."

Author and party-haver **George R. R. Martin** writes ... actually wait, this needs context. Long story short, Worldcon is also where fans vote for the Hugo Awards — *Dirty Computer* was robbed! — and after the awards ceremony, there is a longstanding and mercurial tradition of a "Hugo Losers Party." Only this time, the venue — it was literally a piss-up in a brewery — was rammed, and many Hugo nominees and their +1s were stranded outside, with nothing to feast on save their invitations. As G.R.R.M. later explained on Mike Glycer's fandom news blog File 770: "*The Hugo Losers Party is not intended to honor or celebrate the current year's [crop] of Hugo finalists or exalt them above all others. [...]* Never has been, never will be, not so long as I am throwing the party. LOSERS WELCOME. WINNERS WILL BE MOCKED. NO ASSHOLES. That's how our invitations have read since 2015. There is not a word about the current year's nominees or finalists. [...] Gardner Dozois and I threw the first party at my room at MidAmericon in 1976, with stale pretzels and leftover booze scrounged from other parties, but we'd been Hugo Losers long before that." Fair enough, although an invite to something is usually a hint you can come. And though G.R.R.M. originated the Hugo Losers Party, in the years he was not its steward, it seems it really did evolve into a knees-up for the runners-up. More significantly, there was just enough internet controversy about G.R.R.M.'s semi-apology to suggest all this wasn't just about the party. So what was it about? I guess it was about how our big loose community of SFF fans and pros understands itself. Simply feeling left out of something is one thing. What *really* stings is when the stories that a community tells about itself — for instance, that the community is great at identifying and honouring certain kinds of creative achievements, that it is friendly and welcoming, that it is progressive and sensitive to things like accessibility, that it can recognise and own its past mistakes, and that it is naturally ecstatic about the future — when those stories strongly imply that you *should* feel welcome, and yet you *don't*. For most



folk, not being one of the cool kids is no big deal ... but I bet this was more like when your perfidious, so-called friends play a cruel prank on you.

Then again, the word “party” has always been a bit treacherous at a SFF con. “Party” could mean literally anything. That’s because a con is party-like already: and although it’s fairly easy to throw a party, throwing a party at a party can be tricky. The first is a problem of events management. The second is a problem of event ontology ... how do you condense the dispersed, rarefied revelry into something more party-cular? One tactic is to give away free stuff. Another is some form of exclusivity, whether that’s a hotel room, or the vast snugness of a big venue with a guest list and a bouncer (“Door Dragon,” in convention speak), or some more obscure play of centrifugal and centripetal forces. As Robert Frost almost wrote, *Good fences make good knees-ups*. Parties, like utopias, have a troubling but real affinity with the enclave form. (See www.conrunner.net for more practical perspectives on running a con party). My guess is, even with all the good will in the Worldcon, G.R.R.M. probably simply can’t throw a party where all his friends and their friends are invited, while also claiming that pirate town, underdog, stale pretzels, “battered brotherhood of defeat” energy. There’s just too much dissonance between those two aims. So next year somebody — either *Vector*, or the folks who are organising Discon III, or G.R.R.M. in disguise like the Duke in Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure* — should start a Hugo Losers Party Losers Party. And clearly if we want to think seriously about inclusivity, that means thinking about the big walls *around* events like Worldcon, not just the semi-permeable membranes within it. E.g. Con or Bust, founded by Kate Nepveu, provides financial assistance to fans

of colo[u]r to attend cons (con-or-bust.org). One question is whether established SFF figures really need to be using their financial capital and their social capital in reinforcing ways. Isn’t a great way to give back to the SFF community to pay it forward, by funding some convention attendance bursaries?

One last snippet of controversy. When the Hugo Awards were announced, one cheer was heard round the world: AO3’s Award for Best Related Work. If you don’t know it, AO3 is a giant fanfiction site, one of the Organization for Transformative Works’s many projects seeking to protect and enrich spaces of cultural production where commercial logic is kept at arm’s length. As **Naomi Novik** said in her acceptance speech, “All fanwork, from fanfic to vids to fanart to podfic, centers the idea that art happens not in isolation but in community. And that is true of the AO3 itself.” Three weeks later, a post at the behest of the World Science Fiction Society put a damper on some fun, reminding AO3 contributors that they couldn’t legitimately refer to themselves as having won a Hugo *personally*. Which raises many interesting questions, but we’re out of space here, so I’m away to finish reading “A Mistress in Heat” by Hugo-award winning authors AussieTransfan2015 and TheBigLoserQueen. Meanwhile, Glasgow is bidding to host Worldcon in 2024 ...

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Vector interviews

Yoon Ha Lee interviewed by
Jo Lindsay Walton

At WorldCon, August 2019

How has your WorldCon been so far? Any highlights?

Honestly, the highlight was going to the Book of Kells this morning, which was not at the con at all! But I don't have any program items until tomorrow.

So you have two books out this year! There's *Hexarchate Stories*, a collection set in the same world as your *Machineries of Empire* trilogy. And there's *Dragon Pearl*, a space opera with fox-magic. Is there a next project yet?

I'm working on a fantasy novel for Solaris called *Phoenix Extravagant*. It's loosely based on Korea during the Japanese occupation 1910-1945. So it has colonialism in it, but it also has mecha. And it has a rebel painter teaming up with a rogue dragon to fight the evil empire.

Sounds awesome.

The magic system is based on the art. So how robots are decorated and painted changes their behavior. It's kind of how you program them.

Let's start with a bestiary of questions. 'Stories as ghosts.' Can you tell us about a piece of writing that was lost, abandoned, stuck, or left as a fragment?

I wrote a novel in middle school. It took me three years, sixth through eighth grade. And it was terrible. It was essentially *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* fanfic, except fantasy, and with the serial numbers filed off. It was my first novel. And it was not a good novel.

Excellent. How did you interpret the character of, say, Donatello?

I don't even remember! It's been so long ...

You must. Was he elfin? Dwarven, an artificer! 'Donatello does machines.'

Something like that. I had this whole thing where they were in a fantasy planet, except metal was very rare. So they used crystals for swords. It was the kind of nonsense thing that you come up with when you're twelve years old, and you don't know anything about research. I just thought it sounded cool, so I put it in.

Yet sometimes when you read children's writing, and it has this, I don't know, strange special pigment you seldom find elsewhere ...

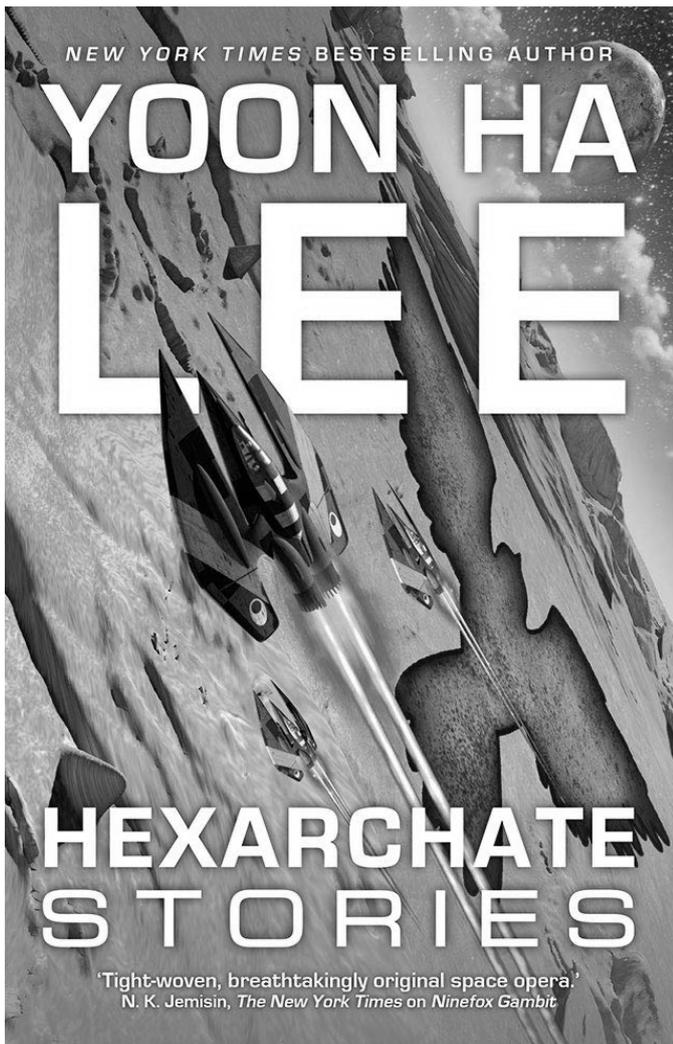
It has this sort of vitality when you're a kid because you don't know that you can't do it.

Right, exactly!

So that novel literally was lost. My parents were divorced and my dad remarried, and my step-mother threw out all my books and papers. So it no longer exists, which is probably good for the world. Because as I said, it's a terrible novel. But it's a ghost in the sense that I wrote it, and it existed, and then it stopped existing ...

I'm determined to find the ritual to summon it. But let's move on: 'stories as robots.' If your stories were robots, what kind would they be?

Oh no. That would be scary. That would be bad. Honestly, my daughter makes fun of me, because she's read my books and she says, 'You're setting



a bad example because of all the genocide.' So I think my robots might be genocidal robots? I would be scared. It would be like *Battlestar Galactica*.

***Battlestar Galactica of the Books!* Let's try a safer question. 'Stories as vampires.' From whence does your writing draw blood?**

Video games.

'Stories as fairies.' What gifts do your stories offer and can we trust them?

Never trust a story. Cheap entertainment. A book is a world for ten dollars.

And yet politics and escapism are not necessarily opposed. Politics can be articulated through escapism, right? I feel like I've heard you talk about this elsewhere ...

That's funny you say that. I met Jonathan Strahan earlier today, and he asked me what my motivation is for writing space opera. And I said blowing shit up.

Right.

And he said, 'But there are all these other themes like imperialism, colonialism, gender!' And I told him those are in there sort of as a sidelight, to fill out the world. But really my primary motivation is still to blow shit up.

But I wonder if all those secondary choices can accrue until they're just as important as your primary motivation? Like in designing a game, you might have some set of underlying mechanics. But that's not really what gives the game its essence. At least, how you skin and clothe those mechanics is far from superfluous. Do you want to talk about the role of games in your writing, by the way?

I guess I'm sort of a semi-lapsed gamer. I had more time in college, then I got married and had a kid. And, you know.

Do your books sometimes play games? Or do they immerse the reader in the same way that a game might immerse a player?

I think I play with that sometimes. Of course, sometimes game design is explicitly a topic of the book, like in *Ninefox Gambit*. And I've done some minor game design, experimenting with card games and tabletop RPGs.

You recently posted a free mini-RPG *Heretical Geese*, written with Ursula Whitcher. 'Can the Geese achieve moral insights before being assimilated?' And you've written some interactive fiction I wanted to ask about too. First I have another quick easy question.

Sure.

What is free will?

I think free will is either choice or the illusion of choice, and sometimes it's really hard to tell the difference between the two. I mean, it's a question that philosophers have spent their entire lives trying to answer. So you're not going to get a definitive answer from me!

Actually, I think we just nailed it. So when designers and critics talk about interactive fiction, there's this idea that readers/players want 'meaningful' choices. Do you agree? And if so, what is a 'meaningful' choice?

I think a player often wants the illusion of choice more than they want actual choice. Not all choices are interesting choices. When you're a game designer, it's your job to give the player the sense that choices are interesting.

Do you have an example?

If you have – I don't know, to be really cliché – there's a dragon! And the dragon is rampaging through the countryside! And it's still a meaningful choice to stay at home and do nothing about it. It's meaningful, it's just boring. Like that's obviously something ... I mean, I would do that.

I mean, I might do that.

I'm a coward. Like, I have no combat skills, I have no chances against the dragon ... so realistically I would choose to stay at home and do nothing about the dragon.

Me, I would be extremely good versus the dragon. But I'm busy at the moment.

Of course, the player wants to be the hero of the story. So you would probably take away the choice of staying at home. You would give them the choice, I don't know, to bargain with the dragon, seduce the dragon, bribe the dragon, or fight the dragon.

'Stories as dragons.' You have four novels so far. Which would you fight, which would you bribe, which would you seduce, and which would you bargain with?

Oh gosh. I would fight *Ninefox Gambit* – and lose, because Cheris and Jedao – because it's the fightiest of the four novels. I would bribe *Dragon Pearl* because, let's be real, Min is like twelve years old and I'm pretty sure that Pocky is the key to her loyalty. I would seduce *Revenant Gun*, and come to a bad end, because it's probably the one with the most sex – albeit the most really unhealthy nonconsensual kind. And I would bargain with *Raven Stratagem*, on the grounds that Cheris is a reasonable opponent and can be bargained with, unlike some of those other characters.

'Stories as gods.' If *Ninefox Gambit* were an avatar of a god, an avatar in book form, what kind of god –

War.

– would it be? A god of war.

I mean it's military science fiction. There's really nowhere else I can go with that. My mother says it's very peculiar that I'm so fascinated by military history. She's like, 'Your dad was in the army, but he was an army surgeon! He wasn't someone who went out and shot people! He sewed them back up!' I don't know, I just find it fascinating.

You're interested in military history, military strategy, and also in the ethics of war.

I first got into military ethics by way of Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game*. Obviously the genocide is one big aspect of that book. But there's another aspect people don't talk about as much. You have this whole program where children are being trained as soldiers. At the end of the war, the program designer – Colonel Graff – you know, he's a hero because he's done this! And I'm asking myself, why is he not being court marshalled for turning children into soldiers?

He's gamified genocide and used child soldiers to do it. What a hero.

Yeah. It struck me as very American, to be quite honest. But anyway.

I wanted to ask you, actually, about minor and major characters. You're quite good at bringing in a minor character who feels like they have quite a rich history, sort of hidden around the edges of the book. How do you approach orchestration of characters?

Any time you're asking a reader to remember a character, you're asking the reader to do work. So if it's the waiter who walks in and hands somebody their food and then walks off, and you never see them again, you don't want to spend a lot of detail describing that waiter. If you do that, the reader thinks, 'This waiter is someone important and I have to remember them.'

That makes perfect sense. You need to re-weight your waiter.

Yes. Or the reader will be doing work that is not necessary to understand the story. But if the character is significant to the story, then you want to signal that to the reader, and that's where all the detail comes in. That's how I look at it.

Has the way you've approached character changed over time?

Well, I used to think that characterization was almost an optional part of writing. It's actually my least favorite part of writing. If I could get away with writing stories without characters, I would do it! And then I learned – mostly from the fanfic community, honestly – that people relate most to other people because we're humans. That's what we do. We're social creatures. So I had the revelation, 'Hey, I can't neglect the characterization side.'

Does characterization differ across novels and short stories?

In a short story, there's probably not a lot of room for characterization. You can just make it about the ideas, or about some cool technology, and that can be the point of the story. But if it's a novel you have all that space, and to keep the reader engaged, you really have to shore up the characterization.

What about your servitors as characters? Can you tell us a little about writing them?

Originally they were just sort of a whimsical thing that I put in. 'Hey, there are these intelligent robots and they are kind of running the show, and the humans don't realize it.' And I got the idea from – have you ever watched the American soap opera called *Revenge*?

No, but it sounds GREAT.

Well, the first season was great. The later seasons not so much. It's about these super-rich characters. They live in the Hamptons: you know, gigantic mansion, twenty rooms ... and servants. And they have what are supposed to be top-secret conversations all the time. Because it's a soap opera, everything's life and death and very, very, very serious. And they these conversations in front of the help. As though their servants were invisible to them. These are human beings! They understand everything that's going on! And so I thought, you know, I could see a human culture doing the same thing with the robots.

That makes total sense. Because humans have done it with humans.

Yeah.

Yoon, thank you so much! To finish off, let's collaborate with a robot. Maybe as equals? There's this website called Talk to Transformer, which runs off OpenAI's neural GPT-2. It's basically really good predictive text. Let me see if I can get it open ...

I haven't seen that before. I've seen those knitting patterns that neural networks design, and the knitters try to actually knit the patterns. They're terrible patterns, but they are technically knittable.

Have you watched AI playing computer games? There might be a character whose 'falling over' animation moves them forward slightly. The AI figures out that they can travel faster by constantly falling than by walking. I love it.

I've heard that AlphaGo plays Go in ways that are really counterintuitive to humans, because it didn't have human preconceptions.

Okay! If we can come up with a sentence or two to start the story, maybe Talk to Transformer can finish it for us.

'Once upon a time there was a cat with a rail-gun.'

That is completely perfect. Yoon, it was so nice to meet you!

(For the results, see www.vector-bsfa.com.)

YOON HA LEE HAS HAD NOMINATIONS FOR THE BSFA AWARDS, THE HUGOS, THE NEBULAS, AND THE CLARKE AWARDS, AND WON THE LOCUS AWARD. HE LIVES IN TEXAS. TWITTER: @DEUCEOFGEARS.

A report from IceCon 2018

Lars Backstrom

IceCon kicked off with a Friday night icebreaker at the Klaustur Bar, where special prices for convention members made it easier to enjoy the local — extremely potent! — Icelandic brews. There was the option of joining the local horror reading group, The Bookcase of Dr. Caligari, to discuss Paul Tremblay's 'The Cabin at the End of the World.' We opted to mingle instead, and ended up chatting with IceCon organiser Brynhildur Heiðar- og Ómarsdóttir and moderator Atli Dungal Sigurðsson. This was the second IceCon, and we learned that it would be a slightly cosier affair than 2016 (largely because of a rival ComicCon in Reykjavik earlier in the Autumn), with around 75 members.

On Saturday morning, we arrived at the convention hall, Iðnó, a former theatre just next to the Althing — the Icelandic parliament — and the scenic Tjörninn lake. The audience was seated around round tables, with sofas on the stage for the panel members. Sadly, the hall is still not accessible, although IceCon is making efforts to change that.

