

Vector

The critical journal of the British Science Fiction Association



**Family Frontiers: The Space Age Fiction
of Ursula K. Le Guin and Marge Piercy**

An Interview with Jeff VanderMeer

The 72nd World SF Con in London



No. 277

Autumn 2014

£4.00

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Published by the BSFA Ltd © 2014 ISSN 05050448

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Vector

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British Science Fiction Association Ltd

The BSFA was founded in 1958 and is a non-profitmaking organisation entirely staffed by unpaid volunteers. Registered in England. Limited by guarantee.

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Cheques (Pounds Sterling only) should be made payable to 'BSFA Ltd' and sent to **Martin Potts** at the address above, or join via the BSFA website at www.bsfa.co.uk

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Torque Control

How was your summer? I can't believe it's over already (indeed – long over, given that this *Vector* is reaching you a little later than we'd been planning). Has there been a summer like it for British sf? I think I might *still* be tired as a result.

For me it all started relatively relaxed until August when things started to get hectic in a big way. First off I attended the Science Fiction Foundation's Masterclass in the beautiful surroundings of the Greenwich Observatory. It was a great chance to meet fellow academics and exchange tips and expertise with each other as well as our three highly esteemed tutors: Andy Duncan, Neil Easterbrook, and K.V. Johansen. I'd highly recommend the experience to anyone else interested in sf scholarship when next year's class runs. The day after the class ended it was along the DLR (that's Docklands Light Railway), to the Excel centre for Worldcon/Loncon3.

We've collated a few reminiscences from Loncon attendees and included them in this issue. Reading over them a prevalent theme which emerges is the size of the event (and the vastness of the building housing it), and I have to confess that I too was struck by this. It seems absurd that one of my most distinct memories is finding my way through the backrooms of the Excel Centre to find the academic meet-and-greet, which we located at the opposite end of a seemingly infinite corridor. Yet when we weren't being entranced, or tormented, by the vast scale of the building (a building so large that on one of the days there was a sponsored run organised separately to Worldcon in a different room), the events going on within it brought no end of joy, fascination, and intellectual stimulation. I can't remember the last time I ever met so many interesting people, heard so many new ideas, and learnt so much in such a concentrated burst of a few days. Particular highlights for me were my experience of participating on the Marvel/DC Franchise panel, meeting former *Vector* Editors including Guest of Honour Malcolm Edwards, and the Titan Books party. I'd like to extend my congratulations and gratitude to the organisers for a job very well done. It was my first true convention experience and a great introduction to the ins-and-outs of international fandom, although I worry it may have spoiled me for any other convention.

After the convention I managed to steal a few days of time-off (although I spent one of them at a brilliant event in the opulence of London's Freemason's Hall

with George R. R. Martin and Robin Hobb), then it was a train to Warwick for two conferences: "Irradiating the Object" and "SFF Now". The first was a one day conference about the work of M. John Harrison, an author I know more by reputation than experience having read far less of his work than I would like, although that's a personal flaw that I'm already remedying spurred on not only by the intelligent and insightful discussion of the work which with conference provided, but even more so because of the experience of sharing the room with MJH and hearing him read a frankly stupendous short story to close the conference's [non-alcoholic] proceedings. The SFF Now conference followed on Irradiating the Object's heels and brought together a wide range of experts from global universities to discuss current trends and hot issues in the study of sf. The closest comparison I can make to this conference would be my sole experience of the Science Fiction Research Association (SFRA) conference a few years ago, but in miniature. However, rather than being reduced by its smaller scale, SFF Now felt like it distilled the essence of its larger cousin into a brew which was more potent, and certainly more focussed, because of its intimacy.

All of this and I haven't even mentioned the other great events going on which I wasn't able to attend in person, from Nine Worlds to a conference on Lois McMaster Bujold at Anglia Ruskin University, and so many more. It was a glorious summer indeed.

Sadly, my mood was tempered somewhat by tragic news: the death of Graham Joyce in September. Graham's presence will be missed by all that knew him, and felt throughout the genre community. I knew him from readings at Waterstones and the loss of someone who had felt so full of life came as quite a horrible shock. I can't do justice to a writer of such talent and humanity if I ran this editorial on for several more pages, so instead I shall finish by referring you to Simon Bestwick's moving tribute to Graham on the *This Is Horror* website: <http://www.thisishorror.co.uk/graham-joyce-1954-2014/>

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#sfVector

Glyn Morgan
Features Editor

Cover art by Marko Laine aka Anubish

“Giant”

<http://anubish.deviantart.com/>

Correction: reference was made in Vector 276's interview with Jo Walton to Jo's novel *Lifelode*, we of course meant *Lifeload*.



Changes to some rules regarding the BSFA Awards

Farah Mendlesohn (BSFA Awards Administrator)

To the members:

An analysis of last year's nominations revealed the following:

That there is a very wide spread of nominations caused primarily by some people nominating many times.

That although men and women are nominating in roughly equal numbers, the overwhelming number of "super-nominators" are men, and that in categories where the leads are very narrow, these super-nominators have a disproportionate influence.

That in the novel category where publication in the UK is required (the only category currently with such a requirement) the skewed record of the UK publishing industry is ensuring that very few female writers are eligible.

That many nominations in the short story category and for non-fiction are in publications not easily available to the BSFA membership.

The following response has been constructed by the AGM and has already been accepted:

- That nominations be restricted to four per category.
- That nominations shall open in October each year and run to January 31st the following year.
- That a minimum of three nominations will be required to be included on the ballot.
- That the BSFA will request a "year in science fiction" panel at Novacon and Bristolcon
- The BSFA will maintain a web page of eligible publications and a means for authors and artists to register their eligibility

Further proposed:

That all categories are restricted to publications within the UK and Ireland, and UK and Irish authors publishing overseas, or for publications on the internet which are thus easily available to UK readers.

This proposal will increase the number of women eligible for the BSFA Novel Award, bring all of the categories in line with each other, and ensure that all publications are readily available.

Non-UK and Irish writers are eligible if publishing in UK publications or with UK publishing houses.

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By post: PD Competition, 11 Stanhope Road, Northampton NN2 6JU
 Via email: chair@bsfa.co.uk

Please note: This competition is only open to current members of the BSFA as at 31st October 2014

Family Frontiers: The Space Age Fiction of Marge Piercy and Ursula K. Le Guin

by Sue Norton

There is a short but striking passage in Ursula K. Le Guin's 1969 novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* that relates to the artificiality of culture. It is written in the voice of Ai as he contemplates the political caginess of a Karhide demagogue. The demagogue had 'talked a great deal about Truth...', for he was, he said, "cutting down beneath the veneer of civilization" (91). His rhetoric prompts Ai to ruminante that:

it is a durable, ubiquitous, spacious metaphor, that one about veneer (or paint, or pliofilm, or whatever) hiding the nobler reality beneath. It can conceal a dozen fallacies at once. One of the most dangerous is the implication that civilization, being artificial, is unnatural: that it is the opposite of primitiveness.... Of course there is no veneer, the process is one of growth, and primitiveness and civilization are degrees of the same thing. (91)

His thesis is an interesting one. If, for instance, we allege that a particular family form, such as the so-called nuclear one, is merely a product of "civilization" or "culture", does that mean we are also calling it unnatural? Yes we are, but only in a limited sense. The artificiality of culture needs to be qualified: instead of categorically regarding culture as unnatural, it is considerably more useful to see it as the continual reinvention of itself as "natural" in accommodating the next evolution in material human circumstance. Such an understanding of culture and society is outlined by Levi-Strauss's argument that it is impossible to refer without contradiction to any phase in human evolution as lacking in culture, since humankind would always have practiced activities that exceeded the requirements of nature (3). Thus a primitive "then" and a civilized "now" are degrees of the same thing.

Since civilization is so thoroughly, and so conspicuously, constructed, it is spurious and politically or ideologically mo-

tivated to claim with certainty that any social formation is more or less "natural" than any other, given that the category of "the primitive" is equally a product of civilization and therefore utterly constructed as well. What is of interest to literary and cultural critics is the identification in fiction of the points where one culturally generated form competes for privilege with another. These competitions take place across time (linearly), of course, and also across human cultures and sub-cultures (laterally).

And literary and cultural criticism are socially instrumental, for it is by carefully and methodically delineating difference, and the forces that shape it, that spaces are cleared in which change can be allowed, charted, narrated, and new forms "naturalised". By examining the devices and practices through which such forms take shape, the constructed, artificial, or narrated complexion of the world we live in is emphasised, thus highlighting the enabling potential of critical fictions (to use bell hooks' well known term) to effect "real" change.

Perhaps attempts to expose the constructedness of unsavoury social formations, institutions, racial (and gender) pecking orders — which are symbolized and practiced as "natural," that is, as logical expressions of "human nature" — as a way of challenging their ideological dominance will always fall short of their project. Even as feminist fiction writers, writers of feminist sf, and feminist critics manage to "denaturalise" the patriarchal nuclear form, manage to reveal it inarguably as a product of "civilization", we are still left with the problem of the natural, or, rather, inevitable, momentum of culture, and all that that implies. If Ai is right, if primitiveness and civilization are degrees of the same thing, and the 'process is one of growth', then there is little to be gained in arguing that a seemingly omnipresent but oppressive form of social organisation is unnatural. For in a certain sense (Ai's sense) all forms of social organisation are indeed, and despite their obvious social construction, natural. Thus, one form of family necessarily

replaces another as the “natural” dominant practice, and, given the nature of representation, the practice of backgrounding and foregrounding persists.

Nevertheless, fiction has the power to be both enabling, insofar as it can expose the constructedness of seemingly natural social formations, and disabling, to the extent that it often reconstructs the ideologies it critiques. Serious writers acknowledge, in their very enterprises, the importance of fiction in the formation and de-formation of social patterns. It is not surprising that many writers write stories according to principles that have a broadly-based appeal. In other words, the deliberate alienation of the reader, post-modern obfuscation, and abandonment of navigational aids are not practices employed by writers who seek wide readerships in order to prompt broad social reflection or change. Instead, these writers endeavour to work within the coordinates of their genre, and to make their stories attractive and accessible. Speculative texts are especially apt to participate in the process of the symbolic naturalisation of burgeoning family forms. They are able to identify myths in the unmaking, and myths in the making.

The baby-boom era novels of Marge Piercy and Ursula Le Guin are especially engaged with myths of the family. Their speculative representations of family come not only out of the social revolts of the sixties, but also of the explosion of science fiction which, during this era, mirrored the landing on the moon, the space race, and such popular television series as *Star Trek*. Their work, like the work of African American female writers during the same period - writers such as Toni Morrison and Alice Walker - makes immediately apparent the artificiality of the nuclear configuration of family because it overtly assails the heavy, and now crumbling ideological structure that has held it in place. Certainly other writers assail that structure as well. For instance, Armistead Maupin's *Tales of the City* series, which began in *The San Francisco Chronicle* in 1976, takes account of gay and lesbian efforts to replace nuclear families with surrogate ones. Native American writing, especially the work of Leslie Silko and Louise Erdrich, also offers strikingly different models of family. But such accounts do not pose direct contrasts to what has been accepted in mainstream American culture as “normal”, whereas blackness has often been constructed as the binary opposite of whiteness. Likewise, science fiction and speculative fiction (sf) generally pose direct contrasts to what we know, or think we know, about dominant reality.

Thus, delivering characters that are untrue to type is one of the primary aims of feminist writers of sf. Like “raced” writers who create characters that resist behavioural resemblance to racial stereotypes, feminist writers of sf construct female characters whose traits are often, in the phrase of Marlene Barr, ‘alien to femininity’. Barr, a prominent scholar in the field, has observed how contemporary female sf writers ‘address themselves to three broad, sometimes overlapping themes: community, heroism, and sexuality/reproduction’, and, in doing so, create protagonists who change their worlds by defying behavioural models of femininity. She says:

Women who form communities, become heroes, and take charge of their sexuality behave in a manner which is alien – opposed, estranged, repugnant, outside – to the concept of femininity [...] When women conform to the requirements of “femininity”, they bolster patriarchal

ideologies upholding exclusive male power at the expense of their own effectiveness and power [...]. Female speculative fiction writers use two forms of exaggeration or hyperbole to speak against the imposition of femininity upon women: their characters either become overwhelmingly negative and feminine, [...] or overwhelmingly positive and unfeminine. [...] Both methods decry femininity's imposed limitations, restrictions, and indirect routes as they show women displaying mastery and competence. (Barr, 1987: xvii-xviii)



Feminist writers of mainstream or “realistic” (as opposed to speculative) fiction have, of course, always created female characters who behave in ways that are ‘alien, opposed, and estranged’ to femininity. One need only consider Jane Eyre, for instance. But the speculative genre frees the writer of the historical, psychological, spatial, and temporal requirements of realist fiction, thus allowing greater narrative latitude for the revision of gender roles. Because writers of sf are released, as Barr says, from the ‘constraints of patriarchal social reality, they can imagine presently impossible possibilities for women’ (Barr: 1987: xi).

As for women, so too of course, for family. The future visions of female sf writers tend to involve renditions of family that are fundamentally alien to conventional notions of “the family unit”. They are, to use Barr’s descriptors, estranged, outside, and repugnant to the concept of the patriarchal nuclear family, which depends so heavily upon a maintenance of “the feminine” and “the masculine.”

By blurring the usual distinctions between male and female subjectivity, works of a speculative nature sometimes

create future-perfect families that are, among other things, gender neutralised. The didacticism of such texts is often unequivocal. They aim, as Robin Roberts has observed, to 'teach us to rethink traditional patriarchal notions about science, reproduction, and gender [for] only in science fiction can feminists imaginatively step outside the father's house and begin to look around' (2).

One might argue, in fact, that only in science fiction, or in sf more generally, can *any* writer step outside the father's house. When non-speculative writers attempt deviant renditions of family (or of other societal institutions), they must do so within a context of the world as we know it, not as we might imagine it. The store of images available to them is quite limited. A realistic writer must create family scenarios that conform to reader expectations of a plausible world or else risk exposing themselves to charges of implausibility.