My wife, Isabel Nuñez Ortiz, was on the first panel, about fancons and fan communities. The very relevant subtext was: how do we ensure fan communities survive, and that cons don't fizzle out as the firebrands leave? One panellist offered the expression 'bus factor.' This describes the risk of concentrating all the fandom's responsibilities and know-how in a few active members. How many members of a fandom could get hit by a bus, and the fandom still survive? Rejuvenation is also a known problem, especially for literary fandoms that don't want to shift to become more commercial multi-media fandoms. How does fandom attract new members and make them feel welcome? Finnish fandom seems to be the happy exception here, thriving in part because of its focus on free events.

Then started a series of panels all focussing on various aspects of Icelandic fantastic literature and folklore, both in a historical and present aspect. These were all fascinating, educational, and entertaining. Most of what we know about ancient Norse mythology was written down by Icelanders, most notably Snorri Sturlason, in the thirteenth century. This is considered 'high' mythology by the Icelanders themselves, whereas Icelandic folklore is considered 'low' mythology, and is much less fashionable to research. Icelandic folklore was also collected much later, in the eighteenth century. Nevertheless, it still influences present-day Icelandic literature and culture greatly. Most Icelandic fiction, including non-genre and Scandinavian Noir, contains supernatural or folkloric elements. Even the Icelandic Nobel Laureate Haldor Laxness put mythological elements in his books. Yet paradoxically, Iceland seems to suffer from the same malady as several others of the Scandinavian countries, of holding fantastic literature in low regard, or considering it to be primarily for children. Be that as it may, there seems to be a growing acceptance of the fantastic in Iceland and — if the evidence of the convention is anything to go by — an extremely energetic and enthusiastic fan base.

Because Iceland is such a small nation, with c.650,000 inhabitants, it is inevitable that there are events, places, and even persons that the readership will recognise. It is said that Icelanders read with the book in one hand and the telephone directory the other. We also heard that Icelanders love reading and books are the most popular gifts for Christmas. They mainly read translated fantastic literature: what Icelandic fantastic literature is written is seldom translated, despite some works being of very high quality. We also got introduced to the Yulelads: Icelandic goblins who emerge in



the period before Christmas. These are not nice beings, but mischievous at best. In fact, in the seventeenth century they were considered so nasty that the authorities banned them, because they traumatised the children too much!

The discussions continued in a panel on comparative folklore. In Iceland nature is still very much alive, and full of spirits. A striking proportion of Icelanders admit to believing in ghosts, and this influences their relation to their environment. One interesting side point was that there are no castles in Iceland, and therefore no heroic stories of power after the end of the Viking age. Instead their folklore flourished. There were parallels drawn between Iceland and Ireland, as both are island societies with strong folkloristic elements in their national identity. I spoke with Úlfhildur Dagsdóttir and mentioned that Japan would be another island nation with rich ties to nature. She reminded me about the excellent Japanese 1995 movie *Cold Fever*, which draws on parallels between Japanese and Icelandic folklore.

Then came the interview with Guest of Honour Naomi Novik. Perhaps her most famous works are the *Temeraire* series, set during an alternate Napoleonic Wars era, where dragons partner with humans to rule the skies. On the surface it is a combination of Patrick O'Brian's *Master and Commander* series and her wish to add dragons to any form of fiction. On a deeper level, it also studies world history by introducing a disruptive element — dragons! The seven books each represent each of the seven continents. In each continent the relationship between humans and dragons differ, and as the series progresses the impact of the dragons on world history increases. After finishing the *Temeraire* series, Novik wrote the fantasy novels *Uprooted* and *Spinning Silver*. *Uprooted* is based on her Christian Polish mother's stories,

and *Spinning Silver* is based on the experiences of her Lithuanian Jewish father. *Uprooted* is about members of a large and strong community, while *Spinning Silver* is about vulnerable individuals dependent on the whims of a larger community. There was a party organised for the evening, but because of our tight budget we elected to abstain.

The second day began with a very interesting writing workshop led by Crystal Huff, who spoke about impostor syndrome, and

Michael Swanwick (*Stations of Tide*, *Scherzo with Tyrannosaur*), who spoke about the fundamental tools of the trade, like human conflict, and how to develop them. And then — even though we did not attend the Saturday party — we still attended the delicious Hangover Brunch, which was served on-site.

In her Guest of Honour interview Úlfhildur Dagsdóttir spoke about cyborgs and the fluid boundaries between human and machine, and about her efforts to improve the status of fantastic literature in Iceland.

The Sunday afternoon panels were about general fandom and social sciences and provided a varied and interesting programme. If the first day had focussed on Icelandic folklore and literature, the second day offered a more varied selection and was more themed towards diversity and boundaries in fandom and fantastic literature. I participated in a panel that consisted solely of members with diagnosed mental disabilities, mine being autism, and we discussed how we perceive our disabilities and how fantastic literature could do more to include characters with disabilities. Another panel was about talking animals, and how they are used to mirror humanity. There was another panel about race, gender, and sexual preferences, and how to diversify fantastic literature.

The final panel — which I was also on — was about modern urban mythology and fake news. The moderator was children's author, journalist, and candidate to the Althing, Snaebjorn Brynjarsson. The panel evolved into an interesting discussion about the role of myths in modern society and how social media is an integral part of that. Social media, it was suggested, allows groups to isolate themselves in their own hermetically-closed spheres, only accessing the information they want. At the



Iceland (Photo: Grant Galbraith)

same time, social media has also broken traditional media's monopoly of information. Now there are many sources of information, some of which act as sources of fake news. These sources can become so influential that traditional media may start to report their opinions as news, for the sake of appearing unbiased.

Were there downsides to IceCon? I was surprised at the poor attendance at the first and last panels of the convention. The panels were very topical, but didn't have a majority of Icelanders as participants, and perhaps therefore lacked local interest. While most of the organisers and volunteers were both professional and friendly, there were some unfortunate exceptions.

But all in all, IceCon 2018 was well worth the visit. The organisers did a tremendous job in creating a programme both highlighting both the specifics of Icelandic fandom and fantastic literature, and challenges facing fandom and fantastic literature in general. IceCon 2020 should be opening registration soon. The guest of honour will be Mary Robinette Kowal. I for one am looking forward to attending.

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Reciprocal Babymaking is the Future: A review of Sophie Lewis's *Full Surrogacy Now*

Katie Stone

Sophie Lewis's *Full Surrogacy Now: Feminism Against Family* (Verso, 2019) is, like all good science fiction, "a book about an impossibility."¹ In this provocative and carefully-argued work, Lewis clearly demonstrates that the boundaries of possibility not only can, but must, be contested. Lewis moves from a consideration of the impossible, yet actually existing, working conditions of professional surrogates — those who carry and give birth to 'someone else's' infant — to the similarly impossible premise under which all gestational labour is undertaken. In Lewis' analysis, the reason that "bearing an infant 'for someone else' is always a fantasy, a shaky construction" is not because of the uniquely fantastic conditions of commercial surrogacy. Rather, it is attributable to the fact that "infants don't belong to anyone, ever" (19).

Full Surrogacy Now includes astute readings of prominent science-fictional texts, such as Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), Octavia Butler's 'Bloodchild' (1984) and Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976). However, Lewis' work also provides a striking example of the power of science-fictional thought in its own right. Here the strangeness of cyborgs and surrogates is explored, not to establish surrogacy as an embattled, economically-compromised alternative to 'normal' pregnancy, but rather as a way of reflecting on the compromising, violent realities of gestation as such. *Full Surrogacy Now* extends us a science-fictional invitation to understand deeply familiar words — nature, work, mother, create — in radically new and unfamiliar ways. By asking over

and over again—"why accept Nature as natural[?]" (7)—*Full Surrogacy Now* proves itself the "disloyal, monstrous, chimerical daughter" (27) of Donna Haraway's classic 'A Cyborg Manifesto' (1985), and of the tradition of feminist science fiction from which that seminal text was—and continues to be—partially, laboriously, and reciprocally birthed.

To begin with, we must remember that pregnancy is work, and it is often difficult and dangerous work. It is also often work in which the body is "working very, very hard at having the appearance of not working at all" (59). However, Lewis reminds us that the working conditions of gestational labourers vary hugely:

Pregnancy has long been substantially techno-fixed already, when it comes to those whose lives really 'matter.' Under capitalism and imperialism, safer (or, at least, medically supported) gestation has typically been the privilege of the upper classes. And the high-end care historically afforded to the rich when they gestate their own young has lately been supplemented by a 'technology' that absorbs 100 percent of the damage from the consumer's point of view: the human labor of a 'gestational surrogate.' (3)

Since its publication, *Full Surrogacy Now* has drawn fierce attacks from 'readers' who — having read the title, but not the book itself — assume that Lewis is arguing that such commercial gestational surrogacy is utterly unproblematic, and that we should welcome the expansion of the commercial surrogacy industry. This, of course, is to entirely miss the point. Lewis carefully outlines the exploitative realities of commercial gestational surrogacy,

1 Sophie Lewis, *Full Surrogacy Now: Feminism Against Family* (New York, NY: Verso, 2019), p.19. All subsequent references are to this edition and are given within the text.



a booming business that is rife with wage theft, deception, brutally inadequate health-care, a lack of informed consent, and extreme power imbalances. She also carefully picks apart the neoliberal, faux-feminist rhetoric used to justify such practices. Instead, Lewis places the lives and voices of actual surrogates, particularly those from the Global South, at the heart of her analysis.

Nevertheless, within commercial gestational surrogacy, Lewis also discovers the traces of a wider revolutionary agenda. Thinking about the experience of gestational workers becomes a way of thinking more generally about pregnancy, child-care, the organisation of our society, and the labour we undertake to reproduce society from one day to the next. Lewis writes, “We are the makers of one another. And we could learn collectively to act like it. It is those truths that I wish to call real surrogacy, full surrogacy” (19-20). Ultimately, for Lewis, “surrogacy politics aren’t just a concern for an infinitesimal, niche sliver of the proletariat” (56), any more than the anarchism of Ursula K. Le Guin’s

Anarres, or the lesbian feminism of Joanna Russ’s *Whileaway* is ‘just’ a concern for the inhabitants of those imagined regions.²

Lewis draws upon a long history of socialist feminist thought—Silvia Federici’s *Wages Against Housework* (1974) is a particular influence—to reframe the discourse around pregnancy. By using surrogacy as her lens, she can reveal the inconsistencies in what passes for ‘common sense’ about pregnancy. “Pregnancy is not something society as a whole tends to question. Surrogacy, on the other hand, is hotly contested. Yet we can readily perceive that all that really separates the two is the possibility of a wage” (44). Refusing to position gestational work as a sacred maternal sphere, determined by a naturalised biology, Lewis instead asks: “What if we really felt the politics of uterine work to be comparable to other labors[?]” (129).

In this way, *Full Surrogacy Now* is part of a larger, pressing, political project. This is the project that challenges the white, liberal, trans-exclusionary, whorephobic, ‘feminist’ discourse which is currently dominating conversations around sex work and gestational labour. Just as infants do not belong to their parents as property, workers do not belong to their clients or employers. In advocating for the rights of workers whose labour is so often delegitimised, exploited, and criminalised, *Full Surrogacy Now* joins texts as Juno Mac and Molly Smith’s *Revolting Prostitutes* (2018). Here, Lewis argues for the recognition of surrogacy as work, while simultaneously taking up a fundamentally anti-work position. For Lewis, gestational labour’s “articulation as work in the first instance will be key to abolishing [it] (as work) in the long run” (42).

Although *Full Surrogacy Now* always keeps these wider goals in sight, a substantial part of Lewis’s writing takes the form of an analysis of the material conditions of gestational workers currently labouring within the commercial surrogacy industry. The study which Lewis provides of the Akanksha Hospital, and in particular of the charismatic representative of neoliberalism Dr. Nayana Patel, is detailed, wide-ranging and politically and theoretically rigorous. Lewis notes that

2 See Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* (London: Gollancz, 2002; first published 1974) and Joanna Russ, *The Female Man* (London: Gollancz, 2010; first published 1975).

[...] most prominent white feminists, no matter how queer they are at home, no matter how critical of the family as the primary site of patriarchal and queerphobic abuse, are remarkably prone to forgetting this antipathy when it comes to legislating lives in sufficiently "other" (proletarian) neighborhoods. (41)

In contrast, Lewis's approach provides a welcome alternative to this ideologically-driven amnesia. Even for those for whom commercial surrogacy is not (yet) a particular area of interest, Lewis's determined focus on the material conditions of these particular labourers should be noted.

The emphasis on the working conditions of surrogates is also of particular relevance to those SF critics who study so-called "pregnancy dystopias" (10), given that, as Lewis argues, "in order to paint the neat picture of surrogacy-as-dystopia that First World feminists so often seem to want to paint, actually existing gestational workers have to be ignored almost by definition" (16). Lewis reintroduces the voices of those workers who are actively seeking out these supposedly-dystopic surrogate pregnancies into the conversation around dystopian pregnancy narratives. In this way, she demonstrates that a queer, feminist, anti-capitalist critique of an industry in which "living humans have become the sexless 'technology' component of the euphemism Assisted Reproductive Technology" (24) need not take a Eurocentric perspective which erases the agency and desires of those same "living humans."

One prime example of a 'pregnancy dystopia' is Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). Lewis joins scholars such as Kate Meakin in critiquing "Atwood's sterility apocalypse" (11) for its deification of white motherhood, its race-blindness, and the "stylized pleasure" it takes in its "chastity cos-play" (13): something which has become increasingly prominent in the recent HBO adaptation of Atwood's writing.

Borrowing the historical experience of forced surrogacy from the American plantation, Atwood had [...] clearly adapted its emotiveness for the purposes of a color-blind — white — feminism. [...] At least the original novel had referred to Gilead's eugenic

purging of the tacitly African 'Children of Ham,' thereby demonstrating some recognition of the racial character of reproductive stratification as elaborated through the Middle Passage [slave ships crossing from Africa to the Americas]. In 2017, Hulu series director Bruce Miller took blithe erasure of black women's historic connection with surrogacy to the next level. Announcing that he had 'simplified' the story, Miller presented an image of a society with no race, class, or history: a society in which 'fertility trumps all.'

Lewis further argues: "the pleasures of an extremist misogyny, defined as womb-farming, risks concealing from us what are simply slower and less photogenic forms of violence, such as race, class, and binary gender itself" (14). She is certainly not dismissive of those for whom, as she puts it, "a personal encounter with this particular text has been the moment of feminist coming-to-consciousness" (14). But nor does she accept that the popularity of *The Handmaid's Tale* in feminist circles ought to absolve it of all its many failings. In this she provides a model for those feminist SF critics who are hesitant about demanding a rigorously intersectional, trans-inclusive feminism from texts which are often hailed as feminist masterpieces simply because they champion the rights of (cis, straight, white) women.

Lewis also offers readings of Butler's and Piercy's writing: framing their surrogate-focused works as texts which either engage in surrogacy as terrifying and alien (Butler) or as a utopian alternative to the 'problem' of human gestation (Piercy). By returning frequently to these texts as part of her wider theorisation of surrogacy, Lewis joins the great tradition of feminist writers such as Haraway, Susan Stryker, and adrienne maree brown, who weave science fiction into their theoretical analyses—once again challenging the boundaries of possibility. From a SF studies perspective, it's worth pointing out that Lewis' coverage of these texts is relatively brief, and highly focused. I feel that there is more room here for SF scholars to explore the implications of what Lewis calls "full surrogacy" (20) within feminist SF. Feminist SF is a field which is deeply invested in the ethics of reproductive technology, and thus in the fact that, as Lewis puts it,

"we are the makers of one another" (19). In Piercy's lactating fathers and Butler's multi-generational, multi-species communities where — just as in the contemporary commercial surrogacy industry — gestational labour is coercively but consensually entered into, I see more than the oscillation between "the alienated misery of the status quo" and "the silver absolutism of their techno-fix" (28). I see a gesture towards the "horizon of gestational communism" (21) that Lewis locates in the science-fictional sculptures of artist Patricia Piccinini. Lewis argues that the question to be gleaned from Piccinini's sculptures is "not whether surrogates will intimately produce us one day," but "rather, how we should respond to them and hold them—since they're already here" (158).

It is this utopian turn in her writing which, I argue, transforms Lewis's work from insightful critique into transformative critical apparatus. This is not a book which is merely about impossibility; rather, it demands impossibility.³ The fact that we cannot necessarily explain every detail of what Lewis calls the "gestational commune" (29) must not prevent us from desiring it, nor from creating it. Moreover, this is not an impossibility which lies in a distant future, beyond the utopian horizon. As Lewis rightly notes: "Despite capitalism's worldwide hegemony, many people on earth are putting something like 'full surrogacy' into practice every day, cultivating non-oedipal kinship and sharing reciprocal mothering labors between many individuals and generations" (147). Reciprocal baby-making is the stuff of impossibility. It is also happening right now. We can only hope that, as Sun Ra might put it, "when you've achieved one impossible the others / Come together to be with their brother" ... or, in this case, with their multiply-parented surro-sibling.⁴

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3 See Tom Moylan, *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination* (York: Methuen, 1986)

4 Sun Ra, 'Reality has touched against myth', *Esquire* (July, 1969) 53-141.

Vector interviews

Emma Newman interviewed by Jo Lindsay Walton

At BristolCon, November 2018

Hello Emma Newman! What a delight and an honour. How has your BristolCon been so far?

Well, I actually arrived quite late, so I've really just got here.

So far it's been, "ambushed for an interview."

Yes! And looking at beautiful art, actually.

Now, you are much better at interviewing people than I am. But one person you never seem to interview is you. So if you were interviewing you, what would you ask you?

"Would you like a cup of tea?"

Would you like a cup of tea?

I would love a cup of tea! But I think that's in another room.

In that case, there's no time to lose! Your last book was *Before Mars*, part of the Planetfall sequence. What projects are you working on now?

Well, I've just finished my last round of pre-copy edits on *Atlas Alone*, which is the fourth book in the Planetfall sequence. That's been sent off, and I've just got the copy-edits to come back on that one ... so it's a long way down the road to being finished, which is always a nice feeling.