Challenging, then, must be the task of the realistic writer who seeks to deliver plausible plotline *and* independent character, when fidelity to social reality insists upon the marginalisation of character. When, in his 1989 novel *S*, John Updike sought to liberate Sara, his latter-day Hester Prynne, from her upper-middle-class marriage to an inattentive New England doctor, he needed to create a kind of alternative reality for her by sending her to a utopian commune in the Arizona desert. Rather than posit either a distant future or a distant world, he devised this remote but parallel space in which his heroine could "find" herself (before fleeing, nevertheless, to a life of solitude in the Bahamas - also a remote but parallel space). For Updike, as indeed for any writer of realistic fiction, female liberation can be imagined only to a *certain extent*, before it collapses into the implausible. If an author is to remain mimetic to a world we recognize as our own, then certain wished-for plot gestures are apt to be compromised. Sf, by contrast, offers the possibility for radically re-visioned social landscapes without upsetting readerly expectations. Its conventions simply allow for the extraordinary. As feminist writers of futuristic sf, Marge Piercy and Ursula K. Le Guin rebut patriarchally sanctioned representations of family. With reference to the so-called "family unit," they, quite simply, attempt to split the atom and explode the nucleus entirely.

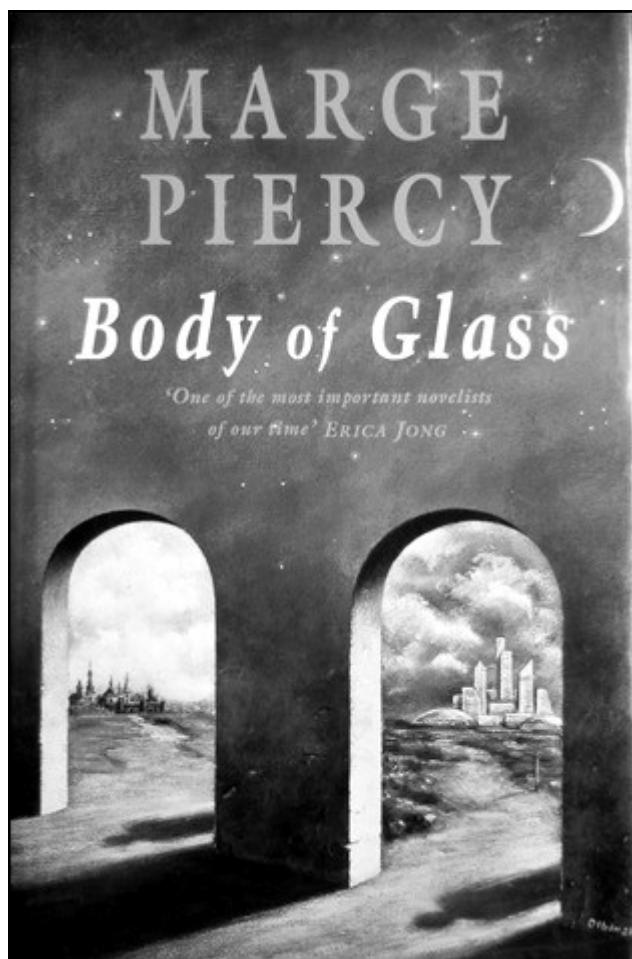
Discussions of late twentieth-century fictive representations of family invite such atomic metaphor, given the political context in which the American nuclear family entered its heyday. As historian Elaine Tyler May has argued, the politics of the American nuclear family in the 1950s were intimately linked to the politics of American nuclear weaponry during the same period. The family's ideology of closure replicated and helped to sustain the nation's cold war policies of "containment" and its general warding off of "foreign influences" (11). She reminds us, furthermore, that 'the legendary family of the 1950s, complete with appliances, station wagons, backyard barbecues, and tricycles scattered on the sidewalks, represented something new. It was not, as common wisdom tells us, the last gasp of "traditional" family life with roots deep in the past. Rather, it was the first wholehearted effort to create a home that would fulfil virtually all of its members' personal needs through an energised and expressive personal life' (11).

What Marge Piercy in particular seeks to show in her futuristic reworkings of family is that *all* of the members of the nuclear family have hardly had their needs fulfilled or, for that matter, considered. Her manicured lawns surrounded by white picket fences in the dystopic *Body of Glass* (1992) implicate the ideological framework Tyler May refers to, holding its legacy responsible for the misogynistic, socially dysfunctional society she projects onto the year 2061.

Tyler May's analysis of the connection between cold war politics and the dominance of the American nuclear family after World War II is a convincing one. She argues that 'postwar Americans fortified the boundaries within which they lived' (13). She continues at length:

They wanted secure jobs, secure homes, and secure marriages in a secure country. Security would enable them to take advantage of the fruits of prosperity and peace that were, at long last, available. And so they adhered to an overarching principle that would guide them in their personal and political lives: containment. Containment was the key to security. The word was used only in its foreign policy version, first articulated by George F. Kennan, the American charge d'affairs in Moscow, in 1946. The power of the Soviet Union would not endanger national security if it could be contained within a clearly-defined sphere of influence. But the term also describes the response to other postwar developments. The terrifying destructive potential of the atomic bomb would not be a threat if it could be contained, first in the hands of the United States and later through peaceful applications.

[...] In the domestic version of containment, the "sphere of influence" was the home. Within its walls, potentially dangerous social forces of the new age might be tamed, where they could contribute to the secure and fulfilling life to which postwar women and men aspired. [...] More than merely a metaphor for the cold war on the homefront, containment aptly describes the way in which public policy, personal behaviour, and even political values were focused on the home. (13-14)

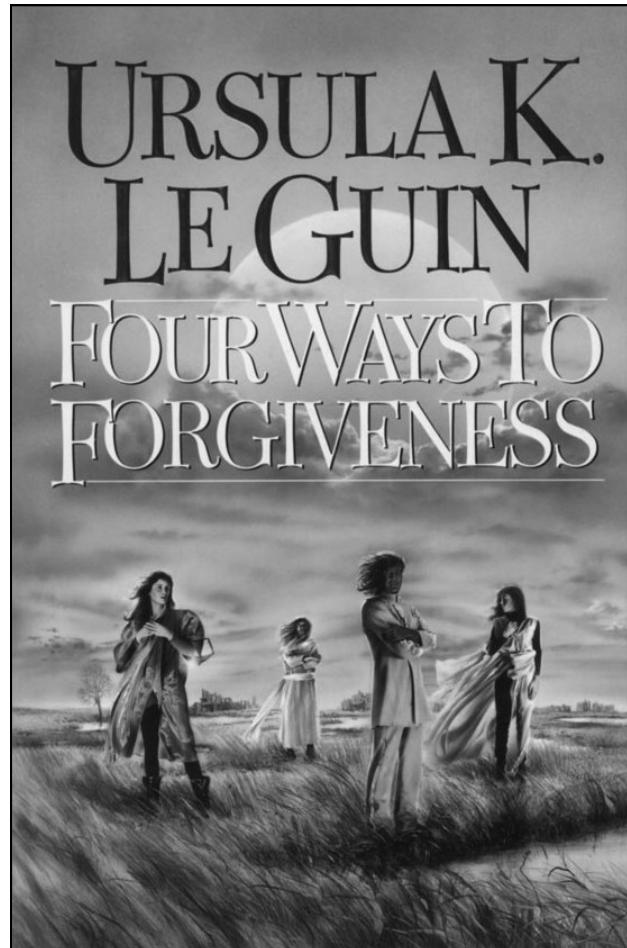


In such ways, the Cold War encouraged the seemingly “natural” nuclear family - that next evolution in material human circumstance - as rootless Americans scrambled from the cities of enclosed spaces and extended kin to the sprawling suburbs of private property and professional security, both deftly supported by fixed understandings of masculinity and femininity. While Soviet women were headed to the factory, American women continued to keep the home fires burning.

In *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) Le Guin makes more literal the Nuclear Age's metaphor of “Cold War politics” by casting her futuristic vision of family and society on the ice-covered planet of Winter, where two rival nations maintain an epoch of, for the most part, bloodless political hostility. We learn that Winter’s people are a mutant, androgynous strain of humanity produced as an experiment of Earthlings who, long ago, may have been trying to eliminate human aggression. On Winter, any adult can become pregnant, and children are raised by the clan. Neither of Winter’s rival nations privilege the “copulating couple” to use Germaine Greer’s phrase, but instead configure family as an extended network of kin spanning ‘hearth and domain’, the two primary sub-sections of Nation. The sibling relationship, rather than the conjugal one, enjoys the greatest degree of status.

Piercy and LeGuin’s visions of family reflect a number of the concerns present in much late twentieth century female-authored sf. Not least of these is a deep cynicism of heterosexual monogamy leading to exclusivity in parenting. *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1978), *Body of Glass* (1992), *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), and its sequel of novellas *Four Ways to Forgiveness* (1995) seek, for the most part, to herald in an age of open partnership and a village-approach to child-rearing. They operate very much in the late ‘60s and early ‘70s consciousness-raising tradition reflected in Joanna Russ’s influential speculative short story “When It Changed” (1972), in which the tranquillity of an all-female, parthenogenetically reproducing society is threatened by the sudden arrival of four men from earth. Details are revealed sparingly, but the reader can surmise that, heretofore, life on Whileaway has been a largely agrarian and thoroughly harmonious matter of lesbian partnering, cottage industry, highly participatory local government, and community-based parenting. When the earth-men arrive, this Adam-less Eden must shrink from impending masculine imperialism. Characteristic of much feminist utopian fiction, the text is preoccupied with the significations of clothing and its relationship to the construction of gender. At one point in the story, ‘the man passed around pictures of his wife, who looked like the priestess of some arcane cult’ (414). At another, he says to his inquisitors, ‘where I come from, the women don’t dress so plainly’ (413), leaving the narrator to reflect upon the one question ‘those four men hedged about all evening and never quite dared to ask, looking at the lot of us, hicks in overalls, farmers in canvas pants and plain shirts: *Which of you plays the role of the man?* As if we had to produce a carbon copy of their mistakes!’ (416).

By these and other exchanges, “When It Changed” implies that sexual difference is largely cosmetic, put on from without, and therefore possible to eradicate, the result of which would be a more just social order. Heterosexual monogamy is taken to task in this and more extended feminist utopias, owing not to any of its inherent features, but because of its pride of place in the history of the patriarchal nuclear family. In “When It Changed,” the earth-men are seen to regard themselves as humane, rational, scientific, and eminently *reasonable*, yet they think nothing of the all-male composition of their mission, nor of their unabashed pride in having well-ornamented (read ornamental) wives. The biases latent in their unexamined assumptions become subtly apparent to the reader each time one of them innocently professes that ‘sexual equality has been



reestablished on Earth’ (414), as though it had ever been a fait accompli to begin with. The reader is left wondering just how unequal things must have become on Earth before some of its women resorted to the founding of Whileaway.

Representations of ambisexuality and androgyny in female-authored utopian and sf are prevalent. In *Woman on the Edge of Time* the desire for gender neutrality can be found in the ‘reformed pronoun ‘per’ to mean both him and her, and also in the proclivity of both men and women for fanciful attire. Mattapoisett is a society that embraces all forms of aesthetic creativity, and welcomes the expression of personal identity through elaborate costuming. Bisexuality is the norm, and parenting involves three ‘co-mothers’ of both sexes who have not given birth to their offspring, but who have adopted them in embryonic form from a community ‘brooder’ which serves as a massive artificial womb. The mores of Piercy’s future world expect that parenting be a shared responsibility of both sexes, and its ethos anticipates and accommodates the desire of men and women to nurture.

Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness*, though it also presents an ambisexual, gender neutralised world, one which certainly has its advantages, is nevertheless concerned to reject the naivety inherent in utopian projections, especially feminist ones. It was written before *Woman on the Edge of Time*, but emerges from, and helped to comprise, the same literary movement — the feminist utopianism of the late ‘60s and early ‘70s.

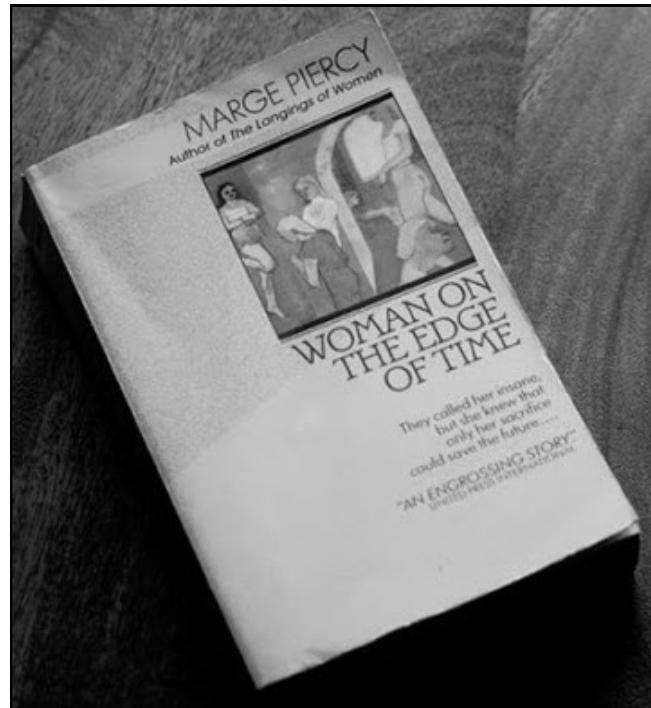
As Barr and others have critically documented, these decades produced a wealth of specifically feminist sf that challenge received wisdoms pertaining to family life. Authors and titles of note include Suzy McKee Charnas’s *Walk to the End of the World* (1974) and *Motherlines* (1979), Joanna Russ’s *The Female Man* (1975), Dorothy Bryant’s *The Kin of Ata Are Waiting for You* (1971), Mary Staton’s *From the Legend of Biel* (1975), Sally Miller Gearhart’s *The Wanderground* (1978), as

well as Ursula LeGuin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), and Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1978).

These writers and their fictions allow readers to view alternative societies that hold "corrected" and seemingly alien, but adoptable, counter-notions, or else they rehearse the familiar in the extreme. In instances of the latter, the tactic of the writer is, as Barr suggests, simply to exaggerate our most common assumptions into nightmarish proportions. This is Margaret Atwood's approach in *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986) in which she depicts the dehumanising results of a rigidly enforced patriarchy. Like a good number of other female-authored sf, including *The Left Hand of Darkness*, *The Handmaid's Tale* links the politics of cold war containment to the politics of the nuclear family. The post-apocalyptic Republic of Gilead insists upon the nuclear configuration of family in a world that has so long been negligent of female health and well being, that its women can no longer bear children. A small minority of reproductively healthy women must, in servitude, conceive, carry, and deliver the offspring of the elite as it wages war to preserve its insular values.