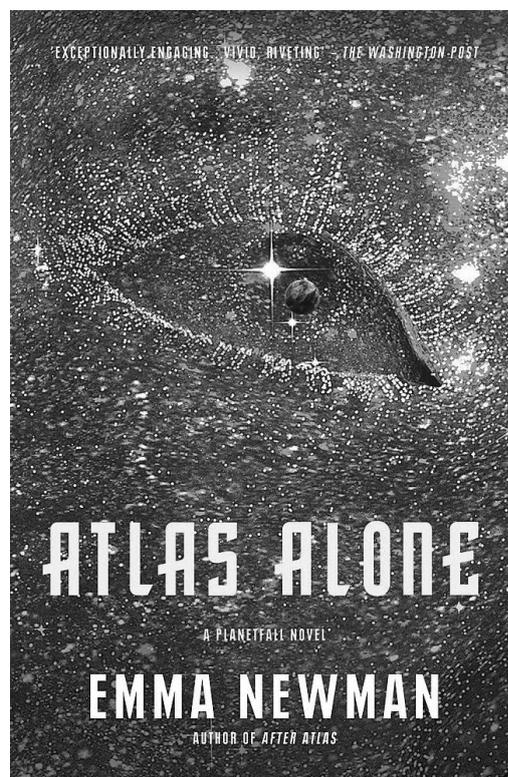
Can you tell us about the shift from urban fantasy to science fiction? Are there sort of traces of urban fantasy in the earlier Planetfall books that then trickle away, or ... ?

No, no. I mean, it completely surprised me that my first books were urban fantasy, because I've always been a science fiction fan. When I was a teenager,

in fact most of my adult life, science fiction is all I've read. And then a story came into my head and I wrote it ... and then I was informed by the publisher that it was urban fantasy. I had no idea, I was just writing a story! So it was partly that. That was the story that came out at that time, and it happened to be urban fantasy. Strictly speaking, the first novels I wrote were post-apocalyptic, which is a little bit away from urban fantasy.

Whereas with science fiction, I was actually quite scared of writing it. It was hugely intimidating. I also didn't know how I'd be received as a woman

writing science fiction. I was concerned about how male the classic canon is, and whether I could be welcomed into the genre. And beyond that, the even greater concern was what could I add to the



conversation. Because there had already been so many amazing ideas and so many incredible writers. What could I possibly add to that dialogue?

What did you try to add?

In-depth psychological studies, and explorations of mental health. So much of the science fiction which I utterly adore is very concept-driven. In some of the science fiction which I truly love, the characters are practically cardboard cut-outs, there to deliver the incredible concept, the amazing execution of an idea. But they're not characters in the way that would satisfy me. What I wanted to do was have it all. I wanted to have a really, really strong science fiction concept, but I also wanted to have realistic, flawed characters that the reader gets to know very, very, very well.

And 'flaws' is one well-established way of thinking about how you round out characters. But maybe 'mental health' can be a different way of thinking about that?

Oh very much so. I really don't see mental illness as a flaw. The 'flaws' that I'm thinking about are things like the way that they cope with secrets, the way that they cope with pressure, the way that they just can't figure out how to have good relationships with their friends and their family. The mental illness side is very separate in my mind. As somebody who has lived with an anxiety disorder for over twenty years, and having many friends who have a variety of mental illnesses, there is an incredible strength and resilience in people who function in the world as it is today.

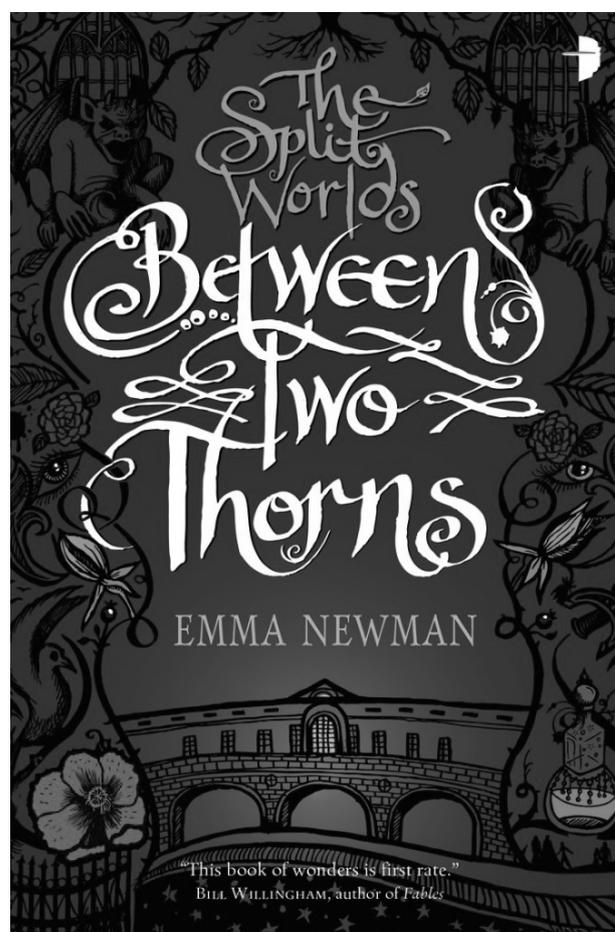
In *Planetfall*, for example, I wanted to show the protagonist's incredible intelligence. I wanted to show how she was a pillar of the colony. I wanted to show her as an absolutely badass 3D-printing engineer. She is all of those things first, and it's halfway through the book that the reader finds out what the nature of her mental health issues are. And that was really important to me, that the reader gets to know her as a person. I wanted them to discover a character who's as rich and complex as a real human, rather than, 'Oh look at this character defined by her very interesting mental illness.' So that's what I wanted to show: that you can see so much more of a person thrown into relief by a mental illness, but also kind of underpinned by it as well.

That is really interesting. Okay, let me see if I can express this question right. There's often a tension, in how we understand mental health, between the biological and the social. So for example, the DSM — the official handbook that lists diagnoses for mental disorders — has gone through several editions. But that's not just because the medical profession has been updating its understanding over time. People's actual behaviours, actual experiences, actual realities, have also changed according to the societies in which they live.

Yes.

And science fiction allows us to extrapolate future societies, or to imagine alternate societies. So I guess what I'm wondering is, when you explore possible futures, are the possible futures of mental health part of that?

I think about it a huge amount, although it hasn't necessarily been the emphasis in the books. One of the things that I did want to examine is, even if you have incredible medical technology, where there are embedded neural chips that can run your body



physiologically, you can still have mental illness. It isn't just biology. There are stresses, there are traumas that happen in someone's life, and you can't just medicate that away.

Sure. No matter how sophisticated the technology is.

And something I wanted to examine in *Planetfall* was the reaction of the community, when it becomes apparent how much the protagonists are suffering. Because the community doesn't necessarily handle it as well as they could have. I really wanted to examine how you can have the best of humanity, incredibly progressive, very forward thinking, very intelligent people ... and they can still screw it up when it comes to supporting somebody with mental health issues. And my kind of fury at how this particular mental illness often gets treated in our media. But I can't talk about it too much without ...

Spoilers.

Spoilers, yes. So yeah, it is something that I think about a lot, and sometimes address in my writing. For instance, if you have technology which enables you to effectively neuro-chemically manage your brain, where is the diving line between alleviating the symptoms of mental illness, and changing fundamentally who that person is? Where is that line?

And maybe sometimes there kind of isn't a line.

You know, I have a friend who has bipolar disorder. We have discussions about lithium, and how sometimes you face a trade-off between functionality within a really shit society, against being the best you can be. And then, how are you going to ride out the worst of the depressive episodes? So finding that balance is so hard.

But then, if it's possible that you'll one day have more defined and granular mental technology, and chips that can actively intervene and manage those levels, what would that mean? Are you going to be able to get ... get the best of yourself ... without kind of numbing everything, without making everything grey, in that way that can sometimes can happen with lithium? Those kind of issues, I'm really interested in.

Final question. Any recommendations? What have you been enjoying?

I've just read back-to-back and hugely enjoyed *The High Ground* and *In Evil Times* by Melinda Snodgrass. They're the first two books of the Imperials Saga. They're really excellent, solid fun, rip-roaring, fast-paced. It's like a space opera with great characters and an examination of class, and privilege, and what meritocracy really is not. They're really, really enjoyable.

Fantastic.

And in terms of pure sci-fi, *Semiosis* by Sue Burke. It's a colonization and first contact story. It spans I think five or six generations of people in this colony, a colony which doesn't start the way that they wanted it to. And it examines a relationship with an organism which is indigenous to the planet. In my mind it is very old school sci-fi — the concept comes first, and you don't get to know the characters in a great deal of depth, because the characters are spread out across several generations. But I really enjoyed it, and it felt really solid science-wise.

Awesome. We'll keep an eye out for those. And we'll be looking forward to *Atlas Alone* too. Thank you so much, Emma!

You're very welcome!

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Vector Recommends

***Gnomon* by Nick Harkaway (William Heineman, 2017)**

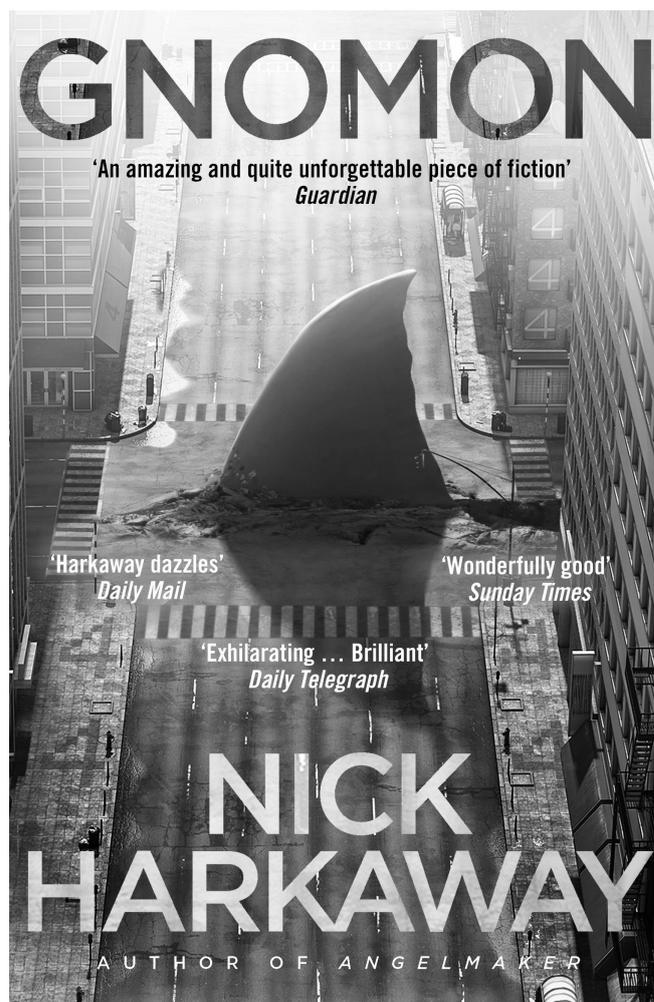
Paul Graham Raven

There's a blurb on my copy of *Gnomon* where Warren Ellis explains how much he hates Nick Harkaway for having written it. I can relate: the ambition of this book would be enviable even if the execution weren't very impressive. And the execution is very impressive indeed.

I need to capture *Gnomon's* essence in not many more words than it has pages: a daunting challenge in its own right, made harder by my heaping praise on it in my opening paragraph. Readers familiar with my reviews will know I hold no truck with the Spoiler Police, but I'm nonetheless hesitant to reveal too much – not because outlining the plot would spoil your enjoyment of it, but because it's effectively immune to summary. There's just too much going on.

But still, let's give it a go. For the setting, we have a dystopian future UK of the algorithmic-panopticon type: cameras and sensors everywhere, AI running all the things, democracy driven by mandatory online plebiscites covering everything from local disputes to major reforms of the legal apparatus. (It's like the blockchain-enabled Society Of Tomorrow™ that features in TED talks, which is of course the point.) There are no police any more, only the Witness, one of whom – Meilikki Neith – is our viewpoint character.

Neith has to investigate a high-profile case: the death in custody of a suspected dissident. Dissidents like Diana Hunter are routinely identified by the System and brought in for questioning; more often than not, their dissidence is diagnosed as some incipient or as-yet-unnoticed mental illness or social dysfunction, and is treated before they're released to go on with their lives in a happier,



more well-adjusted manner. The treatment and diagnosis are performed by the same means: a combination of innovations that make it possible to read human mindstates with an astonishing level of fidelity, and also to edit them. It is during such a questioning that Diana Hunter, minor novelist and luddite recluse, died. The rarity of such deaths merits Neith's investigation – she's one of the best – because it's important that the System be seen to be fair, that due process is followed.

The procedure is for Neith to review the memories retrieved from Hunter's mind, so as to check whether she was the dissident that the System

considered she might be, and whether her death was thus akin to the suicide of a captured enemy agent – to see if she had something to hide, in other words. Hunter’s memories are duly dumped into Neith’s mind. But while she’s waiting for them to settle, she decides to go gumshoe around in Hunter’s anachronistic house. The place is a Faraday cage, lined with books, devoid of cameras and sensors, and thus effectively off-grid in panopticonic terms. There, Neith meets an oddly-named androgyne who asks her a series of confusing questions, before roughing her up and doing a runner. In the aftermath of this assault, Hunter’s memories begin to surface in Neith’s consciousness... only it seems that they’re not Hunter’s memories at all, but those of a succession of other characters.

These could almost be treated as novellas in their own right: first-person accounts which bring the experiences of their narrators into sharp and immediate (if deliberately foreshortened) focus. Kyriakos the stock-market whizz-kid gains a god-like ability to see where the markets will turn, only to see them – and the rest of the world – turn sharply downwards. The alchemist Athenais is assigned to solve a Byzantine murder mystery that occurred in an occult contraption of her own fraudulent invention and ends up on an inter-planar vision-quest. Berihun, a feted artist in the last years of Haile Selassie’s Ethiopia, finds his creativity revitalised when invited by his games-designer daughter to contribute to her latest project, a dystopian surveillance-society RPG that presses all the wrong political buttons in a very Brexit contemporary Britain. And in a post-human far future, the book’s eponymous character takes up a tainted offer that might let them bring an end to all things, now, then, and forever more. As we move through these accounts, interspersed with Neith’s attempts to make sense of the mind they tumbled from, we realise that they are not mere nonsense that Hunter had hidden in her head, but something larger and stranger and more interconnected than that.

The central notion isn’t exactly original – it’s rather Strossean, in fact. I doubt I was the only reader who, a third of the way through, had a solid notion of Harkaway’s intended trajectory, not to mention an inkling of why he was going there. Perhaps this is a thing that only a writer would say, but there’s a sense in which the real protagonist of *Gnomon* was Harkaway himself: much tension came from wondering how, if ever, Harkaway was going to land this thing without tearing off the undercarriage and

ploughing into a passenger terminal. I was prepared for (and would have forgiven) a moderately bumpy or abrupt landing, an ending that tried to play the game straight while using a doubled deck of cards. Heck, I’d have probably forgiven a hammer-it-home boot-on-a-face-forever conclusion – though that’s almost the exact opposite of what you get, even if things are far from happily-ever-after.

But I never imagined Harkaway would have the audacity to have the book itself address me so directly and plainly in its final pages, to state its metafictional purpose while simultaneously claiming its own success... and yet he did, and it does, and it works (at least for me, shameless postmodernist that I am).

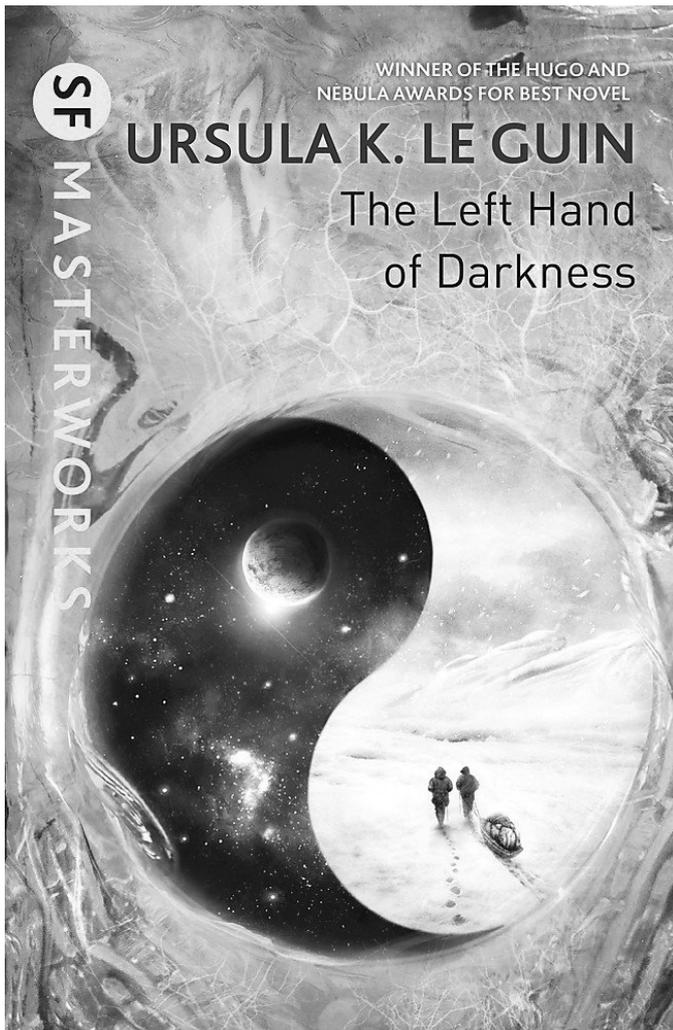
There’s so much more I could say, so much more I want to say, so much more I don’t know how to say. So I’ll just say: you should read it, it’s a masterpiece.