But Le Guin's novel stands in contrast to these and numerous others of its kind in that it is neither facile of argument nor simplistic of plot. *The Left Hand of Darkness* is not wholly utopian, and it isn't wholly dystopian either. It represents, as Ellen Peel has observed, a kind of 'sceptical feminism' (35-49). It does not, for instance, behave as though the elimination of gender roles alone will lead to a Golden Age of Feminism and the erosion of all things patriarchal. Problems of family organisation and gender equality may have been satisfactorily resolved on Le Guin's planet Winter, but social imbalances of power remain. If such imbalances can no longer be attributed to a 'patriarchal social reality', then to what can they be attributed? LeGuin's novel would appear to suggest that the human race is fundamentally desirous of conflict and would generate it even in a sexually equal world.

Piercy's two novels are also driven by conflict as are, of course, all fictional narratives (or, at least, all that are worth reading). Utopian projections become stultified if they are left unchallenged by either external marauders or internal



insurrections. Without some sort of lurking threat, any fictional utopia (for, is there any other kind?) risks becoming a scene as lovely and as flat as a picture postcard, or, in Peel's words, a site of 'chilly perfection' (34).

And for every threat to every utopian vision, we find ideological "fallout". At the risk of over-punning, the context of Cold War nuclear weaponry is a notable one in mid- to late-twentieth century sf by women, relating, as it does, to isolationist family values. As the nation hunkered down beneath its anti-ballistic missile shield, so, too, did the family. The Regan administration made much hay of "family values", a rally cry that took hold and promoted the sanctity of heterosexual marriage as the only safe space for reproduction, until the Clinton Administration proclaimed that "it takes a village to raise a child". The stories, novellas, and novels of feminist sf writers of the latter decades of the twentieth century, such as Piercy and Le Guin, seek, quite simply, to unmake the myth of the nuclear family. They endeavour to radicalise American family values through the socio-political constituencies of their characters, those who resist stereotype, embrace the androgynous, and run far away from the house of the father.

Marge Piercy's Future-Perfect

Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* foregrounds, in no uncertain terms, its resistance to the nuclear family. In her future society of Mattapoisett, children are randomly selected from an amniotic tank by three co-mothers of either sex who have no romantic involvement with each other. As Luciente, Mattapoisett's ambassador to the past, tells Connie, Bellevue Hospital's (allegedly psychotic) traveller to the future, 'co-mothers are seldom sweet friends if we can manage. So the child will not get caught in love misunderstandings' (74). Thus, most adults in Mattapoisett have several 'sweet friends' with whom they share sexual love, and two 'coms' (co-mothers) with whom they form a parenting triad. There is a further network of kin called 'the core'. Each adult has "per" own hut, and therefore does not live *in* a family but, as Luciente explains, '*among* our family' (72). Children live not with any of their three co-mothers, but in 'the children's house' with profession-

al childminders. Such an open configuration is meant to prevent the emotional stranglehold of the old-style families of Connie's past, described by a minor character as 'unstable dyads, fierce and greedy, trying to body [i.e. *embody*, in Piercy's future-speak] the original mother-child bonding' (125).

Piercy's simple (if not simplistic) rearrangements have effectively freed the implied psychological hostages of the nuclear family. In Mattapoisett, one's children need not experience maternal separation as emotional abandonment because the mother, though loving, has become a fairly peripheral figure (one of three, in fact). Adults, though they may have several 'sweet friends', need not form 'unstable dyads, fierce and greedy' because parenting has become a communal act of giving, rather than a home-enclosed struggle for power enacted, as Greer says, by the 'copulating couple'. Piercy's Native American-sounding Mattapoisett does not idealise "the unit" but privileges the tribe.

and gleaming white teeth. Her ugly depiction strategically places blame for gender encoding and social dysfunction at the feet of a global capitalism, thus shifting culpability away from anatomy and toward alterable institutions. Patriarchy is thereby freer to appear as a social phenomenon that can indeed be undermined, overthrown, or at the very least, ironically subverted.

We see an instance of its subversion later on, when we learn that a group of scientists in Mattapoisett has ironically called itself 'The Manhattan Project', enabling Piercy to render the founding fathers of nuclear warfare, the symbolic - but significantly obsolete - protectors of all things patriarchal. Mattapoisett's appropriation of the name metaphorically wrests power away from a male scientific establishment and grants power to male and female bi-sexual eco-scientists who inhabit a world of amorphous social structures and open families. The new Manhattan Project is directly antithetical to the original



Indeed it would appear that in *Woman on the Edge of Time* the nuclear configuration is the strict, and blessedly archaic, form and function of patriarchy - an outmoded way of life that had both sustained and been sustained by the house of father.

Nevertheless, Piercy shows us that a second, far less blissful future is possible when Connie accidentally time travels to the New York of 2137 where she finds a 'cartoon of femininity' with 'enormous sharp breasts' and oversized hips and buttocks (288) called Gildina, a sex-slave of the future, who services 'the richies', and is held in captivity by an armed cyborg. If Gildina's, rather than Luciente's, future comes into existence (depending on certain actions Connie may or may not take in New York in 1976), the egalitarian principles of Mattapoisett will never take hold and flourish. The future's military-industrial complex will, in Piercy's dystopian projection, depend upon the sexual containment of woman, and the unharnessed momentum of a free market economy that yields nothing more sustaining than shrink-wrapped food

Manhattan Project, which enabled Cold War isolationism through its development of nuclear weaponry.³ In her creation of a utopian, flower-child world devoid of marriage, private property, and any and all sexual taboos, Piercy is, in distinctly 1970s fashion, seeking to allay lingering American Cold War fears of sexual chaos. Far from chaotic, though, Piercy's Mattapoisett is, through its sexual liberation, serene, harmonious, and anti-nuclear in every sense. Patriarchy, by implication a purely ideological structure, has effectively been toppled.

Clearly, consciousness-raising is a special aim of *Woman on the Edge of Time*. Piercy's later novel *Body of Glass* (1991), however, probes gendered family arrangements even more decisively through its use of cybernetics. First published in the United States under the title *He, She and It*; *Body of Glass* is an inferior work to *Woman on the Edge of Time* owing to its several convoluted plots, and its frequent slips into sentimentality and melodrama. But it is more intriguing for its exploration of the nature of identity, and of the implications of science and

technology on family and society. It centres on the story of a cyborg who is made in the metaphorical image of a Jewish golem, which, in Hebrew, means literally a “shapeless man”. Piercy’s reliance on centuries-old Jewish myth and legend emphasises her text’s thematic pre-occupation with social and biological evolution - with time’s ability to “program” us - for it tells the stories of two such shapeless men, a golem named Joseph of early 17th century Prague, and a cyborg named Yod of mid- 21st century Massachusetts.

It is this second figure, Yod, who is especially relevant to a discussion of the fictional representation of social organisation and family configuration since, using the body of the cyborg, feminist sf has become increasingly able to ponder the construction of identity and gender. Because a cyborg, usually depicted as a creature comprised of both human and animal tissue as well as of inorganic materials, is programmed by humans, its subjectivity is to a large extent predetermined by the will of its creators. However, because a cyborg has a human genetic makeup, it is also meant to be read as susceptible to the inheritance of any “innate” characteristics possessed by its human ancestors. By positing an androgynous cyborg, the product of both genetic and cultural programming, as a self-proclaimed person (for Yod insists he is a person, if not a wholly “human person”), Piercy prompts consideration of the extent to which identity, and therefore gender, is comprised of cultural influences. Theoretically, Yod

ought to be duplicable. His maker, Dr. Avram Stein (a name that prompts association with Dr. Frankenstein), ought to be able to make several Yods, each just like the other, provided he uses the same materials and programs the chips identically. In the event, though, Yod becomes highly subjective and non-reproducibly unique through his interactions with others and exposure to his surroundings. Thus the novel suggests that, genetic mapping notwithstanding, we are what we consume of our environment.

Yod, unlike his human counterparts, inarguably has no gender-specific essence. So he is fundamentally un-gendered except to the extent that he is *en-gendered*, so to speak, by the humans who spawned and programmed him. He becomes aware of the gendered expectations of humans only as he interacts with them. Even then, his exposure to gender categories is limited because the setting in which Piercy places him, Tikva, is so nearly devoid of them. Piercy’s deployment of an Edenic trope in *Body of Glass* serves to impress her reader with an equation between innocence and androgyny. Tikva operates as Piercy’s version of the garden, where, as Shands points out, ‘the role of housewife or homemaker has simply been dismantled [...] Women’s work outside the house is seen as highly meaningful [...] With everyone in Tikva over fifteen being in the work force, work is in fact central for everyone, and with housework mostly automated, women’s old conflicts are reduced or resolved. Children are in day care even if mothers work at home because of the value seen in the socialisation that day care offers’ (145). Yod, in the end, gives his life to preserve this futuristic Eden, and, in doing so, enacts the part of a revised pre-lapsarian (because androgynous) Adam who sacrifices himself to free the world from the sins of the father, especially from the implied “original sin” of gender encoding. When Yod self-destructs to save Tikva, he intentionally triggers an explosion that simultaneously destroys Avram, who, like Connie’s “patriarchal construct” called God, had been observing events from the detached perspective of his laboratory.

Thus, as in *Woman on the Edge of Time*, *Body of Glass*’s utopian possibilities are ultimately consecrated by an obliteration of the patriarchal stance. But where *Woman on the Edge of Time*’s technological innovation, the brooder, verges on reinventing the notion of fixed gender identities, *Body of Glass*’s technological innovation, the cyborg, thoroughly problematises the notion of fixed or “natural” identities by allowing a “shapeless” man to acquire attributes solely through acculturation. Because this “shaped” man is, at various times, the lover of two of the novel’s heroines, Shira and Malkah, the reader comes away from the text with a sense of endless possibilities for social and familial reform.

Le Guin’s Complications

Where Piercy’s narratives gesture toward genderless worlds, Le Guin’s depict them though, interestingly, Le Guin’s are less utopian. She is a prolific writer, so her novels, poems, and stories do many things. But her penchant for delivering moral grey areas has often been noted by critics.

The Left Hand of Darkness is a meditation on social morality that sets up several hypotheticals to which it offers scant solutions. Le Guin’s two essays, “Is Gender Necessary?” (1976) and “Is Gender Necessary? Redux” (1988) clarify some of her positions and, of course, shed light on intent. The first she wrote in defensive response to critics who had objected to what they felt was her fairly masculine style of androgyny. The second she wrote as a qualified retraction of

WINNER OF THE HUGO AND NEBULA AWARDS
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URSULA K. LE GUIN



THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS

“[A] science fiction masterpiece.” —Newsweek



the first, for she later came to agree, in some measure, with her critics. In "Is Gender Necessary?", Le Guin said the novel was meant to pose a 'thought experiment'. She writes:

Because of our lifelong social conditioning, it is hard for us to see clearly what, besides purely physiological form and function, truly differentiates men and women. Are there real differences in temperament, capacity, talent, psychic process, etc.? If so, what are they? Only comparative ethnology offers, so far, any solid evidence on the matter, and the evidence is incomplete and often contradictory. The only going social experiments that are truly relevant are the kibbutzim and the Chinese communes, and they too are inconclusive – and hard to get unbiased information about. How to find out? Well, one can always put a cat in a box. One can send an imaginary, but conventional, indeed rather stuffy, young man from Earth into an imaginary culture which is totally free of sex roles because there is no, absolutely no, physiological sex distinction. I eliminated gender, to find out what was left. Whatever was left would be, presumably, simply human. It would define the area that is shared by men and women alike. ("Is Gender Necessary?": 138)

What would be left, we are encouraged to conclude, is a human race that still tends toward domination and exploitation, but which carries with it the prospect of hope for a more socially just future.

In *The Left Hand of Darkness*, the character of Ai, though flawed and naïve, represents such hope. He is a representative of the Ekumen, the federation of worlds that coordinates contact and communication among the various Hainish planets for the exchange of goods and knowledge, and what he finds on the planet Gethen is an international power struggle between two rival nations. The mere fact that all of Gethen's people truly have been created equal, in that anyone can become pregnant and give birth, does not eliminate the potential for strife, conflict, and conquest. Karhide and Orgoreyn are, at Gethen's present point in history, engaged in a contest for world domination even though there is no battle of the sexes upon which to model, or from which to derive, their behaviour. On Gethen, there has been no original division of labour based on sex since, as Le Guin says, 'the mother of several children may be the father of several more' before returning to a perfect state of androgyny ("Is Gender Necessary?" 137). Nevertheless, there exists great ideological division between nations, with Karhide gradually assuming an imperialising position.

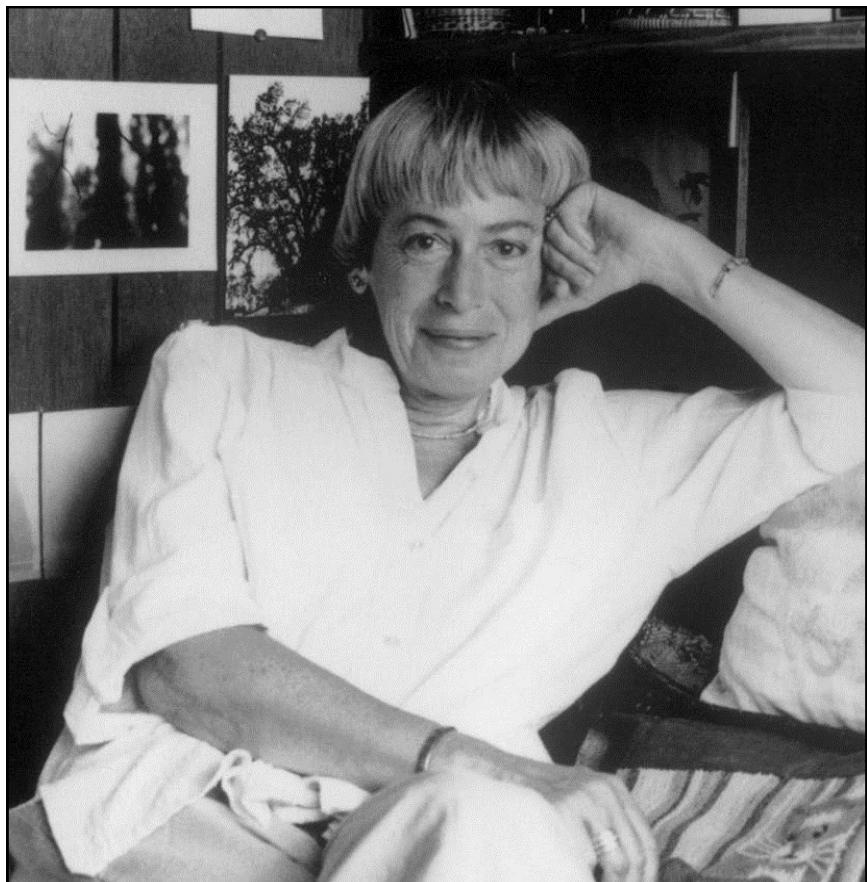
Given its premise of ambisexuality, then, the text is heedless of the hypotheses of Socialist and Radical Feminism, such prevalent discourses in the '60s and '70s, which tend to attribute most forms of hegemony and exploitation to an original sexism. As Le Guin herself explains:

on Gethen, the two polarities we perceive through our cultural conditioning as male and female are neither, and are in balance: consensus with authority, decentralizing with centralizing, flexible with rigid, circular with linear, hierarchy with network. But it is not a motionless balance, there being no such thing in life, and at the moment

of the novel, it is wobbling perilously ("Is Gender Necessary? Redux": 141)

Why that balance has begun to wobble is not made explicit by the text, or by either of Le Guin's essays, but clearly the cause has nothing to do with biological sex, nothing to do with gender. For Le Guin, unlike for Piercy, utopia is not an automatic outgrowth of gender neutrality.