***The Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula K. Le Guin (Gollancz SF Masterworks, 2017)**

Nick Hubble

The Left Hand of Darkness is set on the planet Gethin, also known as Winter where there is no sexual difference between people apart from a monthly period of kemmer. When the androgynous Gethenians meet in kemmer, hormonal secretions increase so that either male or female dominance is established in one and the partner takes on the other sexual role:

Normal individuals have no predisposition to either sexual role in kemmer; they do not know whether they will be the male or the female, and have no choice in the matter. (Otie Nim wrote that in the Orgoreyn region the use of hormone derivatives to establish a preferred sexuality is quite common; I haven’t seen this done in rural Karhide.). Once the sex is determined it cannot change ... If the individual was in the female role and was impregnated, hormonal activity of course continues, and for the 8.4 month gestation period and the 6- to 8- month lactation period this individual remains female. ... With the cessation of lactation the female ...



becomes once more a perfect androgyne. No physiological habit is established, and the mother of several children may be the father of several more. (91)

Thus read the field notes of Ong Tot Oppong of the Hainish Ekumen on her initial observations concerning the sexual life of the Gethenians. These notes are in the possession of Genly Ai, who has openly come to Gethen as an ambassador from the Ekumen with the purpose of inviting the Gethenians to join the wider interstellar community. 'The Question of Sex' – as the chapter in which Ong's notes appear is titled – is the aspect of *The Left Hand of Darkness* which has attracted most attention over the near half century since its original publication.

I was going to begin this review by arguing that 'if Heinlein's line "the door dilated" is often presented as an example of the cognitive estrangement of 1940s Golden Age SF, then Le Guin's "The king was pregnant" is representative of a more

profound late 1960s countercultural and feminist defamiliarisation.' But then I read China Miéville's introduction to this new edition of Le Guin's 1969 classic and discovered to my horror that not only does he make the exact same comparison, he also sums up its significance more effectively: 'Heinlein renders one corridor strange: Le Guin reconfigures society.' For Miéville, the novel's defamiliarisation of gender makes it unquestionably a precursor of the genderqueerness and sexual fluidity of our twenty-first-century present.

However, as he acknowledges, it was not always seen in such a radical light. Le Guin's use of universal male pronouns to denote a society without a permanent sexual divide and therefore without a gender division, led to Joanna Russ, among others, criticising *The Left Hand of Darkness* for only containing men in practice. In *In the Chinks of the World Machine* (1988), Sarah Lefanu argues that the lack of sexual difference means that there is no historical dialectic and that the novel's popularity is due to it simultaneously offering women a retreat from conflict back to the pre-Oedipal imaginary order while offering men the opportunity to roam freely unconstrained by the difficulties that arise from sexual difference. Adam Roberts went as far as to say, in *Science Fiction* (2000), that *The Left Hand of Darkness* is remarkably non-binary as a novel, with an appealing spirituality but an unengaging storyline, and mainly dependent on the quality of its world-building to attract readers' imaginative and emotional investment.

In fact, *The Left Hand of Darkness* has long had all the hallmarks of one of those novels which one feels guiltily ashamed of uninhibitedly enjoying in private while publicly pretending indifference in order to fit in with the apparent critical consensus. There is something about all that apparently non-existent narrative tension concerning the fate of Genly's mission and his relationship with the mysterious and enigmatic King's Ear, Estraven, that makes one need to keep turning the pages even on the umpteenth rereading. The plot is not negligible by any means. The central irony that the rather backward kingdom of Karhide does eventually turn out to be more important to Genly than the apparently more modern and democratic Orgoreyn, is the inspiration for Iain Banks's Culture-

related planetary romance, *Inversions* (1998). And, of course, the Culture is also a society in which it is possible for the mother of several children to become the father of several more.

Maybe the fantasies of motherhood which male readers might indulge while reading such novels are merely examples of how men might roam freely in their imagination while unconstrained by the difficulties that arise from sexual difference? Interestingly, when Le Guin wrote about *The Left Hand of Darkness* in her 1976 essay, 'Is Gender Necessary?', she noted that it seemed to be men who engaged most clearly with her conception of Estraven as both 'man and woman, familiar and different, alien and utterly human' by identifying with Genly and therefore participating 'in his painful and gradual discovery of love.' Eleven years later, however, in 'Is Gender Necessary? Redux' (1987), following more criticism of the novel, she appeared to change her mind on this matter: 'Men were inclined to be satisfied with the book, which allowed them a safe trip into androgyny and back, from a conventionally male viewpoint. But many women wanted it to go further ...' Yet, rather than simply replace the earlier passage with the new judgement, she allowed both versions to sit beside each other by including the new observations in square brackets within the original essay. In this way the ambivalence and ambiguity of the novel became replicated in her commentary upon it. Men might read the novel in either way. Or indeed, they might read it one way and then experience it differently when reading it again. And women were also invited 'to explore androgyny from a women's point of view' as if, irony of ironies, 'it was written by a woman.' Le Guin's self-criticism may appear to be an internalisation of her critics' arguments but on closer reading it is often apparent that she is angry with herself for not managing to make them see the points she was trying to make.

Miéville begins his introduction by noting that '[t]he unluckiest books are those ignored or forgotten. But spare a thought too for those fated to become classics. A classic is too often a volume that everyone thinks they know.' He goes on to suggest that *The Left Hand of Darkness* transcends this status by remaining alive. However, as I'm sure Miéville is perfectly aware, the defining

characteristic of genuine classics is not that they are 'known' and, therefore, neutered entities, but that they remain alive precisely by feeding on the life in their new readers. A classic is a classic because after it has drawn out one response from a reader, it remains hungry not just for new readers but for new responses from its existing readers. So while on the first reading, men might enjoy a trip into androgyny and then back to safety and women might want more, on the second reading, they all might identify differently.

For example, as an adolescent I read this novel indiscriminately as an exotic adventure. Later, having learned somewhere that it is a novel about gender, or the absence thereof, I dutifully read it as a novel about gender, or the absence thereof, and felt rather puzzled by it all. Becoming more aware of the history of the feminist SF of the 1970s, and having undergone the visceral experience of reading Joanna Russ's *The Female Man*, I returned to *The Left Hand of Darkness* for reassurance and found it had become much weirder than I remembered. Some years later, the weirdness had transformed into a pleasurable campness ('My landlady, a voluble man' etc) and I read both Genly and Estraven as queer men. But when I read it again, while they remained queer, neither of them were any longer men. The male pronouns may have originally led to critics saying there are only men in the novel but actually their universality is ultimately so unstable that it radically calls into question their capacity to signify the male gender in the novel and, indeed, outside of it. Language is destabilised and with it meaning. In this respect, *The Left Hand of Darkness* should be considered an example of literary experimentation as radical as any in the genre.

The novel is also, of course, an old-fashioned love story, as Le Guin implied in her 1976 comment that her male readers understood this through their identification with Genly. For all Genly's tiresome misogyny and heterosexual disgust, his attraction to Estraven is clear from the outset:

Estraven's performance had been womanly, all charm and tact and lack of substance, specious and adroit. Was it in fact this soft supple femininity that I disliked and

distrusted in him? For it was impossible to think of him as a woman, that dark, ironic, powerful presence near me in the firelit darkness, and yet whenever I thought of him as a man I felt a sense of falseness: in him, or in my own attitude towards him? His voice was soft and rather resonant but not deep, scarcely a man's voice, but scarcely a woman's voice either ... (12)

Estraven's presence dominates this novel, fascinating both narrator and reader from the outset in the manner of a classic adventure romance. In which respect, it should be noted that the tense climactic crossing off the ice cap is one of the best pieces of sustained action writing in fiction. However, unlike many classic adventure stories, the sexual attraction between the two protagonists during these heightened experiences is made explicit to the reader, even if not consummated. It is not simply the case that there is no conventional female 'love interest' to disguise male same-sex desire; it is rather that Estraven fulfils both of these roles and in so doing he appears more complete than the awkward, diffident Genly. Roberts suggests that the Gethenians are not strictly speaking androgynous in that they are not both sexually male and female but neither except when in kemmer. However, Estraven, as described above, is clearly androgynous in the strict sense of the term even though not in kemmer. The reader identifying with Genly comes to share this sense of their own inadequacy, which is made manifest in his revulsion with his own people when they come down to Gethen in a starship. Genly is only happy again when alone with a Gethenian: 'his face, a young, serious face, not a man's face and not a woman's face, a human face' (296).

By the end of the novel, Genly has learned to see in the Gethenians not an absence of gender but a different kind of non-binary gender and so can the reader. Famously, 'there is no myth of Oedipus on Winter'; no father to kill and no mother to sleep with because there is no separation of humans between binary gendered roles. In consequence there is no division into the dualisms of dominant/submissive, owner/chattel, or active/passive, but this is not simply a 'retreat' – as Lefanu terms it – from the symbolic order of the Oedipal complex

back to the pre-Oedipal imaginary order. Rather than signalling a lack of narrative tension, this return allows imaginary identification with all subject positions simultaneously and thus underwrites the re-readability of the novel. *The Left Hand of Darkness* is a classic because however many times we read it, we can't exhaust its infinitude of possible meanings. Even though you think you know it, read it again!

KINCAID IN SHORT

PAUL KINCAID



M \vee \neg **M**

[‘M OR NOT M’]

THIS WAS A TALK DELIVERED AT THE 2019 EASTER CONVENTION

Many years ago, back when it was all dinosaurs round here, I would occasionally find myself involved in programming conventions. One Eastercon, in Manchester, I think, I came up with what I thought was a really spiffy idea. I would moderate a discussion between the science fiction writer, Iain M. Banks, and the mainstream writer, Iain Banks.

It didn't work.

Iain was up for the idea, but circumstances meant that we didn't have a chance to rehearse beforehand, or even to talk over how we were going to do this. Now, it was Iain Banks, who could have an audience in stitches just reading the telephone directory (do we still have telephone directories?), so the item wasn't actually a catastrophe. But it wasn't what I'd intended.

So, given that stunning past success, I thought I'd revive the idea here today. Well, not exactly. You may have noticed: I'm not Iain Banks, and I couldn't do the accent to save my life. But I thought I would look at some of the areas I wanted to discuss with him on that long-ago day, given the things I learned when I was writing my book about him.

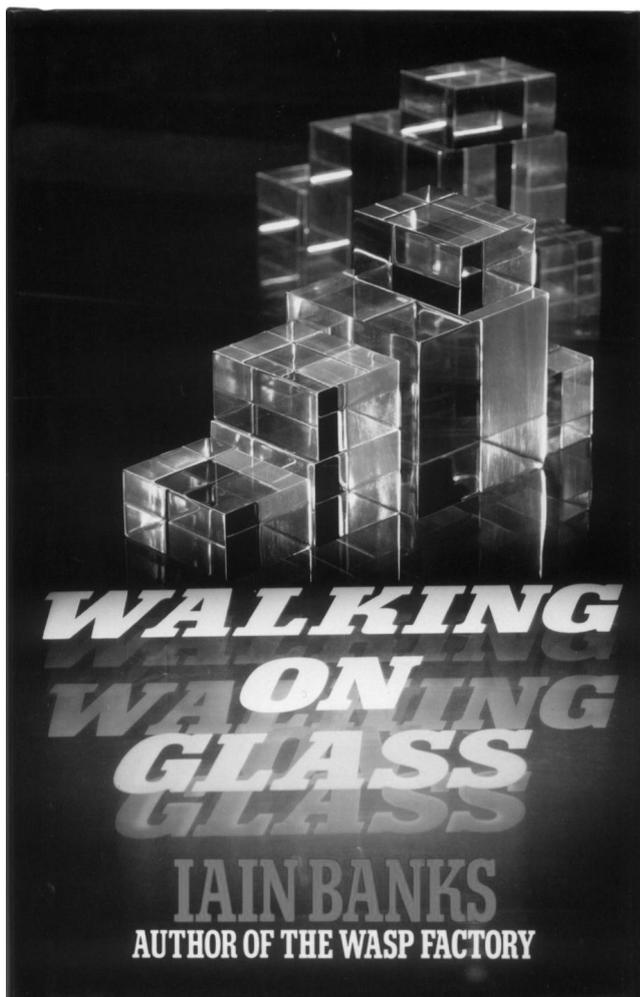
Let's start with the name. Menzies was an old, proud family name, and in the early years when he was just collecting rejections on early novels like *The Tashkent Rambler*, *Against A Dark Background* and *The Player of Games*, he would invariably sign his work Iain M. Banks.

Then, an editor at Macmillan, James Hale, decided he rather liked *The Wasp Factory* and thought that they should take a chance publishing it. Immediately, James Hale and Banks started to have worries about the name.

Anyone who has read much P.G. Wodehouse (and if you haven't, why not?) knows that one of his regular characters is an appalling romantic novelist called Rosie M. Banks. Would the name, Iain M. Banks, cause confusion? Personally, I'm not sure how anyone could mistake *The Wasp Factory* for the work of an appalling romantic novelist, but this was the first book from a totally unknown writer and they couldn't afford to let anything get in the way of people picking the novel up and giving it a chance. So the M went.

Banks said many times that he got an awful lot of stick from his family for that decision. What's wrong with Menzies? Aren't you proud of your family?

Anyway, let's fast forward a couple of years. Another of my gigs on convention programmes was a convention called Mexican. For the first Mexican we had attracted Alasdair Gray and Russell Hoban as guests, and now we were looking to repeat that coup for Mexican 2. One day our chairman, Greg Pickersgill, stormed into a committee meeting waving a copy of *The Wasp Factory* and declaring "This is our guy!" So I read *The Wasp Factory*, and then I read *Walking on Glass*, which had just come out, and he was absolutely right, this was our guy. (Keep this in mind; I'll come back to this point in a few minutes).



I wrote to Banks, he came to the convention, had a great time, and announced that he had a number of sf novels he'd not been able to get published, but he was going to revive them.

Now Macmillan was a venerable firm; the former prime minister, Harold Macmillan, was a member of the family that still controlled the company. They had a high reputation as a fiction publisher, and for nurturing their authors. *The Wasp Factory* had been a surprise, if rather controversial, critical success and best seller; so was *Walking on Glass*; so was his next one, *The Bridge*. Iain Banks was making them a pot of money, so they were happy to indulge one of their most successful authors. At the same time, they knew nothing about science fiction, they didn't publish it, they had no experience in the field. Moreover, it was an era when it was not done for a successful mainstream writer to suddenly produce science fiction, they were worried it could damage his reputation, and his sales. So they suggested he might use a pseudonym.

Banks had no problem with that idea. For a time he played around with pen names like John B. Macallan, derived, typically, from his favourite

blended whisky, Johnny Walker Blue Label, and his favourite single malt, The Macallan. But in the end he saw it as a chance to make peace with his family. Which is why *Consider Phlebas* appeared under the impenetrable pseudonym of Iain M. Banks, going back to the way he had first signed his work.

So far, so straightforward. But this brings us to a much trickier question: what exactly is the difference between a novel by Iain Banks and a novel by Iain M. Banks? Other than Menzies, what does the M actually stand for?

The simple answer, the one you'd get from most people, and indeed the one I used at the start of this talk, is that Iain M. Banks wrote science fiction and Iain Banks wrote mainstream fiction. Wrong!

Remember what I said about inviting him to Mexico on the strength of *The Wasp Factory* and *Walking on Glass*? Both of those novels have, shall we say, an identifiable sympathy with science fiction. One third of *Walking On Glass* features two characters imprisoned in a castle on an alien world. True, the castle is made of books, and is obviously a metaphor. But much of the work we identify uncontroversially as science fiction is metaphorical; it is no less science fiction for that. And then there's *The Bridge*, with its Scottish barbarian, its scenes set in the strange society of the titular bridge. This was, at the very least, a science fiction writer manqué.

But, of course, these three novels appeared before his career bifurcated, in the way that Graham Greene's career, for example, was divided between his novels and his entertainments. Maybe we could say that, after the appearance of *Consider Phlebas*, with the debuting of his Iain M. Banks persona, from that point onwards the M signified science fiction.

Certainly, there is an argument for saying that the invention of Iain M. Banks gave him the freedom to pursue, more whole heartedly, the bigger, bolder visions of science fiction where his real interest lay. Except that is difficult to justify. The first thing he wrote, in longhand, when he was about fourteen, was a thriller called *Top of Poseidon*. When he realised this was too short to count as a novel, he reused the plot for a thriller in the style of Alastair MacLean called *The Hungarian Lift-Jet*. And after that he wrote *The Tashkent Rambler* which was basically a thriller plot used as an excuse to crowd in the sorts of puns that would make Adam Roberts blush; one character,

for instance, was called Toss Macabre. It eventually reached half a million words, and I doubt that there were very many of them that wouldn't make you wince at the excruciating word-play. He was already submitting *The Tashkent Rambler* to publishers when he went to university and finally started thinking about writing science fiction. And at the same time that he was attempting this first foray into science fiction, which he would quickly abandon, he was also starting to write the poems that would eventually appear in his posthumous collection with Ken MacLeod, and most of those poems do not have the taint of science fiction. One of the poems written at this time, "Feu de Joie", which means "Fire of Joy", would later form the starting point for the Iain Banks novel, *A Song of Stone*; while the encounter on a bus described in the poem "Jack" would later be incorporated into his mainstream short story "Peace".

I don't think it is accurate, therefore, to think of the Iain M. Banks novels as a return to his first love. I think the first love was actually writing itself, whatever form it might take. And science fiction just happened to be one of those forms that offered the fun of wild invention.

I'm more inclined to think, in fact, that the invention of Iain M. Banks gave him the freedom to pursue, more wholeheartedly, mainstream realism

under the Iain Banks name, novels like *Espedair Street*, *The Crow Road* and *Complicity*. I don't think he'd necessarily have written these the way he did if he didn't have the Iain M. Banks books to filter off the more extravagant strains of the fantastic.

Except that once again, this is not the full story. He couldn't keep science fiction or the fantastic out of the supposedly realist novels he was writing as Iain Banks. *Canal Dreams* is set in what was then the future, aboard boats trapped in the Panama Canal by a USA-inspired war in Central America that recalls the war in *Life During Wartime* by Lucius Shepard. *A Song of Stone* has the feel of an allegory, set in a castle of odd rituals in a nameless country at a time of endless war. *Whit* has elements of the fantastic about it, and *The Business* features an immortal corporation that feels like the Culture in embryo.

A simple division between science fiction and the mainstream really doesn't work. And it doesn't help that the stories in his only collection, *The State of the Art*, were published under the name Iain M. Banks, but they include stories that were clearly and straightforwardly mainstream.

It's tempting, of course, to identify Iain M. Banks with the Culture, because they were the most baroque, the most glittering, the most popular of the novels he published under that name. But we

[1968?] *The Top of Poseidon*

[1969?] *The Hungarian Lift-Jet*

[1970-71?] *The Tashkent Rambler*

[1972] *Against a Dark Background* (started, completed 1975)

[1993] *Against a Dark Background*

[1973] *Use of Weapons*

[1990] *Use of Weapons*

[1977] *The State of the Art*

[1989] *The State of the Art*

[1978] *The Player of Games*

[1988] *The Player of Games*

[1981] [1984] *The Wasp Factory*

[1982]

[1987] *Consider Phlebas*

[1985] *Walking on Glass*

[1986] *The Bridge*

[1987] *Espedair Street*

[1989] *Canal Dreams*

[1991] *The Crow Road*

[1993] *Complicity*

[1994] *Feersum Endjinn*

have to remember that he wrote only nine novels, one novella and two short stories set in or around the Culture. As Iain M. Banks, he also gave us *Against a Dark Background*, *Feersum Endjinn* and *The Algebraist*. And there's also the curious, liminal case of *Transition*, which I'll come back to later.

The thing that is interesting about these other works that appeared under the name Iain M. Banks is not that they are science fiction novels like the Culture, but rather that they are science fiction novels unlike the Culture. And in the case of the first three at least, they are interesting for when and how they came to be written.

This table [opposite page, bottom] is a timeline from 1968, when Banks was 14, until 1994, when he turned 40 and was ten years into his career. The titles in roman show the approximate date of composition of his works; the titles in italic show when they were published. The composition dates are very approximate. We know, for example, that he had written *Top of Poseidon* by the time he was 14, which was February 1968. He then immediately turned this into *The Hungarian Lift-Jet*, so, for arguments sake, let's say 1969. By the time he started at the University of Sterling in autumn 1972, he had already completed the half-million words of *The Tashkent Rambler* and was already starting to collect the 17 rejection slips it eventually received.

Now, we know that, once he was at university, he began writing a science fiction story but abandoned it. We don't know anything about it other than that. He then wrote the first draft of what would become *Use of Weapons*. But when he left university he returned to an unfinished science fiction novel, so it seems probable that it was the abandoned story from 1972; and that became *Against a Dark Background*. So, depending on how we read the evidence, *Against a Dark Background* was either his first or his second work of science fiction. *Use of Weapons*, the other contender for the title of his first sf novel, is a very complex and sophisticated piece of work, but then, it went through an awful lot of revisions and reimaginings over the years. But *Against a Dark Background* reads like an apprentice work; the prose, the characterisation, the plotting are all much simpler than his other work, almost cartoony in places. Though coming as it did after two undoubted masterpieces, the reworked *Use of Weapons* and *The Crow Road*, does rather emphasise the crudeness

of the writing. I like *Against a Dark Background*, it's great fun, but it would be bizarre to argue that it is anything other than a minor, rather jejune novel.

By the time it appeared, of course, the Culture was well established and everyone was desperate for more of the same. When I was researching my book I came across reviews of *Against a Dark Background* which said that it was clearly set in a distant part of the Culture. No! The thing about *Against a Dark Background* is that it is a sort of anti-Culture novel. The thing about the Culture, the great and obvious and much loved thing, was that it was a universe of plenty, and therefore a universe of practical communism. There is no need for money; as Banks said in an interview one time, a cheque book is a form of ration book. In the Culture there is no need to ration. But the universe of *Against a Dark Background* is one of capitalism gone mad: everything has a price, friendship, loyalty, the right to breathe. And the events that set the plot in motion, and that keep it moving, stem from the fact that everything has a cost and everything is for sale.

Which is why the origin of *Against a Dark Background* becomes interesting. Did it come before *Use of Weapons*? In which case, the communism of the Culture might be seen as a reaction against the ultra-capitalism he had started to explore in *Against a Dark Background*. Alternatively, if it came after *Use of Weapons*, was this capitalist dystopia a reaction against the utopian aspects of the Culture? I suppose that's the sort of angels-dancing-on-a-pinhead question that can get to fascinate literary historians, but it is intriguing to consider the sorts of issues that were running through Banks's mind when he was creating the Culture.

And while we've got this chart in front of us, look here, his thirteenth novel (if we include the novella, *The State of the Art*) which appeared on the tenth anniversary of his becoming a published writer. It's another science fiction novel by Iain M. Banks, *Feersum Endjinn*, and it appeared just a year after the last science fiction novel by Iain M. Banks, *Against a Dark Background*. To the reader, there was a smooth continuity here: ever since *Consider Phlebas* the novels of Iain M. Banks had appeared roughly every other year, alternating with the mainstream novels of Iain Banks.

But look at the dates of composition. *Consider Phlebas* had been written around 1982-3; *The Player of Games* around 1978-9; *The State of the*

Art around 1977; *Use of Weapons* had first been drafted around 1973-4; and *Against a Dark Background* either 1975 or 1972 depending on how you want to see it. They had been published in reverse order of composition.

Now, Banks had worked on these novels in the interim, producing further drafts and edits. But it was more than a decade since he had written a new science fiction novel from scratch. He was a writer who had, almost instantly, established a reputation not just as an enfant terrible of mainstream literature, but also as one of the best and most important of the new breed of science fiction writers. And he hadn't written a new science fiction novel in ten years, indeed, since before he had first been published.

If you were in those circumstances, what would you write? *Against a Dark Background* had gone down well enough, but the reputation was almost entirely based on the Culture. It had caught the imagination of his readers as very few such works do. It was vast, exciting, colourful, the society based on plenty was both exhilarating and appealing. This was what people wanted. It was not what he gave them.

For his first science fiction book in ten years he didn't just eschew his most popular creation, he wrote one of the most complex and challenging novels of his career. It is also, I happen to think, one of his very best; but that is beside the point.

One of the things that people commented on about the Culture novels was scale, the size of the ships, the sheer amount of land surface in the orbitals. But space, as Douglas Adams said, is big, and the size of these structures didn't seem out of place in context, and besides, his human characters never seemed dwarfed by them. But *Feersum Endjinn* was different. This was a building on Earth, but the rooms were so vast that there were climate differentials between floor and ceiling; the rooms contained mountains, rivers and volcanoes; if you fell through a hole in the floor, you'd be dead before you hit the floor below; and you need breathing equipment to go out onto the roof. This was scale used to diminish and alienate the characters. You might imagine yourself aboard a Culture ship; it is hard to imagine yourself in this fastness.

If the setting was alienating, so was the succession of narrative voices. There are four principal voices that we hear: one doesn't know who or what she is, one is dead, and indeed is killed again and

again several times in just one page; and, the one that seems to rise above all others, the child Bascule whose narrative is composed, in equal measure, of the sorts of abbreviations we've become used to in text messaging, street argot, Scots dialect, and homophones. On the page, this can be as visually disorienting as the debased, post-apocalyptic language of Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker*, but once you get used to the rhythms it proves to be remarkably flexible, allowing Bascule to represent characters who speak with a West Indian accent, with a lisp, with a Sean Conneryesque slur, and so on. The range of voices and the presentation of those voices on the page tend to act as a barrier between the reader and understanding, so that you really have to immerse yourself in the narrative before you start to glimpse what is actually going on.

The aesthetic, in other words, owes more to mainstream, or at least quasi-mainstream novels like *The Wasp Factory* or *The Bridge* than it does to the more straightforward narrative approach of *Consider Phlebas* or *The Player of Games*. It is interesting that around this time Banks was teasing interviewers by suggesting that he might drop the M, or use the M for all of his novels. It's hard to say how seriously he took this notion, but it does tend to indicate that he didn't see any substantive difference between the novels that he wrote under the two versions of his name. Certainly it is not that difficult to imagine *Feersum Endjinn* being published without the M, and there are clear thematic links that connect it to the subsequent non-M novels, *Whit*, with its isolated community of largely meaningless rituals, and particularly *A Song of Stone*. Here the action is confined to a castle that is, admittedly, nowhere near as grotesquely huge as the fastness in *Feersum Endjinn*, but that similarly stands as a now functionless representation of the whole of society. Like the fastness, it is a relic of a past that has already been overturned and rendered meaningless. And just as Bascule's broken speech mirrors the broken nature of his society, so Abel's ornate and evasive speech reflects his hopeless attempts to reassert some control over what is going on.

If we look at where these novels fall chronologically, *Against a Dark Background* marks a move away from the thrillers he had previously been writing and initiates a run of science fiction novels, while *Feersum Endjinn* marks a return to science

-M	Date	M
<i>The Wasp Factory</i>	1984	
<i>Walking on Glass</i>	1985	
<i>The Bridge</i>	1986	
	1987	<i>Consider Phlebas</i>
<i>Espedair Street</i>	1987	
	1988	<i>The Player of Games</i>
<i>Canal Dreams</i>	1989	
	1990	<i>Use of Weapons</i>
<i>The Crow Road</i>	1991	
	1993	<i>Against a Dark Background</i>
<i>Complicity</i>	1993	
	1994	<i>Feersum Endjinn</i>
<i>Whit</i>	1995	
	1996	<i>Excession</i>
<i>A Song of Stone</i>	1997	
	1998	<i>Inversions</i>
<i>The Business</i>	1999	
	2000	<i>Look to Windward</i>
<i>Dead Air</i>	2002	
	2004	<i>The Algebraist</i>
<i>The Steep Approach to Garbadale</i>	2007	
	2008	<i>Matter</i>
<i>Transition</i>	2009	<i>Transition</i>
	2010	<i>Surface Detail</i>
<i>Stonemouth</i>	2012	
	2012	<i>The Hydrogen Sonata</i>
<i>The Quarry</i>	2013	

fiction after a ten-year gap. There is a similar gap connected with the third of the non-Culture novels written as by Iain M. Banks.

This [above] is a straightforward chronology of Banks's novels. For the sake of clarity, I have omitted *The State of the Art*, both as a standalone novella (1989) and as a collection (1991), and I have also omitted his non-fiction, *Raw Spirit* (2003). As you can see, once you get past the three initial

Iain Banks novels, *The Wasp Factory*, *Walking on Glass* and *The Bridge*, the pattern is very simple and quite consistent. There's an Iain Banks novel one year, and the next year an Iain M. Banks novel. There are odd hiccups in the pattern, two novels published in 1987, for instance, and again two in 1993. But these aren't particularly significant, they're probably the result of late delivery or a delay in production or some such. In fact, looking at this, you could say that the only serious and consistent difference between an Iain Banks novel and an Iain M. Banks novel is whether it was intended for publication on an even-numbered year or an odd-numbered year.

And then there's a break in the pattern, here at the start of the new century. After producing a novel a year, regular as clockwork, for 16 years, suddenly there's a gap, only three novels appear over seven years. And right in the middle of the gap comes the third of the novels I'm discussing here, *The Algebraist*, which is, to my mind, easily the weakest of the Iain M. Banks novels.

Now there were personal reasons for this gap: he deliberately took one year off from writing, then there was a car accident, and then the break-up of his first marriage. But I believe there were also artistic reasons.

I may be alone in this, but I am convinced that Banks intended *Look to Windward* to be the last of the Culture novels. It is a conclusion to a loose trilogy that consists of *Consider Phlebas*, *Excession* and *Look to Windward*, which explore the consequences of the Idiran War that began in *Consider Phlebas*. By *Look to Windward*, the whole novel is given over to the dire consequences of the Culture's meddling in other societies. Images of death and approaches to dying run through the novel, and it ends with a *Culture Mind* sublim-

ing. This doesn't come across as an isolated or idiosyncratic event, but rather you sense that the subliming of this one *Mind* serves as a harbinger for the step that the whole of the Culture must follow. The only society that goes on and on the same way forever, the novel implies, is that of the vast and slow behemoths, who circle the edges of the galaxy and whose existence is so extended that they are incomprehensible to everyone else. It is a novel about things coming to a natural end, and I think it reflects Banks's attitude towards the Culture. In 1998, before he wrote *Look to Windward*, he said in an interview: "I think there might be one more novel and that'll be it. In theory, you could write about it forever, but you'll end up going over the same ground." And in 1999, as the novel would be being readied for publication, he said that any further Culture stories would "just be retreads of old ideas." And indeed the trilogy of late Culture novels, *Matter*, *Surface Detail* and *The Hydrogen Sonata*, all hinge upon ideas and involve settings that had appeared in earlier Culture novels.

The interviews that Banks gave around the end of the millennium suggest a tiredness, both mental and creative, a sense that having produced 18 novels and a collection of short stories over the previous 16 years had taken its toll, and he felt he was running out of ideas. Hence the year he took off from writing, though the two novels he produced after this break, *Dead Air* and *The Algebraist*, both seem as if he was struggling, not altogether successfully, to get his mojo back. *The Algebraist* is, to be as kind as I can be, a retrograde step, a reversion to an old-fashioned style of science fiction that his whole career to that point had been reacting against. And it is flabby, over-long, the mark of a writer who is not fully in control of his material. Little wonder that, after this, it would be another three years before the next novel came out.

And now we come to the other anomaly on this timeline. Here, in 2009, we get the strange occurrence of *Transition*, which was published in Britain as by Iain Banks, which the pattern of alternating years demanded, while in America it was published as by Iain M. Banks, which the contents of the novel would seem to demand. I hope I've made it obvious throughout this talk that I think the distinction between the novels of Iain Banks and the novels of Iain M. Banks is largely artificial, and as I said earlier, when Banks himself started playing with the idea of putting the name Iain M. Banks on all of his novels it was because he saw no substantive difference

between them. I think *Transition* is a case in point, it can easily bear either name without making a blind bit of difference to who reads it, how it is read, or what we get from it.

Now most of what I have said so far in this talk is stuff that I knew, to some degree or other, before I started work on my book. But there was one thing I discovered about *Transition* that I did not know before, and that I found out about from one interview. There is something to bear in mind about interviews with Iain Banks. There are a lot of them, to start with, he was always happy to be interviewed, and he liked to be friends with the interviewer, to please them and to amuse them. So you'll find the same things cropping up time and again in interview after interview. There's one story that I heard him tell on a BBC radio interview that was repeated at the time of his death, and it was in at least one print interview that I found, and it appeared in *Raw Spirit*. It's about how someone approached him at a book launch and said that on the evidence of his books he must have had a very unhappy childhood. Banks sent the guy over to a little white-haired woman who happened to be his mother, and a few moments later heard her loudly proclaiming, "Och no, Iain was always a very happy wee lad." It's a funny story, particularly given how dubious families are in his novels, but everywhere I encountered it, it was repeated in virtually identical words. Suspiciously identical, it feels rehearsed, and therefore possibly open to question. But when things occur in only one interview, there's a sense that they are perhaps a little more raw, more immediate, something he was still processing, and therefore perhaps closer to the truth.

To be fair, there aren't many things that appear in only one interview and nowhere else, but the close and perhaps unexpected relationship between *The Steep Approach to Garbadale* and *Transition* is something I found in only one interview. *The Steep Approach to Garbadale*, the first thing he wrote after *The Algebraist*, was intended to have a very complex structure but the more he worked on it the more he found the complexity was redundant and it ended up having a very conventional narrative shape. So the complexity intended for *The Steep Approach to Garbadale* he carried over to the next Iain Banks novel, *Transition*. *The Steep Approach to Garbadale* was originally intended to have a female villain, but in the end that didn't work out, so the female villain was transformed into *Transition's* Madame d'Ortolan, the

only significant female villain in all of Banks's fiction. And the opening lines in the first draft of *The Steep Approach to Garbadale* were: "Apparently I am what is known as an Unreliable Narrator, though of course if you believe everything you're told you deserve whatever you get." Again, those lines did not survive into subsequent drafts of the novel, so they were transferred, word for word, to form the opening lines of *Transition*.

In other words, there is a symbiotic relationship that links *Transition* not with either of the *Culture* novels that bracketed it, *Matter* and *Surface Detail*, but with the preceding mainstream novel. Yes, *Transition* is a science fiction novel; it is set amid multiple parallel realities and features a vicious war between powerful people who can move freely from one world to the next. But its multiple narrative voices echo *Feersum Endjinn*, its structure recalls *The Bridge*, and it stands in conjunction with *The Steep Approach to Garbadale*.

What I am coming to see at the end of all this is that my original programme item, the dialogue I meant to facilitate between Iain Banks and Iain M. Banks was always doomed to failure. Not because it was under-rehearsed, not because it would have looked silly if Banks had had to move from one chair to another to indicate which version of himself was speaking, but because there was literally no difference between them. *Feersum Endjinn* and *Transition* could easily have done without the M; *The Bridge* and *Canal Dreams* and *The Song of Stone* could easily have carried the M. It makes no difference.

The author Iain M. Banks was invented, I suspect, for the sake of the *Culture* novels, to provide an umbrella for the only series of linked books he produced. He continued to use the name for non-*Culture* novels, perhaps, out of habit, he had got into the rhythm of producing an Iain Banks novel one year and an Iain M. Banks novel the next. I wasn't totally kidding, earlier, when I said that the main difference between the two was whether they appeared on an odd or an even numbered year. I feel, for instance, that his heart wasn't really in *The Algebraist*, but the schedule called for an Iain M. Banks novel, so an Iain M. Banks novel he produced. Though to be honest his heart wasn't really in anything he was writing at that time, so doing without the M might not have resulted in anything better.

Putting to one side the (relatively) special case of the *Culture*, the novels, M and non-M, display the same bravura, the same humour, there are links, seen and unseen, between them all. They are all Iain Banks. They are all Iain M. Banks.

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RESONANCES

STEPHEN BAXTER



How do you feel about the representation of artificial intelligence (AI) in *Thunderbirds Are Go*?

I know what you're thinking. What with Trump, Brexit, and climate collapse, haven't we enough to worry about? But, bear with me.

Back in 2015, on the debut of TBAG (that's 'Tea Bag' as we aficionados pronounce it), I thought it was wonderful to see new Thunderbirds episodes back on the telly. Of course it is aimed at an entirely different generation, but I like to think that by watching this stuff I get at least one glimpse into what the modern under-tens are watching and thinking, with a franchise I can understand myself – just as the superhero movies similarly let me glimpse what the teens are sucking up.

That's my excuse, anyhow.

Which probably doesn't justify buying the toys.

Anyhow I have made no secret of the fact that the Anderson puppet TV shows were a key influence on my own pre-ten-years-old self, more than fifty years ago, astonishing as it seems (and as documented previously in *Vector*; see the reference).