What happens to family as a result of Le Guin's thought experiment in *The Left Hand of Darkness* is intricately bound up in her treatment of gender. Yet any specific treatment of family in the novel is conspicuous by its near-absence. Le Guin would eventually come to see this absence as a failing of the text, but it is not a failing that prevents *The Left Hand of Darkness* from implying certain things about family, family as it might exist in an androgynous world. Indeed, what it implies may be more interesting for its lack of authorial intent on the matter: Le Guin is not found trying to re-write the family in this novel; she is found trying to re-write gender. What happens to family as a result of that re-writing is therefore somewhat haphazard and, therefore, happily unburdened by politicising intent. It is also happily compatible with most



feminist aims and objectives in relation to child-rearing practices and the non-division of labour, suggesting that a hierarchical, a nuclear, or an otherwise closed family structure in a genderless society is an imaginative improbability. Le Guin, however, found fault with the novel. She wrote:

for the reader, I left out too much. One does not see Es-traven as a mother, with his children, in any role that we automatically perceive as 'female': and therefore, we tend to see him as a man. This is a real flaw in the book, and I can only be very grateful to those readers, men and women, whose willingness to participate in the experiment led them to fill in that omission with the work of their own

imagination, and to see Estraven as I saw him, as man and woman, familiar and different, alien and utterly human." (Is Gender Necessary? 146)

But despite what Le Guin described as this 'real flaw', we do learn several things about family organisation on Gethen. We learn, for instance, that the basic unit all over the planet is a group of two hundred to eight hundred people, called a hearth. We also learn that anyone can and will have sex with anyone else who is in a state of fecundity called kemmer. We learn that there is no marriage requirement, either for purposes of fidelity or child-rearing, but that some people elect to 'vow kemmer' for life. Otherwise, there exists group sex, group "marriage," or pair-bonding without vows (*Left Hand* 91-92). Such commitments have intense moral and psychic significance, but they are not controlled by Church or State' (Is Gender Necessary? 143). The closest bonds tend to be between siblings, who can, and do, form sexual couples at times, but who are forbidden to 'vow kemmering'. Lifelong incest, then, is the only taboo (*Left Hand* 83).

Such family values are, it is safe to say, generally at home in feminism, especially feminism of the 1960's and 1970s. But it would seem that one threat to the possibility of a gender neutralised utopia is symbolised by Gethen's frozen landscape which suggests not just stillness, but stalemate. Le Guin's use of a literally frozen setting on which to cast the drama of two nations perpetually on the brink of conflict, is suggestive of Soviet/American relations during the Cold War. The plot's frequent references to military paranoia, espionage, and Siberian-type prison camps, prompt such an association and work well in a moral tale that bears a political resemblance to the extra-textual world. That Karhlide is a feudalistic/capitalistic type of country, and Orgoreyn a repressive communistic type of country, makes the similarities to the U.S. and the former U.S.S.R fairly compelling. In terms of family, we also learn that in Orgoreyn, 'no child over a year old lives with its parent or parents; all are brought up in the Commensal Hearths. There is no rank by descent. Private wills are not legal: a man dying leaves his fortune to the state. All start equal' (103). Karhlide, however, family - the clan, the hearth - remains detached from government.

This familiar dichotomy assists Le Guin in depicting family as socially and politically determined, and, therefore, as remediable. She reproduces Cold War conditions of political polarity, suggesting, however inexactly, ideological parallels with the extra-textual world. By rendering the textual world genderless, she clears a space in which it is possible to imagine the emergence of new forms, of new family configurations. She clears a space but builds nothing more than a foundation: sexual equality, communal child-rearing, hearth schools. In a clear echo of the feminist discourse of the decade, she offers a symbolic manifestation sexual equality, but she rejects the naïve conclusion that the elimination of class, dominance, and aggression will follow from the elimination of sexism, or vice versa. Where Piercy would choose in both *Woman on the Edge of Time* and *Body of Glass* to consistently and favourably illustrate aspects of feminist theory, Le Guin reveals a scepticism.

Thus *The Left Hand of Darkness* remains in a kind of default collusion with patriarchal modes of thinking, even as it operates as a force against them. Yet as a sf work, of specifically science fiction, it uses what was once a typically male mode of writing to allow women, both its author and its man-woman characters, to enter a man's world. Le Guin's much later Hainish fiction, *Four Ways to Forgiveness* (1995), goes further, in one of its stories in particular, toward positing a more sexually integrated society, even though it makes no revisions to human anatomy. Similar to *The Left Hand of*

Darkness, it finds itself, even in its ideological subversion, reconstructing patriarchal narrative practice.

The collection's third story, "A Man of the People," features families in which the mother/father dyad is replaced by a mother/brother dyad, with the brother of the mother being called "father". The biological father is a peripheral figure,



who may know his offspring, but who has no real involvement with them. He may, however, be a part of a parenting dyad with his sister. Thus the story's central character, Havzhiva, is the son of a woman named Tovo, and her brother, Granite. Tovo leads a richly public life of lecturing and performing rituals at other 'pueblos'. She is so respected by her people that she is called The Heir of the Sun. Granite, whose very name pointedly suggests strength and masculinity, takes domestic responsibility for the children. In most families, the women perform paid work and the men perform domestic work, but both roles are highly valued, and neither is invisible. Homes are inter-generational, incorporating grandparents. The 'pueblo' system of tight, small-ish communities ensures plenty of intercourse between households and eliminates the potential for suburban-esque isolation.

Le Guin's utopian depiction of family in "A Man of the People" prompts both association and agreement with the post-Cold War political slogan of the '90s mentioned earlier, 'It takes a whole village to raise a child'. Furthermore, its male/female role reversal is strategically delivered in such a way as to appear nearly wistful in its ease of accomplishment. Certainly the story seeks to garner wide appeal and invite reader assent to its social/familial vision, not, specifically in terms of mother/brother dyads, but in terms of imaginatively reconfiguring family in any number of ways. By first estranging, and then favourably impressing us with the brother/sister dyad, it suggests the arbitrariness of our systems. However, again unwilling to deliver too facile an argument, here as in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Le Guin problematises her utopian scenario, her mid-'90s thought experiment, and sprinkles her narrative with suggestions of unrest.

Havzhiva, born in harmony, raised in harmony, and the product of a perfectly serene childhood, concludes in his late adolescence that 'existence is fundamentally arbitrary' (127) and goes off into the wider universe beyond the pueblo, to worlds where people have 'no lineage, no relatives, and no religion' (127). He becomes a student of history, a seeker of truth, and in that wider universe he finds societies far less tranquil than had been the pueblo of his childhood. It is in that wider universe of unrest that he cultivates his ability for diplomacy and leadership, and there finds his life's work in heroic action. Galaxies away from the village that raised him, he tells a fellow freedom-fighter about his pueblo, 'about his

father who was his uncle, his mother the Heir of the Sun, the rites, the festivals,' and he says to her, 'when you have to sit still, you want to fly' (164).

It is in this simple moral that we find both the distillation and the reconstitution of an ideology. For here the child of feminist fiction, the child it took a whole village to raise, the un-triangulated child of amorphous social structures and personally and professionally contented parents, is neither mother-hungry nor father-bound. He is not bound by iron curtains, stone walls, or nationalistic ideologies. Nevertheless, he becomes restless with his freedom and goes in search of other worlds to reform. As in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Le Guin has cleared another space, only to leave it blank. Anyone reading the story with attention to its potential as a fiction to invite social or familial formation, will be left standing with "a man of the people" on the precipice of unpredictable change. Light-years away from where we would expect to find him, stands the American quest hero, alone in a feminist landscape, perfectly free to quest. He intuits the absence of any 'supposed nobler reality beneath' to return to Ai's phrase, but still he goes forward to reveal another frontier in which change can be allowed, charted, narrated, and new forms "naturalised."

Notes

1. See the Preface to Barr's *Alien to Femininity* (Westport: Greenwood Press Inc., 1987).

2. See "Science Fiction Critiques of the American Space Program, 1945-1958" by Albert I. Berger, *Science Fiction Studies*, 15, Vol. 5, Part 2, July 1978.

3. Elaine Tyler May's assertions regarding the Cold War American ideology of the enclosed family are apropos of Piercy's implications here — i.e. that patriarchy is *not* an inevitable, permanent consequence of biology; that the nuclear family is a by-product of patriarchy, and therefore also not inevitable; and that the insular nature of both the nuclear family and of Cold War nationhood is linked to patriarchal priorities, including a desire for containment and closed borders.

Tyler May's research indicates, for instance, that the mid-twentieth-century ideology of the nuclear family required that "it was not just nuclear energy that had to be contained, but the social and sexual fallout of the atomic age itself" (93). Among other compelling documents, she cites a major article published in the *Journal of Social Hygiene* in 1951 on the dangers of atomic attack, written by Charles Walter Clarke, a Harvard physician and executive director of the American Social Hygiene Association. She summarises the article and its implications as follows:

'Following an atomic bomb explosion' [Clarke] wrote, 'families would become separated and lost from each other in confusion. Supports of normal family and community life would be broken down.... [T]here would develop among many people, especially youths ... the reckless psychological state often seen following great disasters.' The preparedness plan that Clarke devised to cope with this possibility centred not on death and destruction or psychological damage, but on the potential for sexual chaos. 'Under such conditions,' he continued, 'moral standards would relax and promiscuity would increase....'

Clarke's preoccupation with sexual chaos may seem absurd in the face of the incomprehensible nuclear holocaust. [...] Nevertheless, his ideas struck a responsive chord among many fellow professionals who shared his concern for sexual order in the atomic age. [...] By linking fears of out-of-control sexuality with the insecurities of the cold war era, Clarke articulated a symbolic connection that found widespread expression in professional writings, anti-communist campaigns, and the popular culture. (93)

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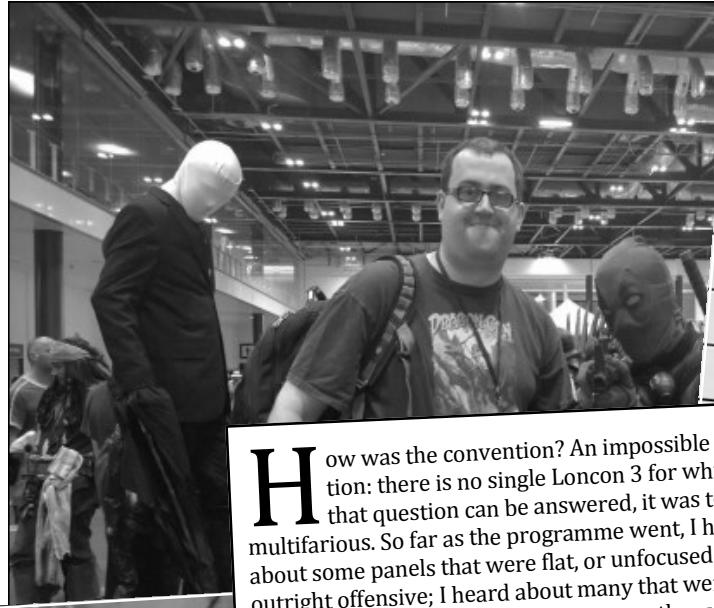
LONCON 3

The 72nd World Science Fiction Convention



Reminiscences

Here are a few memories of Loncon, some provided by invitation, others submitted in response to a call on the @BSFA twitter...



How was the convention? An impossible question: there is no single Loncon 3 for which that question can be answered, it was too multifarious. So far as the programme went, I heard about some panels that were flat, or unfocused, or outright offensive; I heard about many that were lively, in-depth, and inspiring. In a few cases they were the same panel. Socially, many people praised the openness of the Fan Village, a large shared space for parties and events; a few lamented the absence of a more conventional central hotel bar. My convention, all in all, was pretty good.

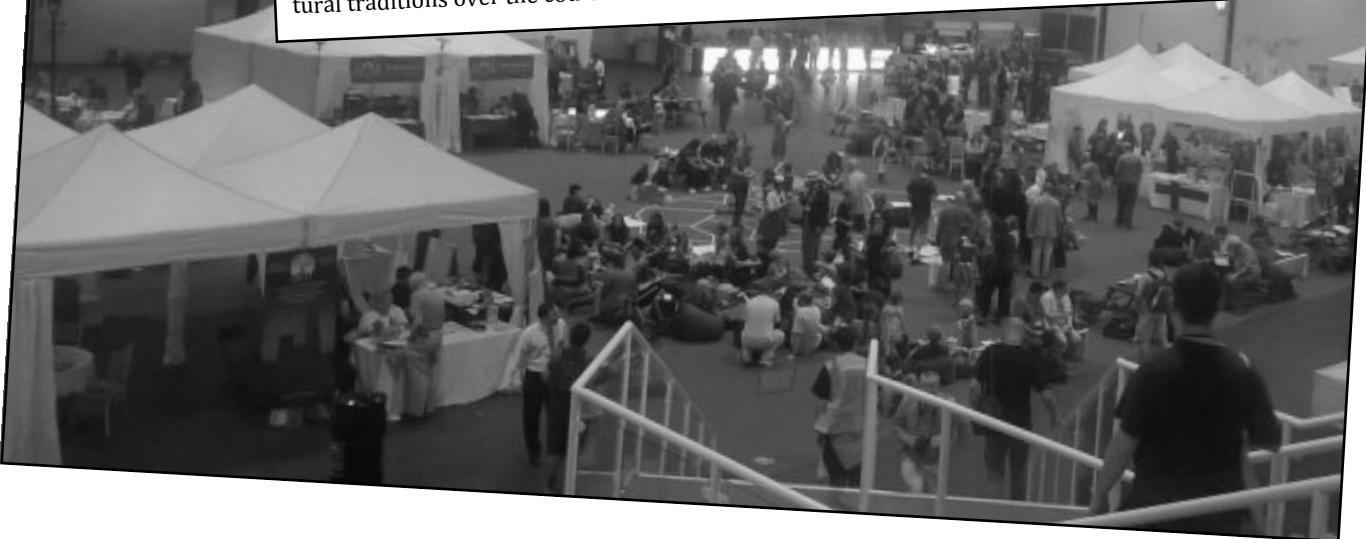
As a Brit at a British Worldcon, I went to a few panels on British SF, partly to see whether they agreed with the "after the Boom" sensibility of a *Strange Horizons* symposium published at the end of July. Two in particular seem worth mentioning; both took place on Saturday afternoon. "Race and British SF" (Tajinder Hayer, Stephanie Saulter, Russell Smith and Dev Agarwal, moderated by Amal El-Mohtar) was, as the title suggests, a very general discussion, but no less fascinating for that, suggesting a number of more specific avenues that future conventions should pick up on: publishing experiences and expectations; the opportunities and traps of "cultural gentrification"; how writers of colour relate to British rural and urban landscapes. Unfortunately, the audience did not follow the panel's lead, and when the time came for questions, these threads were forgotten in favour of very basic "How do I write minority characters?" and "Where do I find minority writers as an editor?" plaints -- questions that were not only inappropriate to the panel, but that have been answered extensively in many forums over the last decade.

The second panel was positioned as part of the "World at Worldcon" stream, which showcased representatives of fourteen different national and cultural traditions over the course of the convention

(one of my favourite threads of what was by far the most international SF convention I've ever attended). "The State of British SF" featured Simon Spanton, Jo Fletcher, Paul March-Russell and Lesley Hall, moderated by Glyn Morgan, and felt dominated by issues of publishing and marketing, rather than questions of art. But perhaps that says something important about where British SF is right now. It seems to me that over the last five years or so, as a community we've become much more sophisticated and vocal in our analysis of the structural problems afflicting the British SF market, and as Roz Kaveney has pointed out, these structural problems -- the absence of women and writers of colour from the lists of major publishers, just starting to be redressed over the last 18 months by Hodderscape, Jo Fletcher Books and Del Rey UK; a broader conservatism that means challenging new writers like Nina Allan are consigned to small press deals -- are inextricably linked to questions about literary direction. In a real sense we can't know what "British SF" means right now, because we're seeing such a skewed sample of it.

Of course even if the problem were fixed overnight, it's not clear that there would be much agreement as to what a healthy field would look like. Perhaps this is all bound up with the ongoing, broader revisioning of SF's historical narrative. Clearly we are unlikely to ever stop talking about "British SF" as a conceptual marker, but perhaps we need to think about how to talk about it in a way that foregrounds multiple stories of British SF, and doesn't expect there to be a single answer to "The State of British SF". That's a challenging project, but it might be a rewarding one.

— Niall Harrison (editor at *Strange Horizons*, former Vector editor)





My Loncon 3 began with instructing at the SFF Masterclass held over the Thames at the Greenwich Observatory, which was a great experience in itself. This was my first really big con, but the masterclass meant I started off already knowing some people with similar interests. I took part in a roundtable and several panels in the academic stream and attended others, all of which I found to be very well-conducted, fascinating conversations -- I enjoyed myself immensely and really came away with the feeling that I was part of an intelligent, thoughtful, enthusiastic community of readers and scholars.

I'm one of only two professional sf writers (the other being Paul Marlowe) in my province in Canada, so having the opportunity to talk to a few fellow authors/internet friends in person over coffee was very revitalizing, as was taking part in panels and less formal conversations with so many of the academics working on children's fantasy. (I was mostly at Loncon as the author of *Quests and Kingdoms* and *Beyond Window-Dressing*, my two works as a feral academic, and of my children's fiction, rather than for my adult fantasy, *Black-dog* and its sequels). Living where I do, and not having any university affiliation, I'm definitely far out of the loop for

contemporary sf scholarship. In fact, until Loncon, I didn't realize that there was now such a large and vigorous academic community engaging with speculative fiction, particularly in adult literature. Loncon was a real eye-opener there. I came away full of new ideas and new perspectives on both the genre and my own writing. (I'm very grateful to the friends and relatives who helped me make this trip possible, and to ArtsNB, the New Brunswick Arts Board, which offered a grant to assist with travel expenses).

What am I going to remember, five years from now? Sitting up till one in the morning trying (successfully) to get my computer working again after it developed some major problems. Working on the copyedit of *The Lady* in the midst of everything -- which was why the computer disaster was such a disaster. Curries from the Mint Leaves takeaway. Kew Gardens and the British Museum and a riverbus up and down the Thames (not actually part of Worldcon but a result of it). Most of all, good company: being reminded of the value of just hanging out and talking -- and of listening to knowledgeable, passionate people talking.

— K.V. Johansen (writer)



I'm by no means a regular convention attendee, but since 'rediscovering' these things by opting to attend the first Edge Lit one-day event back in 2012, I've made more of an effort these last few years, attending a few FantasyCons (including this year's in my home town of York), the World Fantasy Con in Brighton last year, and last year's EasterCon in Bradford. Having most of my family in London meant Loncon seemed like a no-brainer for me -- stay with family, commute daily in and out of Docklands, everything will surely work itself out nicely, right? It meant an early finish every evening rather than the usual 'crawl back to hotel room at 2/3am and do it all again bright and bushy-tailed the following day' way of these things, but that's not necessarily a bad thing, is it?

Alas, for me, Loncon was too massive -- so many programme strands, so much going on at the same time, so many people in attendance (>10k in total apparently), and the venue itself was just mammoth -- and they barely used a third of the whole site over the five days. This ridiculous scale meant not only did I miss many people at the event, but even when I caught them for a brief exchange and sug-

gested we catch up and talk again later, nine times out of ten I didn't see them again for the rest of the weekend. This could be my devastatingly poor wit and charm in full swing, but many I spoke to shared the same concerns -- there were too many things going on and nowhere to really chill out and relax, and no proper bar anywhere either, unless you left the venue through one end or the other.

Stand-out moments were my first face-to-face Writer's Group discussion of my own work, several great publisher parties (esp. the Gollancz one at which I witnessed the birth of an overnight Twitter sensation right before my eyes), and a few select sojourns into the cinema room. This coupled with some quality time spent with various friends and groups thereof pretty much summed up my Loncon experience.

While Loncon did feel full-on all the time, that's not to say I didn't enjoy it -- I did manage a lot and enjoy much of what was on offer -- but my over-riding impression was one of size and scale, and in this case big was definitely not necessarily better.

— Alex Bardy (production/layout of Vector)

"WhirledCon 3"

Unfortunately, we arrived late and left early but the few days I spent at Loncon passed in a bit of a (sober) blur. Although there were thousands of jolly conventioneers, because it was held at ExCel in London Docklands it never felt crowded. The wide central avenue and cavernous halls absorbed the throngs of fans and professional fantasists who had come from all over the world for their annual shindig, a spot of wheeling and dealing, and handing out and receiving of shiny rockets.

The Art show was wonderful; I spent several hours over a couple of days admiring the work on display and lamenting the shallowness of my pockets. A particular highlight was the work of Chris Baker AKA Fangorn but every piece in the show was worthy of its place including some cool spaceships made by Theodore Robinson.

The Hospitality Hall/ fan village was a splendid place to hang out and chill. Stuffed full of fan tables and those bidding to host future conventions it was (IMO) the colourful and friendly hub of the con. Before he decided to re-enact a scene from the exorcist and throw up all over me, my beloved son spent an enjoyable couple of hours in the

games tent playing Fluxx with his dad and a random bunch of friendly strangers.

There was all manner of eye-catching object d'art including a TARDIS and a representation of a throne from an aptly named book called *A Game of Thrones* on which many a would-be usurper happily posed for pics and selfies. There were also some rather splendid cos-players brightening the place up and adding to the general geek chic ambience.

The dealer's room was rammed with all manner of nerdy goodness, but I limited myself to a single purchase, that of an old second-hand book of which I'm rather fond. But what made my day was bumping into Brian Aldiss at one stall and exchanging a brief 'hello'.

In conclusion, I found the overall vibe of the con to be friendly and easy going and I'm one of those weirdly shy writer types so that's saying something. From what I saw, everything seemed to happen when and how it was supposed to happen and everybody seemed to be having a great time. The only downer was being puked all over by my son, but such is life.

— K.T. Davies (writer)



I attend the World Science Fiction Convention every year, and every year it feels bigger than the last, though this year – despite the record-breaking number of members – for some reason this year's Worldcon felt lighter, more... well, "intimate" isn't the ever going to be the right word for a convention held in a building that could comfortably house an extended family of airport hangars, but it felt smaller. "Smaller" is, of course, by its very nature, relative.

Registration was a nightmare, even though I turned up early (though having run a – much smaller – convention since Loncon, I have some sympathy for their woes) but other than this (5 trips needed!), and the appalling quality of the main hotels (but I never spend much time in my room at conventions, anyway) it felt like a great success. The inclusion of the "fan village" (a wide space devoted to a pop-up bar, cheap food ("food" being one of those words that relies on the writer and reader agreeing not to discuss the actual quality of the substances being traded), various kaffek-latches and convention-bid tents) made up for the fact that there was no central bar at the convention centre (and the main convention hotel, somewhat inexplicably didn't open its restaurant for lunch); it became the place to meet up with friends during the event. A dozen or more simultaneous streams of programming meant that there was pretty much *always* something to see or do, and audience sizes at panels were always impressive – perhaps *too* impressive, based on the numbers of folk turned away from panel rooms for safety reasons.

So, a very good Worldcon, despite the hotels that surrounded it. Spokane in 2015 has a lot to live up to!

— Lee Harris (senior editor, Tor.com)

I didn't actually go to the Hugo Awards ceremony as I'd promised my fiancee a non-geeky night at theatre, so I wasn't actually at the convention for what was surely one of its main highlights – especially Ann Leckie's awesome win for *Ancillary Justice* – but as someone with an enthusiasm for all awards I was definitely cheering along via Twitter during the interval!

I did get to talk about awards a little bit though, chairing a great panel on the subject at 10am on Sunday morning. What? You missed it? Sorry, it was amazing, and we sorted out every single problem with awards and still had time to answer questions from the audience!

This was my second Worldcon experience, the first being at Glasgow. I actually think that having the event in London this year was a brilliant move, even if it did mean that I opted to stay at Hotel Hunter and cab home rather than stay in the area. With smaller Cons it usually makes sense to try and stay in the main venue hotel, especially the bar area, but given the already epic scale of Worldcon anyway I don't you really miss out on much not being there 24 hours a day.

The other main thing to note about Worldcon is, of course, the parties, and with so many authors in town there were certainly plenty to choose from. Thank you to Gollancz, Tor UK, Titan and Jo Fletcher Books for all the wine! And also thank you to HarperCollins / Voyager for invites to the George RR Martin and Robin Hobb party and the launch of Lauren Beukes' (awesomely original) *Broken Monsters*, which both happened in the week as well.

As with so many conventions, the biggest challenge of all was finding people! I think I said hi to almost everyone, but usually passing in opposite directions down one corridor or another never to meet again. This is kind of the joy of the event though, and the constantly running backstream chat of Twitter certainly helps you feel connected even if you always feel like you're on the move (or scouting for a free seat somewhere just to sit and catch up for a minute).

So parties, books, panels, corridors and parties. I think that's my Loncon.

Thank you indeed to all the organisers.

— Tom Hunter (director of the Arthur C. Clarke Award)

Monday: nearly the end of a varied London con. I was on a couple of panels in the morning, so it was nearly noon by the time I moseyed over to the Gollancz stand in the dealers' room. Meeting Simon, my editor, for lunch. 'Shall we go?' I asked.

'Sure,' he said.

We started down along the main corridor of the Excel Centre, in the general direction of the restaurants at the west end of the building. Around us fans of every stripe flocked and jostled; a thousand different Sheldon Cooper T-shirts, Star Wars cosplay, Game of Thrones cosplay, steampunkcosplay. 'Have you had a good con?' I asked Simon.

'Actually, I have. It's been fun. We sold a lot of books,' he said. 'You?'

'Not bad at all. Been on some interesting panels. Did a signing to which people actually came. Met some old friends, made some new friends. There's a good *vibe*, I think.'

'Yes,' said Simon. 'I agree. A really good atmosphere.'

We walked on for a quarter hour or so. A man dressed as Gandalf passed us, leading his two dressed-as-hobbits kids. People sat at the cafes that punctuated the layout of the corridor, chatting, taking selfies. 'Isn't that Justina?' Simon said.

It was: my friend Justina Robson, and family, at a metal table drinking Costa coffee. We joined them.

Geoff Ryman strolled past, like a man on stilts. 'Geoff! Geoff!' He joined us. 'Thought you guys did an excellent job hosting the Hugos,' we told them. They took our compliments with good grace, and gossiped about mutual acquaintances. 'We'd better get going,' said Simon, checking his watch. 'Lunch!'

'Excellent idea,' I said. 'I am hungry.'

We said our goodbyes and wandered on. Time rolled on, marked only by the progress we made passing doughnut emporia, noodle bars and cashpoints, public toilets and side corridors. I checked my watch. Half an hour had transpired. Peering ahead of me, I strained to make out the west exit, somewhere in amongst the eye-wearying perspective of convergent lines. 'Is it much further?'

'I'm not sure,' said Simon.

We walked on. Time passed. There were

fewer fans, now. I looked back, but it wasn't possible to see where we had started. My feet were starting to throb.

'We'd better pick up the pace,' said Simon. 'Or we'll miss lunchtime altogether.'

'Right.'

On and on. The quality of the light seemed to change; although whether this was an objective feature of the corridor, or some trick my mind was playing, I couldn't say. To leaven the sound of feet plopping on the hard corridor floor, I cleared my throat. 'Really enjoyed the Gollancz-Bragelonne party, Saturday evening, by the way.'

'Thanks! It was good, I think.'

'It was.'

Conversation died.