The story of Gerry Anderson's pioneering puppetry, a technique he called 'supermarionation', has been well documented elsewhere (see for example the several Anderson biographies). After relatively simple shows leading up to his western series *Four Feather Falls*, Anderson hit on the formula that would make his name. From *Supercar*, produced in 1959, Anderson's shows would feature fabulous futuristic vehicles, good-hearted heroes (male and female – remember Lady Penelope), and impressive miniature sets. Anderson's apotheosis, of course, came with *Thunderbirds*, first broadcast in September 1965. The *Thunderbirds* premise was

perhaps Anderson's most uplifting, with week after week the Tracy brothers of International Rescue (IR) racing from their sunlit Pacific atoll to save innocent lives.

And it was as *Thunderbirds* was launched that the Anderson merchandising empire really hit its stride, with the toys and games of course, but also comics and books which detailed a future history assembled from the shows' elements, including a vision of 2065 with a World Government, spectacular cities, and marvellous craft patrolling land, sea and sky. I think in fact this future-history tie-in material inspired my own imagination more than the primary TV shows.

The supermarionation boom was over before 1970. But the Anderson shows never died. Apart from healthy fan support and home video releases, new waves of viewers were locked in with revivals of the great shows in the early 1990s on the BBC. In 2005, however, Anderson's own attempt to reboot *Captain Scarlet* as a CGI property was an ingenious piece of work but failed to achieve proper backing from the broadcasters. Anderson, who once had what Paul McAuley called an idiot savant genius about what children liked on TV, had rather lost his indestructibility.

Ten years further on, it took a new production team entirely to ensure a triumphant relaunch for Anderson's best idea.

Thunderbirds Are Go was launched in 2015 with an accompanying explosion of merchandise, almost like the 1960s, with a comic, books, toys. As to my own first reaction to the show, with its beefier craft and flexible, fast-moving CGI figures – toy-like, but one heck of an advance over the 1960s puppets - I thought it was about 70% the original series (including those launch sequences), 10%



the 2004 Jonathan Frakes movie, 10% *Frozen* and other modern CGI properties – and 10% the old Anderson background continuity. Needless to say there were objections from various generations of Thunderbirds purists. But there were also fannish touches aimed at old farts like me, such as the use of the original Parker voice artist, the venerable David Graham.

And, most welcome, the show presents an idealistic, positive future. In TBAG's 2060 there is a world government, or at least a beefed up UN, under which operates the Global Defence Force, a world police. As Virgil Tracy says of the villain of the first episode, 'Why would someone want to cause an earthquake? It's 2060. That's not the kind of world we live in.'

But what of AI and IR? The question arose in my mind after watching the first two episodes of series 3, 'Chaos' parts 1 and 2 (broadcast 1st, 8th April 2018), written by head writer Rob Hoegge.

The representation of AI and communications tech in TBAG is actually quite impressive, with voice recognition and Minority Report-style graphic interfaces and holograms everywhere,

all seamlessly integrated into the depicted world (translation: no really fast typing at keyboards). And IR itself uses plenty of this tech. Cute robot Max is a tweet-whoop Star Wars-like creation, built by Brains, who had constructed robots in the original show. And on TB5 (series 1 episode 8, 'Eos') there is a Hal-type computer consciousness, accidentally quickened by John Tracy, who causes peril but eventually joins the crew.

Otherwise, however, AI in TBAG is generally bad news, constantly going wrong or being hacked. And this portrayal reaches a peak in that series 3 opener.

The GDF, the global police, have launched a fleet of 'Rescue Operation Robots' which compete with IR, at first very effectively. 'I think we may be out of a job,' says Scott.

But soon the GDF robots are failing. They freeze on arrival at the scene of the latest emergency (a spectacularly realised aerial anchor for a space elevator, becoming destabilised). And this is a fundamental fault caused by inadequate AI programming. 'The robots seem to be trapped in what's called a feedback loop,' pronounces Brains.

'Their programming detects two rescue situations of equal importance, and they can't decide between the two.' 'A human wouldn't be having this problem,' says Alan Tracy bluntly.

And that's even before the Hood hacks into the GDF system, via a conveniently nickable Robot Control Module: 'Warning! Programming override detected!' Soon the bots are attacking TB2 with laser beams, before the Tracy boys fight them off, and the GDF withdraws the robots as a bad idea.

Brains sums up the moral of the story: 'Our capacity for abstract thinking and problem-solving has no equal.' Or, as Scott puts it more succinctly, 'Machines can't think like people.'

This is fair enough, and any kids' show is brave to try to dramatise the ethical conflicts of AI at all. But is the storyline a little dated?

The premise of the show – which is, just as it was in the 1960s, the heroism and camaraderie of the human heroes - has to be shorn up, of course, and not undermined by chunks of technology more competent than the humans. But maybe the writers are slipping into old clichés about AI, where every smart toaster is a potential Terminator. After all a TBAG viewer nine years old in 2019 will be fifty in TBAG's nominal date of 2060, and will presumably have grown up in a world of smart, hopefully non-hackable, AI, from smart cars and medical systems onwards, which by then will be continually making existential choices for us. Maybe TBAG needs a sixth Tracy sibling: an Asimov robot, perhaps, reassuringly pontificating on the Three Laws.

So maybe TBAG has struck a slight false note about the role of AI in the society of 2060. But overall, I'm not going to argue with the show's tone. We live in an age of pessimism about the future, sadly, and much modern fiction aimed at young people reflects this mood: think of *The Hunger Games*, a grim dystopia of deprivation and exploitation. Veteran Anderson fans will know that the future wasn't always like this.

And now, in the foreword to the show's handbook (the *Thunderbirds Are Go Official Guide*, Simon and Schuster, 2015), we read this about TBAG's year 2060: 'In an age of advanced science and technology, the world is experiencing a time of peace and prosperity. Technology and human ingenuity have saved the world from global warming, pollution, famine and disease . . .'

A remake of a classic show like TBAG will always divide opinion. But in my eyes it is to the eternal credit of the makers of TBAG that they have kept

true to the optimistic sixties spirit of Anderson's original show, and have given today's nine-year-olds at least one positive vision of the future.

And of course, as the TBAG Official Guide says, in that future, 'International Rescue will always answer the call.'

Reference: S. Baxter, 'Adventures in the 21st Century: The Future History of TV21', Vector 224, Jul/Aug 2002.

STEPHEN BAXTER IS THE AUTHOR OF NUMEROUS SF NOVELS, INCLUDING RECENTLY AN OFFICIAL SEQUEL TO H.G. WELLS'S *THE WAR OF THE WORLDS*, *THE MASSACRE OF MANKIND* (GOLLANCZ, 2017). HE IS THE PRESIDENT OF THE BSFA.

Judging the Clarke Award 2019

Andrew Wallace

PART ONE: THE PROCESS

I've been a fan of the Clarke Award for a long time, having enjoyed both the winning books and those on the shortlists. Not all my favourite books for that year end up on the shortlist, but it's never less than interesting. I'd harboured secret ambitions to be a judge 'when I was ready' – presumably when there was peace on earth thanks to my benevolent global rule, or something equally imminent. Before that came to pass Donna Scott rather surprised me at the 2018 BSFA AGM by asking if I fancied being one of the two Association-nominated judges for 2019's award.

After a lengthy consultation period that boiled down to friends saying, 'if you want to do it why are you not doing it?' I signed up. This was August, and afterwards... very little happened. That's the thing about the award. You think you have a whole year to read the sixty or so books you're expecting, when in fact you have about six months due to publishing schedules. Oh, and this year there were a record 124 novels submitted, and they arrived from October 2018 to early January, with a couple of stragglers allowed in after that because they were Joyce Carol Oates and Cixin Liu. I managed to clear my already hectic writing, editing and showing-off schedules and got down to the books.

I soon realised a fundamental truth about the Award: there's a lot of admin. This aspect takes four main forms: keeping a spreadsheet of books you have received; cross-referencing that list with the books the other judges have received via emailed correspondence; outlining your thoughts about each book so the others know what you're thinking/reading; dealing with the unexpected.

The latter includes, for example, a certain much-loved major publishing house sending you seven copies of each novel submitted, thus unleashing your inner Smaug (so many! And mine! All mine!); liaison with wife ('send them back, Andrew'; 'No! Mine!' etc), finally accepting that despite desire, cunning arrangement (throwing out all of own clothes), subtle suggestion of rehousing offspring in shed *you do not have the shelf space*, then arranging pick-up, delivery etc.

There are a series of meetings in London, this year at the Star of Kings near King's Cross, an establishment that is fast becoming the go-to venue for the SFF community. I loved these get-togethers; the team this year were a pleasure to work with. Not only did they kindly accommodate my ranting, I also learned from them. It's just as well; what makes the Award so important is that every book is considered, as opposed to some fan-based awards where not everyone will have read every book available. What this means is that given the Award's prestige, the judges are arbiters not just of the current state of the genre, but on the novel form itself.

There are five judges, so there is never a chance of deadlock. There is also no imposed reading order, although people tend to read the first books that arrive in the early days simply because there aren't any others. That soon changes, and my method was simple: I read the books in the order they were on the shelf, which was quite arbitrary because I started off ordering them according to colour, size etc, then lost interest in doing that because *so many books*. What this means in practice is that if three judges nix a book it's out, and if you haven't read it by then you don't have to, because you'd have been outvoted anyway. That said, there were a couple of instances where

I was the lone voice promoting a particular book, so if you really love one you can make a case for it, it just becomes harder. And, after a while, you will find others that you might feel stronger about promoting.

I made a point of reading every book that I could, with a couple of exceptions that, frankly, I hated so much I felt they were draining my essence like a Gelfling in front of the Dark Crystal. At times like that, when a book is simply bad, there's no use pretending it's a winner because you know that it isn't. These were very few though.

I read about a hundred of the books submitted, which equalled between three and four books a week. I developed the ability to read a book a day, unless it was a doorstopper. I don't know where the editor was with some of those monsters; certainly there isn't always the narrative to sustain a book that length. I guess it's a way of justifying a high retail price. Some books just contain a lot of detail, which can be immersive and fun, but I don't think a novel needs to be more than 100K words in length, and skim-read some longer books without feeling I was missing anything or not doing right by the author. None of the shortlisted books were enormous, and one, *The Electric State*, had a word-count that was closer to that of a novella.

I was glad to see five self-published novels entered; less glad that they were all by white blokes. Nothing wrong with white blokes (I am one, fact fans); rather that the glory of the self-published scene is the variety it offers. Trad publishing has not always served women or people of colour well, if at all, and I'd liked to have seen more from a wider variety of independent voices, of a quality that would have made the shortlist.

If you are a self-published author who has mastered the craft in terms of storytelling and genre, and invested in your work with professional editing and design then do consider entering the Award. It does cost to enter, but could be a good investment. Oh, unless the subtext of your first chapter is 'How come all the attractive women are homosexual?' In which case, jog on.

Judging the Clarke Award is an intense experience, and if you are a writer yourself you do have to put your own work aside for a bit. However, it's worth it simply to get a unique snapshot of the genre as it is now. You will also read books you would not otherwise encounter, let alone add to

the TBR pile. It's bracing and needs discipline, but then so does any creative or academic endeavour, or indeed dedicated fandom.

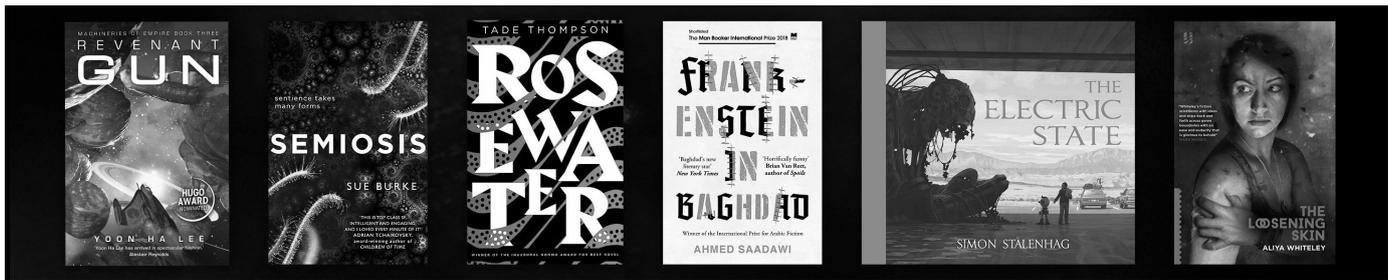
Each judge puts together a long-list, which is discussed, and then a series of shorter lists until the last six are arrived at. There can be an element of horse-trading at this stage, but it does force each judge to be clear about the reasons for a particular selection.

PART TWO: THE SHORTLIST

There are always oddities – Simon Stalenhag's *The Electric State* for example. Was it a novel? Did the pictures matter? Did it have enough words? Were we coming up with reasons not to shortlist it because we think we should? The fact was that we all loved it, it used a novel form in which image and word worked with and sometimes against each other, and was totally original and science fictional. While it wasn't the winner, it deserved a place in the shortlist.

Frankenstein in Baghdad by Ahmed Saadawi is one of those novels I might not have encountered if not for the Award. It cleverly blends mythologies to create a sense of place so effortlessly detailed and powerful you feel you are there, even though you've never been. It's also a very generous book, set in the aftermath of the ridiculous UK/US invasion that was another of the great cons that have characterised the disappointing and wretched twenty-first century. Rage would be understandable, but Saadawi is too clever and big-hearted for that. Instead, a series of overlapping tragedies accumulate alongside witty folkloric and science fictional conceits to create something so memorable I am reimagining the book as I write this, some six months after reading it.

Aliyah Whitely's *The Loosening Skin* is another of her astonishing, lyrical and so-left-field-we're-almost-back-where-we-started meditations on the absurdities of a rigidly gendered society. In this one, people shed their skins and with them their feelings, including those for loved ones, that may not survive the process. An entitled rich man decides to use his wealth and influence to alter the natural course of events for his own narrow agenda at the expense of a former lover. I wouldn't call the results predictable exactly, but they do follow the novel's merciless logic to a set of conclusions that mess with your feelings the way only good SF can.



Revenant Gun is the concluding part of Yoon Ha Lee's *Machineries of Empire* trilogy, and was the strongest of a quality space opera field this year. The brilliant conceit of this series is the difficulty of organising a vast interstellar empire: if the potential chaos of the millennium bug was caused by one digit in one year on one planet, how are vastly more complex and numerous variables to be managed? The author boldly dispenses with obvious thriller tropes, accumulating tension with sequences that hinge on etiquette – such as the choice of gloves to be worn – itself based on 'the calendar' which not only manages the empire but also defines reality.

Sue Burke's wonderful *Semiosis* is a beautifully-realised colony tale that is a textbook case of how to do science fiction properly. The only novel submitted that deals convincingly with the inter-generational conflict at work in our own society, it looks at how the original hippy colonists become so fixed in their isolationist philosophy they perpetrate atrocities against their own children. Meanwhile, the planet around them, which may have a Solaris-type consciousness of its own, begins to make its presence felt, not via the usual predations of exotic fauna, but through the flora, particularly super-bamboo *Stevland*. At once familiar and yet unknowable, this extraordinary character does its best to understand its human co-habitants for their sake and, interestingly, its own. The human influence is felt most accurately when all the plants fall out, after which the oranges pull a Brexit and screw everyone over.

I loved all these books – and many more of the submissions as well; indeed, my blog *Life In Sci-Fi* (www.andrewwallace.me) has reviews of a lot of my favourites if you'd like recommendations. What makes a winner though?

Well, Tade Thompson's *Rosewater* had elements in common with the rest of the shortlist; like *The Electric State* it featured a character we usually associate with heroics, but who has an entirely different, potentially chaotic agenda. As with *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, it depicts a society that has been invaded by the British, and then by

the uncanny, but maintains a beguiling philosophy of detachment that suggests Western alien invasion tropes are as much about colonial guilt as they are about paranoia. Like *The Loosening Skin* it has a surprising, even shocking temporal structure, encouraging you to play close attention only to disorient you further later. As with *Revenant Gun*, *Rosewater's* world-building is assuredly complex as it follows the titular Nigerian town's development around the arrival of an entity whose alien qualities are so well-depicted it manages to become both deeply unsettling and yet also bizarrely ordinary.

It is, perhaps, that last enigmatic quality that puts *Rosewater* on a different level, filtered as it is through the disintegrating life and consciousness of its hero, as his colleagues, altered like him by the visitor for its own unknowable ends, begin to die around him. Other mysteries abound; America has disappeared, not destroyed but because it has shut itself off completely from the world (written before 2016, the book is prophetic in this regard). The story is thus defined as much by absence – of the US, of any obvious alien plan or understanding of its true nature, and increasingly of the protagonist's friends – as extra-terrestrial presence. It's a dichotomy that speaks to increasingly fractured times, when truth and reason appear in retreat. What remains is a profound but fascinating unease, all the more effective for masterful storytelling.

ANDREW WALLACE IS THE AUTHOR OF SCIENCE FICTION THRILLERS *SONS OF THE CRYSTAL MIND* AND *THE OUTER SPHERES*. IN THE SPRING OF 2019 HIS NEW NOVELLA *CELEBRITY WEREWOLF* WAS PUBLISHED BY NEWCON PRESS. HE BLOGS ABOUT SFF AND THE CREATIVE PROCESS AT WWW.ANDREWWALLACE.ME.

"For who can think submission?"