We walked on. There was nobody else around, now. The corridor stretched to infinity before us. There were no more coffee or noodle franchises. A dreadful monotony and blankness defined the structure. Odd creatures seemed to slither, or lollop, along the floor—always visible only in the corner of my eye. When I turned my head there was nothing there. We marched on. 'What sort of food does this place do?' I asked. 'This restaurant we're heading for?'

'Burgers,' said Simon, in the dull voice of a man trying without hope to persuade himself of the truth of his own assertion. 'Beer.'

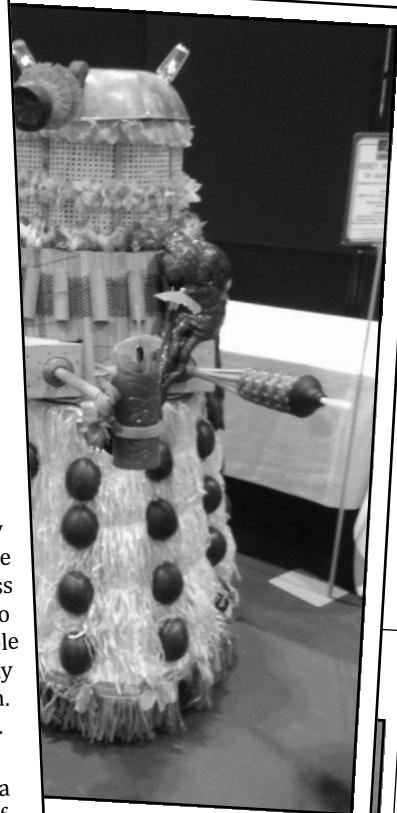
'I'd like a beer,' I said, in a raspy voice.

'Yes,' Simon agreed. 'Beer.'

We walked on. The roof above us seemed to be moving, flowing with a glimmering, uncanny motion, somehow simultaneous fast and slow. Speckles in the granite floor sparked like meteors, fled away into impossible petrific depths. The walls pulsed. Step followed step followed step. There flashed upon my inner eye a true vision, gifted me by the weird topography of the corridor—of Simon and myself emerging from the west entrance, bearded, our clothes rags, into a future that didn't recognise us—or, perhaps, into a deep past, where meglosauri grazed mesozoic ferns, lifting curious heads to observe our intrusion. There was no going back now.

We walked on.

— Adam Roberts (writer, academic)





Loncon was great fun, but felt like hard work at times... It can't have helped that when I arrived on Thursday, the bulk of my luggage was made up of books for the BSFA tombola, when it really should have been full of comfy shoes. The half-mile walk from the hotel end of the Excel centre to the fan village is no way to break in a new pair of Doctor Marten boots.

I was not lucky enough to breeze through registration, but really felt for the volunteers who must have felt under siege. After this experience, I was desperate for a cup of tea. I headed to the fan village, found some friends and marvelled at what a friendly, cosy space the village seemed in the midst of a huge exhibition hall.

I hadn't much time before I had to head off for the meeting with Ian McDonald at Canada Water Library. Unfortunately I never found it. I

wonder how many other members were misdirected and given wrong information by the staff? Shame, because it seems a nice space and is pretty accessible too.

On Friday there was a performance by a Philharmonic Orchestra, which I went along to. An excellent rendition of many science fiction themes, including Superman, Star Wars and Doctor Who, as well as Holst.

...and there was always something interesting going on in the fan village! From piratical entertainers, acrobats, morris dancers, to the attractions of the Tardis and the Game of Thrones chair, the gaming tent and WOOFa craft area for the kids. Also, the beer was not too far away! I loved seeing all the people going through in their costumes.

I also got to chat to Brad Templeton, attending another conference in Canada, but also at Loncon via internet-link on a telepresence robot.

The other things I managed to attend, apart from parties and cheesy discos were Gareth L. Powell's reading, which was excellent, a play, book launches by Newcon and ChiZine, and my own panel.

Loncon 3 was all about the walking. The ExCel Centre is long. Really long. At least a quarter of a mile from one end to the other, maybe more, and I regularly notched up four to five miles each day. Unsurprisingly, some found the trek very irksome but the 'convention passeggiata' quickly became an important element of my Loncon experience.

I particularly liked the first walk of the day, meeting the other early birds along the way, stopping for a chat, and then moving on, hearing the convention hubbub gradually increase as we drew nearer to the exhibition halls, watching people on the escalators, making their way up to the programme rooms. But I also enjoyed going back to the concourse after the first programme sessions, finding a table and settling down to meet people and to watch the convention pass by. I'm an inveterate people-watcher anyway and I found this convention particularly interesting to observe because it looked so different to the last Worldcon I attended, in Glasgow in 2005.

What struck me time and again during Loncon 3 is how different the science fiction community now looks. Yes, the stereotypical white men with beards and black t-shirts are still there but they no longer dominate. The community is younger, often much younger; comfortable in its collective skin. I loved watching the families passing up and down the concourse, sometimes three generations, the children in costume, their parents too. Even just sitting and watching all this go by, the energy was palpable; you couldn't help but be affected by it. Everyone was smiling.

Diversity is the buzzword du jour, with many different groups working to broaden our understanding of what that might mean for science fiction and fantasy. Loncon 3's programming team took this very much to heart. I can only speak for the literary pro-

gramme, which is my primary interest, but that team put together an extraordinary range of items, designed to reflect the fact that science fiction is a world literature, and not simply an Anglo-American product. It is the great frustration of my convention that I didn't get to a tenth of the items I wanted to see but a delight to hear about so many other discussions taking place. Not all of the items went to plan, as audience members and panellists alike sometimes struggled with this shift in focus, but for the most part people seemed open to new ideas and responded accordingly, which can only benefit us as a community.

This was also an incredibly well-organised convention. I don't doubt there were crises but they didn't show. The programme team put on an amazing show but the attention to detail also showed in so many other ways, from the online programme to the acres of chairs and tables to the prompt response when a problem arose. (The ExCel staff were also, in my dealings with them, friendly, courteous and efficient.) The Exhibition area and the Fan Village were outstanding; indeed, with its village green, its quiet reading area and its bar, the Village became a natural place for families to congregate and relax.

Some media outlets chose to characterise Loncon as a battle between the old guard and the young iconoclasts for the soul of sf. That may be the experience of some but it's certainly not the convention I saw. I've not always been terribly thrilled with the broader sf community in recent years, especially not its record on diversity, objectification and gender parity, but at a risk of sounding utopian, I looked at Loncon 3 and saw something to be proud of again – people of all ages sharing their love of science fiction.

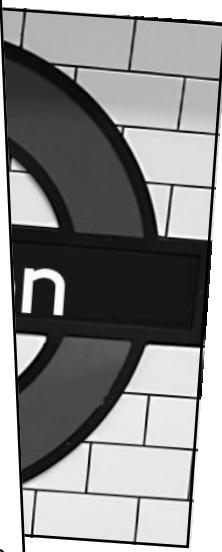
— **Maureen Kincaid-Speller**
(editor, academic)

I only got to see two hours of the play of *The Anubis Gates* by Tim Powers. It's a great story, but the play could do with a bit of tweaking.

On the panel Working for a Living, I appeared with Martin McGrath, Susan Connolly, Alison Page and Heather Urbanski. We had an excellent and lively discussion about the representation (or lack of) the lower classes in genre television, and what we would like to see next as progress.

At the risk of sounding boring, most days were the same for me, sitting at the BSFA desk. We gave out freebies and ribbons; we sold a lot of tombola tickets; we ran the Tweetstream fiction challenge; we ran the BSFA selfie competition to win signed Adam Christopher books from Angry Robot. We got ourselves a few new members and had some great chats with lots of different people. Thank you to all my fellow desk sitters for your help, and for making it so nice to be there.

— **Donna Scott (BSFA Chair)**



Collapsing the Quartet: Jeff VanderMeer talks to Tom Hunter

by Tom Hunter

Clarke Award director Tom Hunter talks to author, anthologist and Master of the Book Life, Jeff VanderMeer about his groundbreaking Southern Reach trilogy, paying your writing experience forward and creative new ways to jump off cliffs.

Tom Hunter: Starting with the Southern Reach trilogy a three part question if you will: Can you tell us about the very beginning of this project, how it changed when you were right in the middle of it (for instance weren't you doing final edits on book three when book one was already out for example) and how you're feeling about it all now its done and out there in the world for everyone to see?

Jeff VanderMeer: From about half-way through writing *Annihilation* I had a really good idea of the overall narrative arc of all three novels, although I sometimes call the trilogy a “collapsed quartet” because I did think it might be four novels instead of three at one point. But each novel was a radically different experience. In a way, *Annihilation*’s the short, sharp spring and *Authority*’s the long hot summer, and *Acceptance* is the brisk, clear winter. I wrote them in those seasons, and probably channelled that into the feel of the books. *Annihilation* was also a weird experience because I had severe bronchitis stemming from dental surgery and after the initial dream inspiration I would just get up in the morning, write for three or four hours, go back to sleep, and repeat that cycle every day. After about five weeks, I had a complete novel, of which I’d done three or four drafts.

Authority is a paranoid snarl and an absurdist dark comedy, which requires a different approach, even in terms of method writing. So I would channel things like seeing a mosquito squashed on the inside of my car’s

windshield that I didn’t remember killing. Had someone been inside my car? Instead of pushing that feeling down, I’d let it rise up and devour me and use it in the fiction. So I spent a long hot summer being paranoid and feeling not much in control and used it all for my main character battling against the confines of his own past and a messed-up labyrinthine secret agency.

Acceptance is kind of like Mozart’s Requiem or all of Songs: Ohia’s Magnolia Electric Company CD. Nothing’s ever going to return to status quo, and success or failure is measured in very personal ways. It was the hardest to write because I was so invested in the characters and so submerged in them that I had a hard time not being colonized on a daily and weekly basis by the emotions coming through on the page. For me, it was a quest to be true to the characters and to follow them to the end regardless of how that turned out—and in the character arcs to make no concessions, no compromises. Where I went back and forth was on the matter of reveals of the mystery behind Area X. In actual fact, there are a lot of answers in the third novel, but spread out across the discoveries made by individual characters.

As for still doing edits on one novel with the other out... it sounds rushed, but in fact I had more time to work on each novel than ever before—just over fewer days, if that makes sense. So the trick was to find perspective on something you’d stick in a drawer for a month usually and then look at with fresh eyes. Part of that was accomplished by having just an amazing editor, and part through mental acts of distancing...but also by the fact the U.S. publisher allowed me to make changes well past the point you usually don’t get to do so. What that meant is in the end I had as much time as I needed to get everything the way I wanted it.

TH: Would you do something like this again, and indeed what's next?

JV: Thankfully, I don't have to consider whether I'd do it again as the next few novels are stand-alone. The next novel will be *Borne*, which is about a giant, floating psychotic intelligent bear terrorizing a post-collapse city. It's also about motherhood and redemption and survival and the fight between nature and nurture. And it's about the nature of post-post-capitalism, which we can already see the advancing fringes of. All you have to do is look at what's inside your smart phone and where it came from.

TH: One of the most striking things about the Southern Reach sequence is that you've published all three books in one year. Clearly in the modern bookselling context there are advantages to this approach, but what are the pressure points and do you think this is a model that might work for other genre authors or is it actually something that might burn out most publishers if suddenly all their authors became this prolific?

JV: I certainly think that a trilogy that, no matter how it grapples with the inexplicable and the unknowable, contains a central mystery as a narrative hook...is ideal for this kind of publishing schedule. In part because the overall narrative question lingers strongly across all three in a way that, for example, a trilogy about a family over several generations might not. Although you can never really say something so general about fiction.

What it eliminated for me was the stress over the second novel, which is where you inevitably have fears that it's going to come out a year after the first and the whole publishing landscape has shifted or readers have gone on to something else and forgotten your series, no matter how good sales were for the first one. That, coupled with having a strong editor who was sympathetic to me doing something a little different, meant *Authority* is the book I wanted it to be. Otherwise, *Authority* might have been a superficially faster-paced read that wouldn't have been

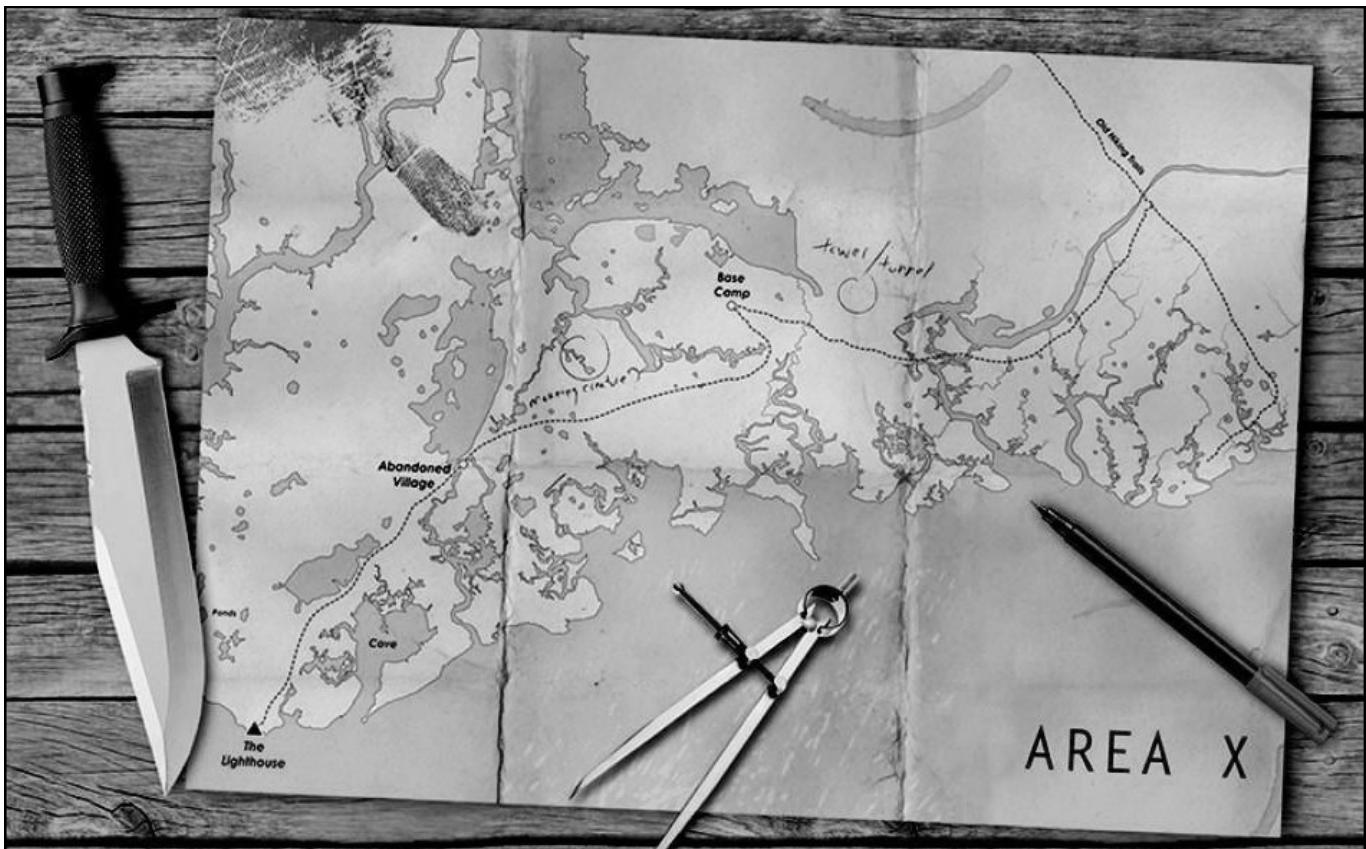
worth a re-read. Because the fact is all three are constructed for a re-read, or multiple re-reads, and *Authority* most of all. Middle books are always going to be misunderstood, but at least, despite a lot of excellent press, those who have had to do so in a much shorter period of time, and even readers who didn't care for the pivot to *Authority* stayed on to read and enjoy *Acceptance*.