Christina Scholz

Miltonian Rebel Angels, Translation as a Tool of Political Control and the Linguistic Turn as Linguistic (R)evolution in China Miéville's *Embassytown*

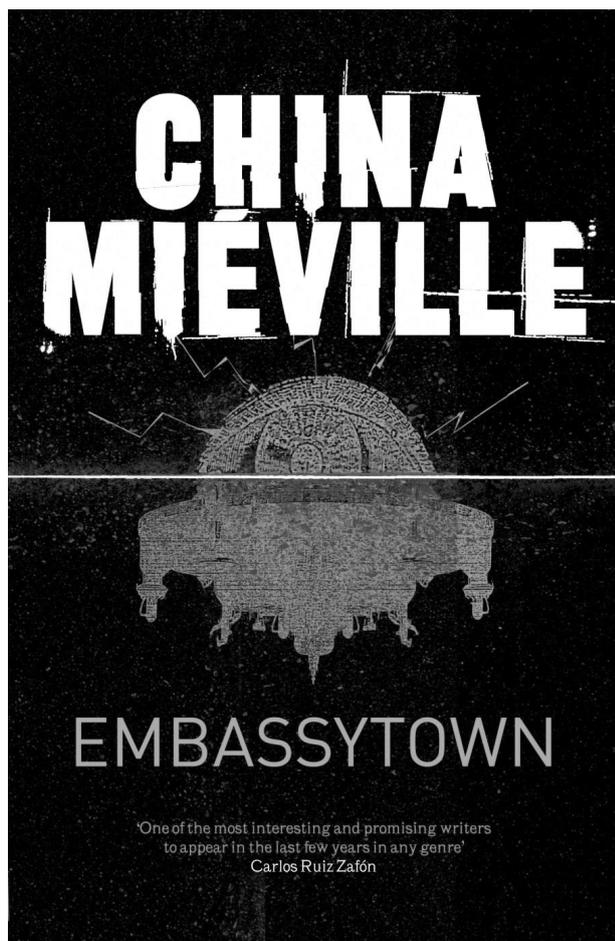
Science Fiction, as Ursula K. LeGuin points out as early as 1976 in her introduction to *The Left Hand of Darkness*, isn't about predicting the future. *Extrapolation*, she says, "isn't the name of the game" (LeGuin 1976). She goes to explain that "[t]he purpose of a thought-experiment, as the term was used by Schrodinger [sic] and other physicists, is not to predict the future – indeed Schrodinger's [sic] most famous thought-experiment goes to show that the 'future', on the quantum level, cannot be predicted – but to describe reality, the present world" (LeGuin 1976). Science Fiction, and more specifically Weird Science Fiction, is in my view perfectly suited for this, since it deals in great descriptive metaphors. The writer – and especially writers of the Weird, from William Hope Hodgson, Leonora Carrington, and of course Lovecraft and the artists who inspired him, all the way through to contemporary writers such as Nnedi Okorafor, Nalo Hopkinson, and China Miéville – "says in words what cannot be said in words" (LeGuin 1976). Writer and scholar Haris Durrani supports this argument in his recent article "Why science fiction matters to life in the postcolony":

The history and politics of the MENA [Middle East and North Africa], other postcolonial regions, and the diasporas which I am a part of feel closer to science fiction than science

fiction itself. The development of modernity and the state are ambiguous and elusory as much as they are bizarre and artificial, like Sykes-Picot or Herbert's ominous emperor. They forgo an empirical analysis. Likewise, resistance to colonialism's lasting and discursive forms of power lives equally beyond the boundaries of academic definition.

People are much the same. To tell things as they are, their stories must often tell them as they are not. Stories, then, are our means of digging beneath both polemics and 'the facts on the ground'. They are a vessel toward the deepest kind of understanding. This is what the Muslim theologian, jurist, and philosopher Al-Ghazali called *dhawq*, or fruitional experience. That concept is embedded in the heart of science fiction and fantasy literature.

This is why science fiction and fantasy is such a powerful tool for the postcolonial life. In its simplest form, the genre can provide escapism, a haven from the ongoing daily strife. Meanwhile, dystopias usefully warn us how to navigate or avoid oppressive regimes. And in its most potent form, science fiction and fantasy literature sheds light on the



complex architecture of the real world. It helps writers and their readers break out of binaries of oppression and marginalisation, transcend stereotypes, and imagine new ways of living. (Durrani 2015)

Weird Fiction is part of what Gary Wolfe terms 'the post-genre fantastic' (Luckhurst 2012, 1), transcending genre boundaries as well as cultural and national spaces. It speaks to a global experience of certain spatial logics, a transformation of borders and flows (Luckhurst 2012, 1), which makes it a suitable mode of writing to communicate problems and world-views in multicultural and postcolonial spaces. For H.P. Lovecraft, who defined the genre, the Weird is not the discovery of an aberration, which would place us in the context of law, norm and the monster. Rather, the Weird is "the discovery of an unhuman limit to thought, that is nevertheless foundational for thought" (Thacker 2010, 23). This is perfectly illustrated in China Miéville's novel *Embassytown* (2011), whose central theme is the linguistic determination of consciousness, of perception, and subsequently of world-views.

Embassytown is an experiment in linguistics and postcolonial language politics that stages alien creatures as the ultimate opaque Other, and the linguistic turn in Western philosophy as a linguistic and political revolution.

All human communication is based on Othering: our first act of signification is pointing: 'this'. Our first distinction is separating 'this' from everything else: 'that'. And since 'I', our mind, is the fixed centre of our universe, this leads to the ultimate opaqueness of the Other. As Ursula K. LeGuin's character Lord Argaven puts it (speaking of the Envoy from Earth), "His obtuseness is ignorance. His arrogance is ignorance. He is ignorant of us: we of him. He is infinitely a stranger[...]" (LeGuin 1969, 145).

Where LeGuin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* demonstrates how cultures who perceive each other as alien fail to communicate even when they share a common language, Miéville's *Embassytown* is about cultures having no access to each other, no shared language, no shared concepts because communication is a policed privilege – with the colonial government controlling the technology that enables communication and enforcing practices, policies and taboos that prevent contact between the two closed systems of language and culture.

The colonised aliens, the Ariekei, have a language which is utterly alien to humans and human consciousness, and inaccessible to humans because of radical differences in physiology. In the novel, Language (with a capital L) is based on the utopian linguistic concept of a 'perfect' prelapsarian language, a language of 'pure signifieds' – of meanings unaltered by linguistic forms.

Communication between human language and Ariekei Language is eventually made possible through the commitment of the protagonist Avice Benner Cho, who has returned to her home colony after years spent off-planet, and who is used to making a living by creative application of her skills and talents. During her travels, Avice has encountered alternative world-views and learned to perceive truths and possibilities outside the cultural norms and taboos she grew up with. Based on her experiences, she can find the courage to break those norms and taboos.

In the course of the story, the underlying problem becomes evident despite the colonial government's efforts to cover it up. The indigenous Ariekei are striving for autonomy – and they

can only attain this by communication, by using language as a tool (instead of allowing themselves to be tools used by language). The narrative offers a complex and detailed examination of general and intercultural linguistics, and Miéville provides valuable insight into the interconnectedness of language and perception, language and culture, language and power. Furthermore, his narrative structures and topics are constructed in a way that strongly suggests a comparison (and parallel reading) with John Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost* – which is one of the most famous epics in the English language, and also a 17th century precursor to the genre of speculative fiction.

1. Miéville and Milton: Language, Perception, Politics

Both John Milton and China Miéville work inside certain traditional frameworks to create their own respective subjective vision of the universe by combining influences from various sources, myths and traditions to form a complex novum. Thus both *Paradise Lost* and *Embassytown* can be categorised as speculative fiction. Both works treat obedience based on ignorance as a prominent thematic: the respective authority controls communication and implements taboos to ensure their continued power. In both works the chosen narrative perspective is of interest as well for its linguistic implications: both describe objects, places and beings which differ immensely from human everyday experience. While Milton frequently uses stylistic devices such as the epic simile (cf. Milton 1667/1996, 15, etc.) in order to translate unimaginable concepts into human terms, Miéville deliberately dispenses with detailed descriptions. The thus created lacunae produce an effect of estrangement in the reader while at the same time forcing them to enter into an active dialogue with the text by using their imagination to fill these lost (in translation) spaces. In *Embassytown*, the epic simile is taken a step further, it becomes embodied: human characters serve as similes in order to enable the aliens to speak about concepts which are alien to them.

Valdik, who every week swam with fishes [...] was an ongoing: his status depended not on something that he had done or had done to him, but on something he had to continue to do. *It's like the man who swims with fishes every week*, the Hosts might want

to say, to make whatever obscure point it was, and to allow them that, it had to be true that he did. Hence his duty. (Miéville 2011, 148f)

This body-serving-as-language becomes a fulcrum for the linguistic evolution and concomitant political revolution of the oppressed Ariekei.

2. Language and World(-Building): The Cosmos as Ocean

The planet of Ariekei has been colonised by humans in order to harvest its biotechnology. All travel to and from Ariekei is controlled from the remote world of Dagostin, with the capital of Bremen, the seat of the colonial government, which also owns all the rocketships. The central Bremen administration on Ariekei is seated in Embassytown, the only place on the whole planet with an artificial atmosphere which allows human settlement.

In his descriptions of the cosmos around Ariekei, of space travel and of alien technology, Miéville uses a striking number of words derived from Latin or Greek. Additionally he introduces the unfathomable spatial concepts *manchmal* and *immer* (originally German for "sometimes" and "always"). These two spatial concepts are never explained in the novel and remain inexplicable to characters who haven't experienced them. Through the interaction of the *manchmal* and the *immer*, space is produced as a kind of ocean with currents and shoals that have to be circumnavigated. This recalls Milton's descriptions of the cosmos in *Paradise Lost*, where the planets are divided by Chaos, which is depicted as a dark, moving sea, an *unvoyageable gulf* (Milton 1667/1996, 248):

[...] into the waste / Wide anarchy
of Chaos, damp and dark, / [...] /
Hovering upon the waters, what they
met / Solid or slimy, as in raging sea
/ Tossed up and down, together
crowded drove, / From each side
shoaling (Milton 1667/1996, 245-246)

[...] of whom to ask / Which way
the nearest coast of darkness lies /
Bordering on light (Milton 1667/1996,
57)

[...] That Satan with less toil, and now
with ease / Wafts on the calmer wave
by dubious light, / And, like a weather-
beaten vessel, holds / Gladly the port
(Milton 1667/1996, 59)

Milton refers to the celestial bodies, especially the fixed stars, as lights, which shine because God has lit lights inside them. They indicate time (cf. Miéville's use of *machmal* and *immer* to denote spatial concepts). With their help Satan navigates Chaos. Similarly, in *Embassytown* there are so-called *pharoi* – mystical beacons that guide spaceships through the dangerous *immer* so they can reach Arieika, which lies at the margin of the explored territory. Before the crossing, space navigators give thanks to the *pharotekton*, the unknown architect of these signals:

So there are lighthouses through the
immer. Not every dangerous zone is
marked by the beacons, but many
are. They are, it seems, at least as
old as this universe, which isn't the
first there's been. The prayer so often
muttered before immersion is one of
thanks to those unknown who placed
them. *Gracious Pharotekton watch
over us now.* (Miéville 2011, 39)

But even these beacons can only be grasped as translated concepts:

To be precise I've never seen [the
Ariekene Pharos], of course, nor
could I: that would require light and
reflection and other physics that are
meaningless there. But I've seen
representations, rendered by ships'
windows. (Miéville 2011, 39)

3. Alien Concepts: The Reading Process as Translation

The protagonist and first-person narrator of *Embassytown*, Avice Benner Cho, grew up in *Embassytown* and so never explains things that are commonplace for her. As a result, the reader has to deal with cultural shock on nearly every page, working to make sense of this world and actively assembling pieces of information to arrive at a coherent

picture. This technique, apparently based on Victor Shklovsky's concept of *ostranenie* or estrangement in literature, parallels world-building on the diegetic level. The reading process itself partially reflects the problem of communication between mutually alien cultures described in the novel. What is required of the reader is a constant sense-making out of experientially unfamiliar concepts and vocabulary. This, however, makes the struggle of the human characters to describe Arieika's indigeneous inhabitants relatable: the Arieikei are so utterly alien to humans that human language fails to describe them. We've seen a lot of describing-and-failing in Lovecraft; Miéville takes this a step further and simply doesn't offer us a single coherent description of the Arieikei. We only get brief partial glimpses, and even these only work via similes and metaphors: *four legs, a little like a spider's* (Miéville 2001, 109); *eye-corals* (Miéville 2011, 160); *stiletto feet* (Miéville 2011, 109); but then again *hooves* (Miéville 2011, 273). All attempts at describing them inevitably contradict each other: Arieikene anatomy cannot be compared to anything recognisable, anything else humans may know from their own experience. They are utterly alien.

Because of social taboos, *Embassytown's* humans don't interact with Arieikei, whom they conventionally refer to as *Hosts*. As mentioned above, in *Embassytown* Miéville uses a great number of words with Latin or Greek, and sometimes German or French origins, possibly to suggest that at the time in which the novel is set, modern languages appear ancient too. Mirroring Milton again, he integrates the terms' original meanings into the plot, creating additional levels of meaning and reference.

If we take a look at the etymology of the word 'host', we find several variants:

1. The Old French word *hoste*, meaning a *person who receives guests* (Harper 2001-2011), a host or a landlord, deriving from the Latin *hospitem*, which can refer to the host in the sense of the landlord as well as to the guest in the sense of 'friend', but originally simply means 'stranger' (cf. Harper 2001-2011).

2. The Latin *hostis*, which originally means 'stranger' but also 'enemy' and

is later adopted into Old French as *host*. This variant denotes a 'multitude' or 'army' (cf. Harper 2001-2011).

Both variants can be found in modern English; thus we are made aware of a multitude of possible meanings and associations from the very beginning. Moreover, all of these meanings become relevant in the course of the plot developments. In the context of a Miltonian reading we can even read the Ariekei as *heavenly hosts* or *hosts of angels*, especially after considering their Language, as we will in the next section. Another, later, meaning is the biological sense of an "animal or plant having a parasite" (Harper 2001-2011).

4. Language, Communication, Control

Ariekene language, or *Language*, which human linguists are only able to describe after a long history of trial and error, misunderstandings and coincidences, cannot be spoken or understood by humans due to the basic differences in human and Ariekene anatomy: Ariekei have two mouths, which cannot be used separately. Every word consists of two parts which are spoken simultaneously. Using tools – computers or biomachines – to communicate via artificially synchronised speech is impossible, since Ariekei need to perceive a consciousness behind the words. Moreover, *Language* doesn't recognise a break between the signifier and the signified. Ariekene *Language* is purely mimetic. They can only describe what they have seen or experienced, and they cannot lie (another possible influence from Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, in which mindspeech cannot be used to lie). Because of this, some human linguists compare them to angels, and *Language* to the perfect Adamic language (cf. Miéville 2011, 207).

In *The Search for the Perfect Language*, Umberto Eco points out that the utopian dream of a perfect language is a phenomenon that can be found in every culture (Eco 1995, 1). This has led to intercultural attempts at rediscovering "languages postulated as original or as mystically perfect – such as Hebrew, Egyptian or Chinese" (Eco 1995, 2), and at reconstructing "languages postulated, either fanciful or not, as original or mother tongues, including the laboratory model of Indo-European" (Eco 1995, 2). Lastly, artificial languages have been constructed to achieve 'perfection' of either func-

tion or structure, 'perfection' in terms of universality, or 'perfection' in terms of practicality (Eco 1995, 2-3). These attempts were either motivated by "profound tensions of a religious nature" (Eco 1995, 209), as in various forms of Kabbalism, or by the wish for "a philosophical language which could eliminate the idola responsible for clouding the minds of men and for keeping them afar from the progress of science" (Eco 1995, 209). What Miéville is concerned with in *Embassytown* is basically a move from the 'perfect' but limited and exclusive mother tongue to the multitude of mutually related modern languages, which enable the creation of new systems of communication, including potential universal languages like the mutable language of the New Ariekei at the end of the book: a constructive political Babel. A fall which is also an uprising.

In normal circumstances, humans and Ariekei cannot communicate. Humans don't even know whether Ariekei even perceive humans who speak in only one voice as sentient, communicating beings. All other languages are only present to the Ariekei as their signifiers. To the Ariekei, this is only noise. In order to make communication possible – and simultaneously have complete control over all exchange of information – the Bremen administration in *Embassytown* develops so-called *Ambassadors*. An Ambassador consists of two clones (e.g. Cal + Vin = CalVin) whose brainwaves have been synchronised using an electronic implant, so they are able to speak in perfect unison. Ambassadors are the only humans who can speak *Language* (or something approximating *Language*, cf. Miéville 2011, 417). Of course, Ambassadors don't really speak *Language*. As Milton would put it, they were "taught / To counterfeit Man's voice" (Milton 1667/1996, 233) – since the speech they produce is filtered through a human mind. Their utterances are intelligible to Ariekei, but they aren't 'pure' signifieds (cf. Miéville 2011, 417).

After colonisation, Ariekei are confronted with many alien concepts for the first time. In order to be able to speak about them, they develop the practice of staging similes. Miéville's conceit suggests the possibility of extra-linguistic knowing: in other words, the possibility of meaningful experience that is formulated outside of language. (This is an idea influentially rejected by the linguist and philosopher Saussure). In several passages throughout *Embassytown*, the characters seem to express just this notion: "At best, it must be like a pre-ghost in their heads" (Miéville 2011, 73); "I remember suddenly

knowing, though I didn't have the words to express it, that not all his anger was directed at us [...]" (Miéville 2011, 10).

The protagonist Avice is part of such an enacted simile, initially connoting a "making do" (cf. Miéville 2011, 161). She is *the girl who ate what was given to her*: "There was a human girl who in pain ate what was given her in an old room built for eating in which eating hadn't happened for a time. [...] It'll be shortened with use" (Miéville 2011, 30). This is a classic epic simile. In *Embassytown*, as in Homer and Milton, epic similes serve as stylistic devices to foreshadow future scenes and plot developments (among other things).

5. War in Heaven: The End of the World?

The colonial administration notices that Ariekei are developing tendencies to find new usages for existing similes, and Avice's simile seems to be especially popular. Instead of using it to denote "a making do" (cf. Miéville 2011, 161), they are now trying to imply potential change (ibid.). At the same time a group of Ariekei is trying to learn how to lie. They organise "festivals of lies" (cf. Miéville 2011, 112-117), where they first get Ambassadors to lie to them (which has intoxicating effects on Ariekei), but first attempts at lies by Ariekei are still failing. Possible influences for this are, again, LeGuin's novel *The Left Hand of Darkness*, in which "Tibe [the new regent] wants to teach Karhide [the neighbouring kingdom] how to lie" (LeGuin 1969: 146) as well as Walter Moers' *Zamonia* series (Miéville, private communication, Sept 2010).

A circle of fanatic linguists who interpret Ariekei as angels, warns that the ability to lie would destroy the pure language and "usher in evil" (Miéville 2011, 196). This warning of a 'fall' represents another parallel to *Paradise Lost*, in which the fallen angel Lucifer (who is also referred to as Satan and Beelzebub) is described in his powerful, winged (Milton 1667/1996, 13) angel form (cf. Milton 1667/1996, 9). Milton's descriptions of Lucifer make him appear as a classical hero: he is proud (cf. Milton 1667/1996, 8), rebellious (cf. Milton 1667/1996, 9), physically powerful (Milton 1667/1996, 9), and strong-minded. Milton refers to Lucifer's strong-willed character as "unconquerable will" (Milton 1667/1996, 10) – "for the mind and spirit remains / Invincible" (Milton 1667/1996, 11) – in other places as "fixed mind" (Milton 1667/1996,

10), which literally means that Lucifer cannot be dissuaded from pursuing his goals. Originally, the Ariekei cannot change the structure of their minds; it is impossible for them to change perspectives and thus change their language (and implicitly their world-view). By learning how to lie, they would be able to express contradictions, to render their language more complex – and to make themselves more difficult to control. Similarly, in *Paradise Lost*, Satan tries to achieve his revolution against God and the Fall of the first people by using words, and lies, instead of using force:

[...] is plotting now / The fall of others
from like state of bliss. / By violence?
no, for that shall be withstood; / But by
deceit and lies (Milton 167/1996, 121)

Thy hope was to have reached / The
height of thy aspiring unopposed / The
throne of God unguarded, and his side
/ Abandoned at the terror of thy power
/ Or potent tongue (Milton 167/1996,
144)

[...] since first that tongue, / *Inspired*
with contradiction, durst oppose / A
third part of the gods (Milton 167/1996,
144; italics CS)

The Bremen administration reacts to the vague threat of possible revolution by introducing EzRa, an Ambassador created by a new method. EzRa doesn't consist of two clones but of two separate individuals. In the Ariekei this inherent contradiction – "that unity's there and not-there" (Miéville 2011, 237) – causes reactions even more extreme than the intoxication from lies. Each phrase uttered by EzRa works like a drug. As a result, Ariekei become addicted. They don't react to other Ambassadors any more and only communicate to ask for more of EzRa's speech. At the same time, all technology – including the machines that generate Embassytown's artificial atmosphere – begins to degenerate, since all biotechnology is connected to the Ariekei and thus can be infected. To the humans, this means the end of the world.

When Ra dies, the Bremen administration fear losing control over the addicted Ariekei and thus introduce a substitute drug by recombination:

EzCal. The effect is heightened even more: addicts now respond to the content of the messages and blindly obey.

At the same time an extremist faction arises among the Ariekei. In order to save at least the next generations, they resort to self-mutilation, ripping out their own (and each other's) organs of hearing, which are referred to as *fanwings* (Miéville 2011, 109). They are now called *Surdae* (Miéville 2011, 391), which in translation from the Latin means 'the deaf' ('wilfully deaf', even) but also 'the silent' (cf. Harper 2001-2011), and which in *Embassytown* later develops into 'the Absurd' (Miéville 2011, 391). If we follow the etymological meaning of *surdus* even further to Greek *alogos* (cf. Harper) – 'speechless, without reason' – it mirrors what some human linguists believe of the Absurd, i.e. that without language they are also incapable of thought.

Again, even though Miéville is mainly discussing linguistics here, we can find possible references to Milton:

[T]he serpent answers that by tasting
of a certain tree in the garden
he attained *both to speech and
reason, till then void of both* (Milton
1667/1996, 203; italics CS)

The resulting army of deaf ('wingless') Ariekei now provides us with a perfect picture of Miltonian fallen angels who are beginning to rebel against their tyrants. When the army continues to grow and approaches the city, Avice notices that the deaf Ariekei are acting in a very coordinated manner, even though they don't have Language any more. Based on this observation she sets off on a desperate mission to try and prevent the war and the end of her world. Together with a group of rogue Ambassadors and revolutionary Ariekei, who are practising lying, she sets out towards the approaching front of the Absurd – which is depicted in a way that recalls Milton's War in Heaven and simultaneously foregrounds the alternative meanings of *host* discussed earlier:

[...] though strange to us it seemed /
At first that Angel should with Angel
war, / And in fierce hosting meet
(Milton 1667/1996, 143)

'Twixt host and host but narrow space
was left, / A dreadful interval, and front
to front / Presented stood, in terrible
array / Of hideous length (ibid., 143)

6. Linguistic (R)evolution

At this point, some Ariekei have progressed far enough that they can tell lies by omission. Here's a programmatic example, which both addresses the development of their language system (and its inherent world-view) through contact with alien systems and foreshadows later plot developments:

Before the humans came we didn't
speak so much about certain things.
Before the humans came we didn't
speak so much. Before the humans
came we didn't speak. (Miéville 2011,
178; 411)

The Ariekei revolutionaries are also trying to find new ways to use known similes. They are evidently trying to make the leap from simile to metaphor (another 'same'/'not same'), which would also enable them to lie – and thus render their language creative. One Ariekei tries to express their common concern (here in translation through an Ambassador, which separates the meaning from the original by several levels, simply by using signs):

We want to decide what to hear, how
to live, what to say, what to speak,
how to mean, what to obey. We
want Language to be put to our use.
(Miéville 2011, 366)

There is also a political connection between Milton's and Miéville's rebel angels: their wish to "reascend / Self-raised, and repossess their native seat" (Milton 1667/1996, 25). Foreign rule makes as little sense to them as a self-appointed government.

Who can in reason, then, or right,
assume / Monarchy over such as live
by right / His equals (Milton 1667/1996,
136)

Unjust, thou say'st, / Flatly unjust, to
bind with laws the free, / And equal
over equals to let reign, / One over
all with unsucceeded power (Milton
1667/1996, 137)

This desire for autonomy can only be fulfilled if they manage to shake off linguistic control, not just as it's being wielded by the colonial administration, but also their own linguistic determination: so far they have been tools through which Language was spoken – now they want language to be their tool. And this can only be achieved by learning how to signify. Their mimetic (capitalised) Language must become (lower case) language. (cf. Miéville 2011, 438): a language among others, and thus performative. After many failures, Avice realises that if she wants to achieve communication, she has to break some social taboos. Using Ambassadors to translate is not enough; she wants to change the Ariekei's perception. This is where the Ariekei's 'fixed mind' turns out to be dynamic:

[...] one who brings / A mind not
changed by place or time. / The
mind is its own place, and in itself /
Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of
Heaven (Milton 1667/1996, 14)

These lines from *Paradise Lost* offer up the recipe for successful revolution, especially when being read in the context of the following Gramsci quotation: "Possibility is not reality: but it is in itself a reality (Hoare and Smith 1999, 681). It is possible that this is intentional (cf. Miéville 2010). The development of the Ariekei linguistic (r)evolution and its inherent logic is perfectly illustrated by the following longer passage, from which the quote is taken:

"Possibility is not reality: but it is in itself a reality. Whether a man can or cannot do a thing has its importance in evaluating what is done in reality. Possibility means 'freedom'. The measure of freedom enters into the concept of man. That the objective possibilities exist for people not to die of hunger and that people do die of hunger, has its importance, or so one would have thought. But the existence of objective conditions, of possibilities or

of freedom is not yet enough: it is necessary to 'know' them, and know how to use them. And to want to use them. Man, in this sense, is concrete will, that is, the effective application of the abstract will or vital impulse to the concrete means which realise such a will. Men create their own personality, 1. by giving a specific and concrete ('rational') direction to their own vital impulse or will; 2. by identifying the means which will make this will concrete and specific and not arbitrary; 3. By contributing to modify the ensemble of the concrete conditions for realising this will to the extent of one's own limits and capacities and in the most fruitful form. Man is to be conceived as an historical bloc of purely individual and subjective elements and of mass and objective or material elements with which the individual is in an active relationship. To transform the external world, the general system of relations, is to potentiate oneself and to develop oneself. That ethical improvement is purely individual is an illusion and an error: the synthesis of the elements constituting individuality is individual, but it cannot be realised and developed without an activity directed outward, modifying external relations both with nature and, in varying degrees, with other men, in the various social circles in which one lives, up to the greatest relationship of all, which embraces the whole human species." (Hoare and Smith 1999, 681-682; italics CS)

Now, for the first time, the Ambassadors speak to the Ariekei *about language*: they tell them that Avice is a complete being, and that the sounds she is producing with her single mouth are also a form of language. Afterwards Avice uses them as translators again to explain to the Ariekei how, being incapable of speaking their real names, she has given each of them a nickname so she could think and speak about them:

"There were humans a long time ago who wore clothes that were black and red like your markings. Spanish dancers. [...] I can't speak your name

in Language so I gave you a new one. Spanish Dancer. You're like, you are a Spanish Dancer." (Miéville 2011, 434-435)

Analogous to the Ariekei's making of similes, she uses metaphors to be able to express something unspeakable. She uses their own methods to give them their names: You are *like* a Spanish dancer. You *are* Spanish Dancer. The listening Ariekei recognise the process, but the perspective is new to them.

Analogously in Milton, the allocation of (new) names (and thus of identity) is in the hands of the humans: "Nor had they yet among the sons of Eve / Got them new names [...] Then were they known to men by various names" (Milton 1667/1996, 17).

Having overcome the first shock, the Ariekei understand the difference between simile and metaphor – via their names, the reference to their identity, which is a basic function of all languages. Besides, it works via the same process they have been practising: leaving out words in order to arrive at new meanings. Through identification with language, their perception is changed (cf. Lotman 29): under pain they transform their world-view and thus become the *New Ariekei*. This 'rebirth' is essential for their development as a species: they lose one side of what they are but gain another. In Milton too the consequence of disobedience is death, however it is still portrayed as arbitrary punishment, whereas Miéville treats this topic more creatively. Transformation is what the Ariekei wanted to achieve by changing the meaning of the simile of the girl who was hurt in the dark and ate what was given her. Avice feeds them their names, they 'eat what is given them', and through pain they are transformed. And just as predicted, the simile now implies change. Now they are able to signify, to understand symbols, to use language performatively, and to play with language. And based on this, they are able to learn other languages and sign systems.

When they reach the Absurd frontline, they realise that their guesses had been right: the deaf Ariekei have indeed succeeded in developing a rudimentary sign language in order to be able to coordinate their movements. For the first time they attach meanings to gestures (based on a first basic act of signification: "that/not that," cf. Miéville 417). Communication between both groups – using

gestures and simple pictograms – is now possible, since their languages and thus world-views now have comparable structures. Through a confrontation with the last of the addicts (a comparison of their 'old self' and their new identity), the New Ariekei demonstrate to the Absurd that they have already won: not even the language of EzCal has power over them now. With the Ariekei knowing that they have a chance to establish an egalitarian society, war is prevented. Finally they are able to communicate their concerns – and speak to everyone. This ties up with Mark Bould's Global Fantastika conference keynote on Afrofuturism: this is the voice of the oppressed, the formerly colonised, speaking without asking permission. Because nobody should have to ask permission (Bould 2016, keynote to Global Fantastika).

Already on their way to the city the New Ariekei further develop their sign language, and the hearing Ariekei start learning words from other languages. They now have the possibility to play with a wide range of possible meanings – and even to form their own neologisms through simultaneous pronunciation. Using loan words simultaneously with both mouths even enables them to express contradictory concepts in the same phrase, e.g. *I regret nothing and I regret* (cf. Miéville 2011, 487). They can now speak to computers as well, and they may have a chance to even travel through space and see other planets.

One unmodified Ariekei, a messenger, is portrayed as the "real hero of the war" (Miéville 2011, 488). It has to get the entrenched 'god-drug' EzCal to come out to the New Ariekei. Without having been trained, it has to convincingly utter its first lie in order to ensure that the revolution remains (largely) unbloody. This too is a parallel to Milton's rebel fallen angel, since the messenger turns into an "Artificer of fraud, and was the first / That practiced falsehood under saintly show" (Milton 1667/1996, 88).

In the end, Miéville doesn't offer us any general answers or solutions, or a certain future for humans and Ariekei. There is no 'healing', only change (cf. Miéville 467). But change means real contact, and without intercultural interaction there can be no exchange, no learning, no growth and no development. And at least the Ariekei's linguistic and political revolution seems to have been achieved: Like Milton's Lucifer they oppose their oppressors, god-drugs and colonial masters, and strive for the same hierarchical position – albeit on a

linguistic level which directly affects the world level. By getting their language to serve them instead of vice versa, they have liberated their consciousness and thus their people. This 'fall' is not hereditary – every new generation must work to attain this freedom through pain – but by losing one side of themselves, they gain many others.

[A]ngels can't signify. We really are signifying monkeys. As are the New Ariekei, but unlike us they have to go through the violence of it individually each time – they can't inherit it. But it is, at least arguably, worth it. (China Miéville, private communication, March 2011)

Even though the novel seems very theoretical on a linguistic level, Miéville brings real life to the characters, human and Ariekei, and portrays them as having real 'human' concerns – that is to say, personal, universal concerns which can be understood and felt across cultures. Cultural change, including the intermingling of cultures, is depicted as immanent to culture itself. Consequently, our task would be to enable a transformation that is beneficial to all participants. Apart from various cultural groups forming unlikely alliances to further inclusion and change, *Embassytown* suggests that there are vast possibilities for unforeseeable change and developments. Always a strong influence behind Miéville's novel, Milton's *Paradise Lost* itself is an act of supreme, strenuous, and impossible-but-necessary translation, from the divine to the mortal: a theodicy to justify the ways of God to Man. In addition, the immensely human and relatable way which Milton chooses to portray Lucifer, the Light-Bringer, suggests that there is a more radical transformation at the heart of the Fall: humanity receives and assimilates knowledge which God has forbidden – by implication, like in Goethe's "Prometheus", to prevent them from becoming God-like themselves – and is thus transformed. Similarly (and similarly radically), the Ariekei's 'Fall' is an emancipation, which serves them to become more than themselves, even joining other cultures in star travel, and nobody can predict where this change will lead them. The encounter between cultures is transformative, and the transformations can't be understood simply as the mixing and exchange of existing elements but as the painful production of something truly new. And although the colonisers are the cause of (the beginnings of) this transformation, and ancillary agents in reaching the crucial point and achieving it, the choice and the agency ultimately lies with the Hosts. For

them it starts as a tool for empowerment, grows into a technique to achieve independence, and ultimately leads to transcendence – not just of the colonial system, but of their former world-views and limitations, and of their former selves. "[L]ong is the way / And hard, that out of Hell leads up to light." (Milton 1667/1996, 42)

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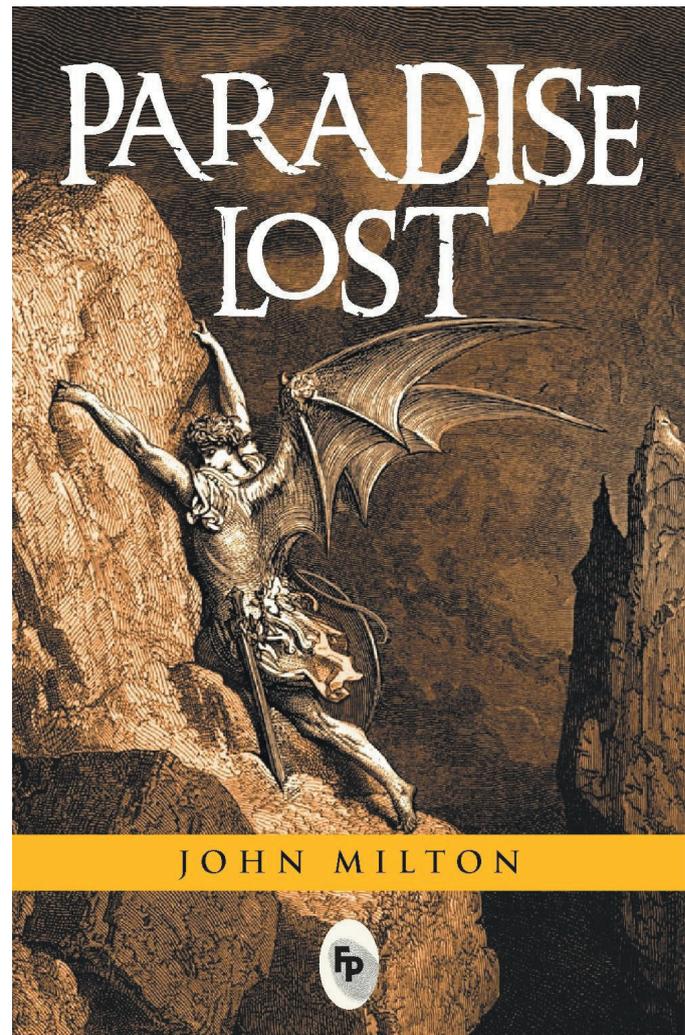
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Vector 292: Speculative Art

"I want to be a machine" Andy Warhol

CFP: For the next issue of Vector, we invite contributors to explore modern and contemporary art in relation to science fiction. At a time when avoiding science fiction is as difficult as avoiding technology, the news, or reality itself, it is not surprising to encounter SF in art galleries. Yet it is difficult to provide a definition by which some works of art may be considered works of SF. Should such a definition be based on aesthetics, concepts, or methods? Even if a work of art may not evoke science fiction at first glance, it might be fruitful to consider it in the context of SF culture and theory. We welcome submissions that explore alterity, technology, time and space, posthumanity, artificial intelligence, and other science fictional and fantastic themes through visual art, sound art, installation art, performance art, relational art, new media, conceptual art, ludic art, and any and all other forms.

Please feel free to get in touch with us if you would like to discuss your ideas in advance. Academic articles between 3,500 and 5,000 words may be considered for peer review, and shorter articles and exhibition reviews are also welcome. Imaginative and left-field interpretations of the call are very welcome.

Submit to: vector.submissions@gmail.com

Deadline for final articles: March 1, 2020

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Image by Rhona Eve Clews

From the series 'Suddenly the darkness turned into water'