From a purely cynical standpoint, or a commercial aspect, if I'd basically written three *Annihilations*, repeating the same idea of exploring Area X, I might've gotten even more readers but lost something else that I can't quite quantify but which I'd humbly put forth as staying power. It's kind of a moot speculation, though, and a dangerous one, since in the U.S. both *Authority* and *Acceptance* made the New York Times bestseller list and the sales have been huge. *Annihilation* is still selling at the same rate it did on publication —incredibly robust. It's been very heartening for me personally and in terms of what you think readers will and won't buy into. In this case, they've bought into—often joyously—not getting all of the answers by trilogy's end, but still being satisfied.

TH: A final Southern Reach question then. There are great characters throughout the trilogy, but the standout icon has to be the Biologist who, for me at least, has to be up there with Ripley in *Alien*. On the one hand she's such a solid, fully focused character, but on the other she's so much a mystery I'm sure most readers' versions of her are different from mine. Who is your Biologist, and have you been surprised by the huge positive reaction to this character?

JV: Everyone has their favourite. I've had readers on this latest book tour tell me they loved Grace, the assistant director. I've had a lot of people who love the former director and how their perception of her changes throughout the series. The lighthouse keeper also ranks up there. There are also a few who love Whitby Allen—or, as I call him, the Smeagol of the Southern Reach.





With the biologist, as with all of the characters, I wanted them to be real, flawed people and in the biologist's case to give readers a distant character who cares more about the natural world than other people but who is still, ultimately, sympathetic. I thought if I got the balance right, readers would like her and want to follow her. Part of that is that she doesn't freak out in extreme circumstances. On a podcast, one reviewer said he couldn't identify with the biologist because she "doesn't freak out." Well, not only is she setting down her account in journal entries after the fact, but that's not in her DNA. Some people don't freak out, even when encountering the weirder end of the natural world. That's their strength. That's what makes them other than stock characters.

Thankfully, I haven't had much push back against the biologist. But when it's come, it's been male reviewers trying to undermine her values by saying she's somehow damaged or mean to her husband or in other ways misunderstanding that some people are not quite like other people and that's normal too.

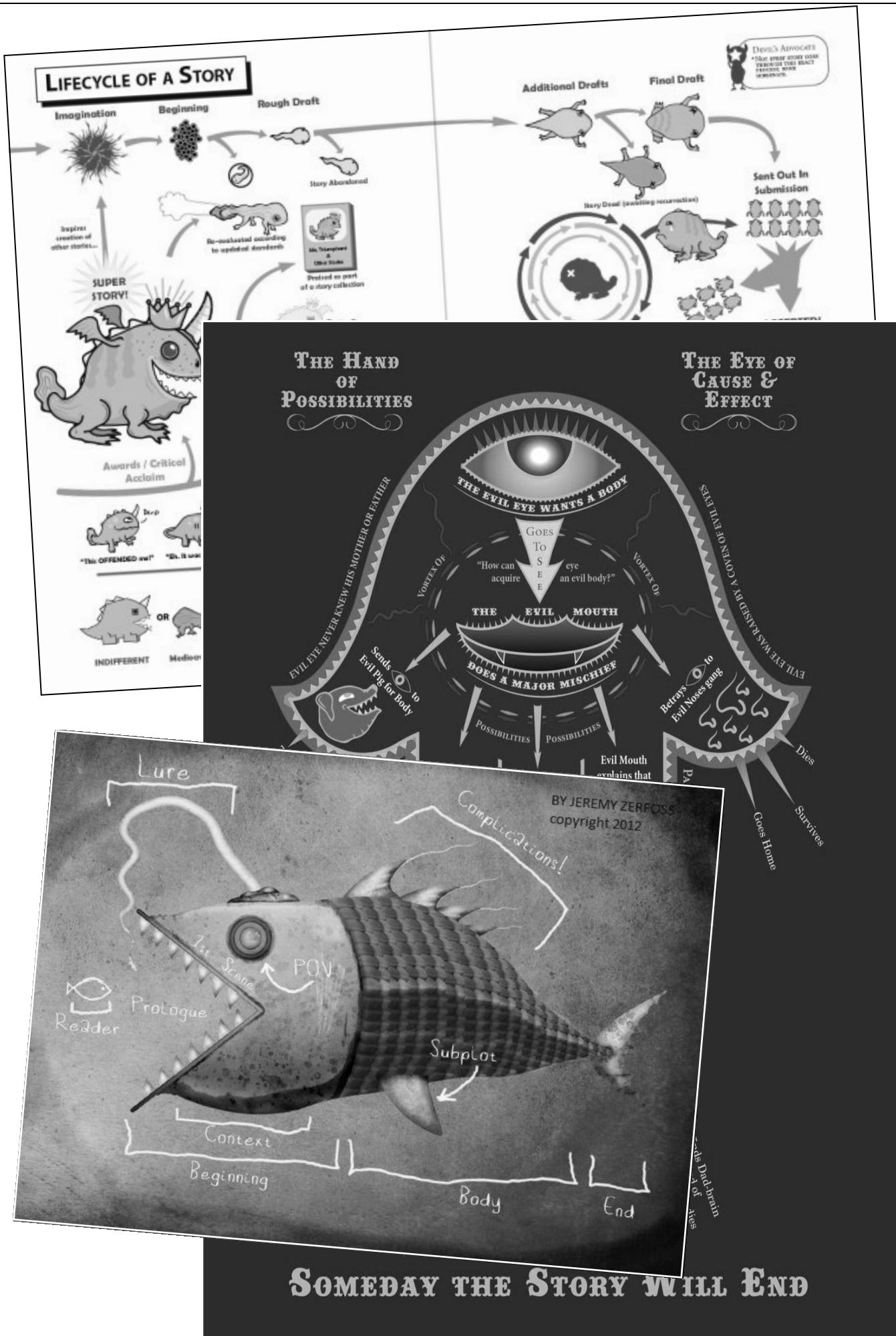
TH: We also wanted to ask you about your multi-award nominated, Locus and BSFA award winning *Wonderbook*, but before we do this is actually your second foray into books on the craft of writing, the first being *Booklife*. What led you to start writing non-fiction books aimed at writers alongside your own fiction?

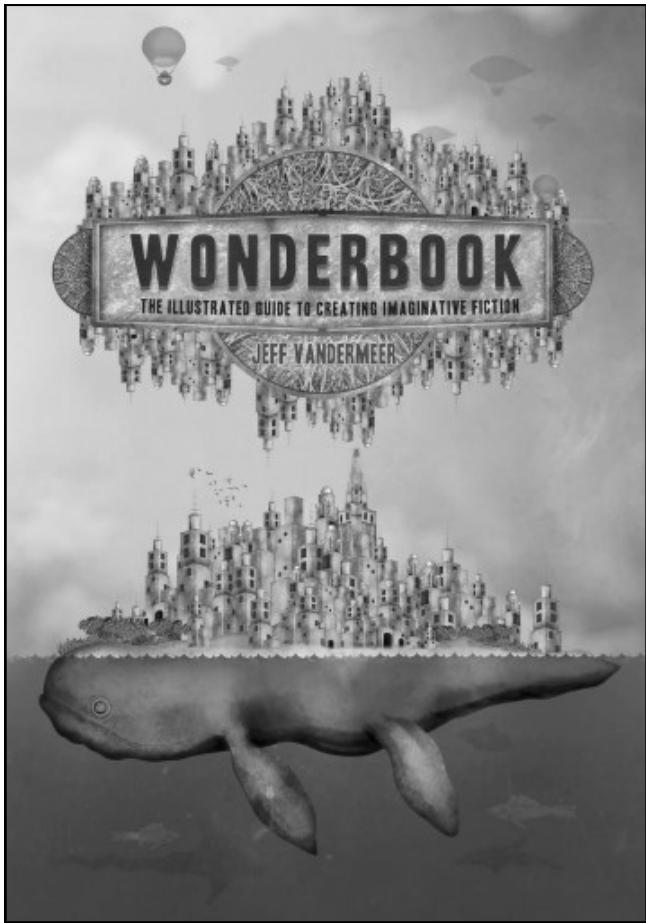
JV: It took a while to find my way toward writing these kinds of books because first of all I don't like to repeat what's already on the market. As long as I could point to X, Y, and Z and say "these are great writing books—read them," I felt I had nothing to add. But increasingly, before I wrote *Booklife*, I felt a disconnect regarding

what I read in books about the modern writer's life. Writing books about careers and creativity would have a section on the internet instead of being suffused with the effects of social media and how that is reflected in a writer's life. So I wrote one to fill that gap. It was the first book to address the topic, and because I decided to deal with it on a strategic level about 85% of it is still relevant today. I also don't think I've seen another book that's tackled the topic in quite the same way since. Mostly, I need to do an updated edition to get it back up to 100%. But I'm proud of it. It's helped a lot of writers I know deal with the stresses of a modern writer's life.

TH: And on to *Wonderbook*, there is, as far as we know anyway, no book that goes into this much glorious depth (with so many great visuals) as *Wonderbook*. No wonder it got lots of award nods. What was the impetus behind this project? And just how cool are Jeremy Zerfoss's illustrations?

JV: I'd had the coffee table book *The Steampunk Bible* out from Abrams Image, and it had done very, very well. So the publisher, Abrams Image, came to me and asked what I'd like to do next. Eventually, we hit on *Wonderbook*. They'd always wanted to do an illustrated writing book and I'd almost given up on finding a unique way to do a writing book on craft. So it was like a bolt out of the blue: why not the world's first fully illustrated general writing guide for beginning and intermediate fiction writers, one that took as its foundation fantastical texts rather than mainstream realism. These two things would make it unique. From there, it just grew and grew—literally, since the final book was 100 pages longer than Abrams anticipated. Somehow having to give Jeremy Zerfoss rough diagrams and sketches to work from also helped re the teaching element. Sometimes it's difficult if





you've been writing for a long time to convey the basics without really thinking about it.

I'm really proud of how it turned out. It's being taught at Yale and at Brown and the reaction has been incredible. High school teachers are using it. Teachers who teach kids with PTSD use the diagrams. And it's also become the standard for some MFA programs. *Wonderbook* has turned out to have so many more uses than I could have imagined.

TH: Oh, and as if all of the above wasn't enough, you and Ann (VanderMeer) have put together some of the most seminal and essential genre anthologies of recent times. Do you two ever sleep? And more seriously, all these different creative drives have always seemed to underpin your work in some ways.

Would it be fair to say that you are as keen to repay or pay forward to the fantastical genres as you are to write within them? It seems to us that a big part of your creative mission is to always either be doing something new or finding new ways to highlight what you personally think is worth attention.

JV: Basically, I'm not risk averse and neither is Ann. We believe that if you get the opportunity, you should jump in head-first, even if it looks like you're jumping off a cliff at first. We also believe passionately about rendering the invisible visible. A lot of what we do is repatriation. It's about not thinking in terms of genre or non-genre turf when selecting stories or contributors to a project. It's about re-evaluating the canon and giving readers things that, for whatever reason, they may not

have encountered before. That's our passion and our knowledge-base, and it also informs the writing. Reading widely, reading deeply, is really important to striving to be a good writer. I also believe it's important to being a good citizen in the book culture. We also don't generally like to repeat ourselves and we don't like to do projects other people have already done, unless there's a good, important renovation to be had. It's a cliché, but life is short and if you're not doing something you believe in, if you have the opportunity, why are you doing it in the first place?

TH: You also put a huge amount of effort into your live readings and book tours and always work to deliver value for your fans. Have you learned any tricks along the way to make sure you always get something out of these experiences for yourself as well?

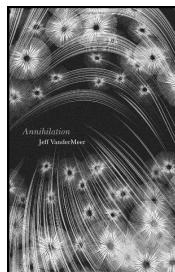
JV: I get a great deal of pleasure out of meeting interesting people and also in the fact that the Southern Reach has allowed me to write nonfiction about the environment and ecological issues. I also got to do a gig with a live owl in Philadelphia and have had a fair number of experiences like that as a result of the books. Being able to see the owls at the Academy of Natural Sciences up close is an experience I'll never forget. I'll never forget exactly how the horned owl's feathers looked spread out or how it stared at me. I've also visited lighthouses beyond number and gotten to write about that, too. In all ways, the Southern Reach trilogy has been a stunning and unique experience for me and I don't take a single moment of it for granted.

TH: And finally, 2014 seems to have been a milestone year for you. Are you taking a year off or do you already have more cunning plans cooking away we should make sure to look out for?

JV: Next year we have two books out, while we take a short breather: *Sisters of the Revolution*, a feminist spec fiction anthology from PM Press. It covers the 1970s to the present. And then in the fall we're publishing an omnibus of all of the iconic Finnish writer Leena Krohn's short novels. She's an important figure in world surreal and fantastical literature and we figure if we put out a 900-page book in the U.S. no one can ignore it.

For more from the many worlds of Jeff VanderMeer follow him on Twitter at [@JeffVanderMeer](https://twitter.com/JeffVanderMeer) or visit JeffVanderMeer.com

The Southern Reach Trilogy – *Annihilation*, *Authority* and *Acceptance* – is out now in (gorgeous) hardbacks from 4th Estate.



recurrent:

RESONANCES

Stephen Baxter

Project Daedalus, The Final Report

Forty years ago, a group of British visionaries were holding regular meetings in London pubs, trying to imagine a dynamic interplanetary culture a hundred years hence. But they weren't of writers. These were aerospace engineers, and they were trying to figure out who would pay for the starship they were designing.

Back in *Vector* 275 I mentioned Project Icarus, a current interstellar spaceprobe design project, run as a volunteer effort through the venerable British Interplanetary Society (BIS). Since then the BIS has run a successful one-day thread at Loncon, the London Worldcon. But the BIS has quite a history, and Icarus is itself an update of an earlier design effort called Project Daedalus, which ran from 1973 to 1978.

As it finally emerged, the Daedalus spaceprobe, assembled in space, would have been a fifty-year uncrewed flyby mission of Barnard's Star, some six light years away (then thought to have planets). The two-stage craft, 190m tall, would have consumed 50,000 tonnes of fusion fuel to send a 450-tonne payload to the target star. These are heroic numbers; by comparison the Saturn V moon rocket was a mere 110m tall and massed around 3000 tonnes. Another way to look at it is to note that the total energy Daedalus would have expended, for a one-way, non-stop mission, was more than the total annual energy expenditure of the whole world back in the 1970s, whereas an Apollo shot was about one ten-millionth of that amount. Interstellar travel is *hard*.

The design study had been inspired by then-recent papers by a US-based engineer called Friedwardt Winterberg, who had sketched a 'pulse-fusion' propulsion system. You would fire a pellet of particular isotopes of hydrogen and helium (deuterium and helium-3, He3) into a combustion chamber where it would be compressed by electron beams until it detonated: a miniature thermonuclear bomb. The detonation would shove your ship forward – and you would repeat that operation two hundred and fifty times every *second*, for several years, until you reached your cruise speed of 12%

of the speed of light. The use of helium-3 offered very high exhaust velocities – and the faster you push your exhaust out of the nozzle of any rocket, the faster the speed you can attain. The engineering challenges were (and remain) significant – perhaps the most significant being the vanishing scarcity of the very valuable isotope helium-3 on Earth, although it is available in such locations as the atmospheres of the giant planets, and perhaps on the surface of the moon.

Given the project started with the propulsion system choice, the team had to envisage a society that would naturally support a pulse-fusion starship using He3 as fuel. The authors, in their introduction to the 1978 Daedalus report (ppS5-7), described a future Earth that was populous and energy-hungry. Against a background projected from the then-current 'world energy crisis', they predicted a demand for future energy sources of 'minimal impact on the environment of Earth, which will by then be required to house about 10 billion people' (pS6).

What could such sources be? The authors noted the 'apparent disadvantages' then associated with nuclear fission (pS6), and 'It is generally hoped that magnetic fusion reactors ... will be operational ... before the end of the [20th] century'.

As for the fusion fuel choice, 'The deuterium-helium 3 reaction ... [is] at present the only "clean" fusion reaction which can seriously be considered for application in reactors, from the point of view of achievable containment conditions and temperatures' (pS7).

Regarding propellant acquisition for Daedalus (ppS83-S89), with He3 impossibly scarce on Earth one option would be to breed the fuel load in ground-based fusion reactors. To produce the starship's fuel in 20 years (the team's target timescale), this would require power levels at multiples of Earth's total present-day output, as well as consuming heroic quantities of other fuels and creating vast amounts of waste.

Therefore, said the authors, the tapping of extraterrestrial sources of He3 'becomes a logical supply of

propellant not simply for Daedalus but for mankind' (pS84). The authors estimated that an import of 1000 tonnes of He3 per year from extraterrestrial sources could supply the world's energy at 1970s levels; presumably more would be required for the more populous world of the future. And 'the provision of the fuel for a starship may be merely an upgrading of this level of activity' (pS7).

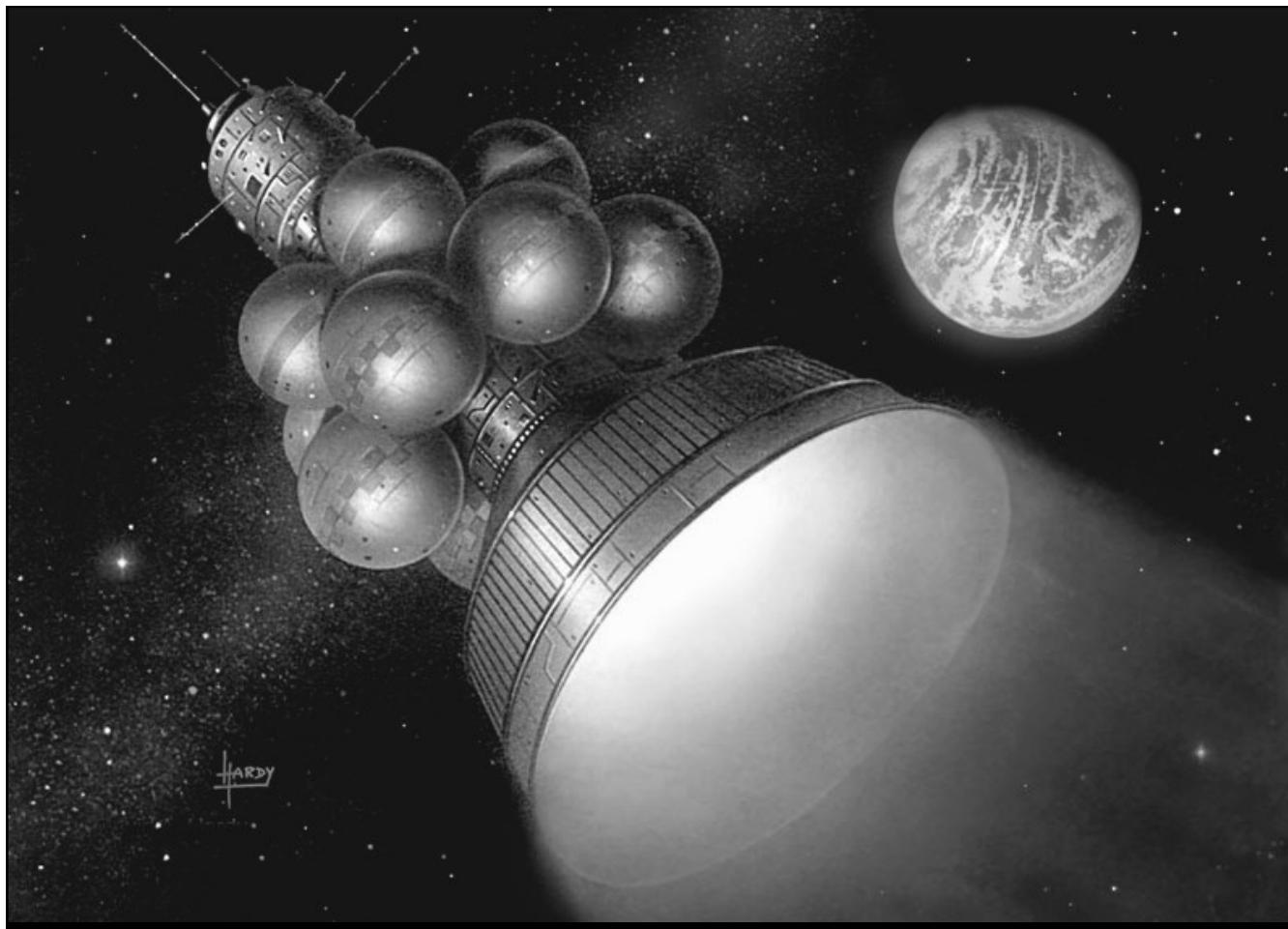
The society of the future then would be populous, environmentally conscious, and connected to an interplanetary web of resource extraction and transportation, just as Earth is globally interconnected today. It would be so energy-rich that a Daedalus probe might be as comparatively cheap as the Apollo moon programme had been in the 1960s, and the pulse-fusion technology would already be in place: 'That community will already be employing nuclear pulse rockets for space flight, and will probably be transporting helium 3 from the outer planets to the inner planets on a routine basis' (pS7).

The main space operation described was propellant acquisition. In their paper on the topic (ppS83-89) the authors settled on mining Jupiter's atmosphere, envisaging 128 'aerostat' extraction factories, each weighing 130 tonnes, operating for 20 years in the Jovian atmosphere, with a power expenditure of about 500MW: 'Jupiter's radiation belts make manned operations difficult within the satellite system, and so it is expected that most of the operation will be unmanned. Callisto,

which appears to be outside the hazardous radiation zone, could be used as a base camp, and if manned operations have to be conducted in an orbit at the fringes of the Jovian atmosphere a well-shielded "transfer station" might be placed in an elliptical orbit between Callisto and the minimum altitude orbit.'

Artificial Intelligence was seen as key to the success of Daedalus. Far beyond the reach of any ground control, 'the computers must play the role of captain and crew of the starship; without them the mission is impossible' (pS130). In their paper on reliability and repair (ppS172-179) the authors pointed out that Daedalus would have to survive 'for up to 60 years with gross events such as boost, mid-course corrections and planetary probe insertions occurring during its life-time' (pS172). A projection of modern reliability figures indicated that a strategy of component redundancy and replacement would not be sufficient; Daedalus would not be feasible without on-board repair facilities (pS176). AI would be used in the provision of these facilities, partly through the use of mobile 'wardens' capable of manipulation and repair.

A high degree of artificial intelligence was also a key assumption in discussions of payload design (ppS149-161). Because the confirmation of the position and nature of any planets at the target system might come only weeks before the encounter (ppS153-S154), it would be the task of the onboard computer systems to optimise



Daedalus — reprinted with kind permission from David A. Hardy © David A. Hardy/www.astroart.org

What's interesting about the 'Daedalus future' is that it is an imagining of the future that derives from, not the imaginations of fiction writers, but the cool calculations of visionary engineers.

the deployment of the subprobes and backup probes. One intriguing possibility was a response to the detection of intelligent life in the target system, in which case 'the possibility of adjusting the configuration of the vehicle for the purposes of CETI (Communication with Extraterrestrial Intelligence) in the post-encounter phase should always be borne in mind' (pS151).

The authors foresaw the continuing miniaturisation of computer hardware, as was already evident in the 1970s, and envisaged Daedalus being equipped with hierarchies of 'picocomputers' (pS132). In the 1970s the design of the controlling artificial intelligence could only be sketched; it would have to be capable of 'adaptive learning and flexible goal seeking', which would necessitate 'heuristic qualities' beyond the merely logical (pS131).

The outline future scenario was in the end quite specific: 'In summary, then, we envisage Daedalus-type vehicles being built by a wealthy (compared to the present day) Solar System wide community, probably *sometime in the latter part of the 21st century*' (pS7, my italics). To build a starship would however require political will, and peace: 'It seems probable that a Solar System wide culture making use of all its resources would easily be wealthy enough to afford such an undertaking [as Daedalus], and presumably in order to have reached the stage of extensive interplanetary flight would also have achieved reasonable political stability, and an acceptance of this new environment' (pS7).

Forty years on it seems sadly unlikely that the Daedalus future will come to pass 'sometime in the latter part of the 21st century'. However the 'Daedalus future' was logical, reasonable as a projection from the time the report was written, internally consistent, and an essential underpinning to the feasibility of the report.

The BIS famously has links with several sf writers – I'm a Fellow myself – and our late President Sir Arthur C Clarke was involved in its earliest days. What's interesting about the 'Daedalus future' is that it is an imagining of the future that derives from, not the imaginations of fiction writers, but the cool calculations of visionary engineers.

The Project Daedalus final report is available from the BIS (www.bis-space.com)

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recurrent:

KINCAID IN SHORT

Paul Kincaid

Let's Go to Golgotha by Garry Kilworth

I've been thinking about time travel a lot recently. This is partly because I was reviewing *The Time Traveller's Almanac* edited by Ann and Jeff VanderMeer; an anthology that I found ultimately unsatisfactory because it included too many stories that I did not believe deserved their place, while missing out too many stories that should have been there. This, of course, set me thinking about the stories I would have included had I been editing such an anthology. There are obvious ones: "Great Work of Time" by John Crowley, "A Little Something for Us Tempunauts" by Philip K. Dick, "The Very Slow Time Machine" by Ian Watson, not to mention "Standing Room Only" by Karen Joy Fowler which I wrote about in the last issue. Fowler's story inevitably reminded me of "Let's Go to Golgotha" by Garry Kilworth, because the two act as a perfect counterpoint to each other.

"Let's Go to Golgotha" won the Gollancz/Sunday Times Science Fiction Competition in 1974. The competition was for previously unpublished writers (among others for whom this marked the beginning of a literary career were Chris Morgan, Daphne Castell and the joint-winner of the novel prize, Chris Boyce), but if I read Kilworth's autobiography correctly, he hadn't even attempted to get anything published before this point.

It is a sophisticated piece for a first story, though it does have the odd sign of a writer unsure of how much or how little he can say. The first line of the story, for instance, tells us that 'The Time-Travel Agency was the third room along one of the branches of a Banyan building' (125). Banyan building tells us everything we need to know about what this future looks like, but, nervously, he has to spell it out in a little more detail on the next page: 'Earth was a solid block of brick and concrete flourishing with Banyan buildings' (126). What we have, therefore, is a typical science fictional setting, familiar from Aldous Huxley or Isaac Asimov: an over-urbanised world in which there is no space for the human. This is the future as machine in which people are nothing more than cogs, which Kilworth dramatises as a lack of holiday options: 'he could not afford space travel ... and ocean cruises made his children ill' (126), so the only choice available to him is time travel.

As in Ray Bradbury's much-anthologised "A Sound of Thunder", time travel has been domesticated and made available to the general public for their holidays. But, unlike the Bradbury story, time itself is not seen as fragile. When time travellers are warned to 'follow our little instructions' (126) it is not to prevent them changing history, but simply to keep

them from harm. 'The agent wagged a finger playfully. "We've never lost a customer yet." (126). Right from the start of the story, therefore, we know that this is not time travel as adventure but as something safe and ordinary, and a simple misadventure, like stepping on a butterfly, is unlikely to have far-reaching consequences.

For a while, as Simon Falk and his wife Mandy bicker over possible destinations – perhaps taking the children to 'Pompeii the day before it erupted – and leave them there' (127) – Kilworth plays up the ordinariness of the situation, and perhaps also the fragility of the relationship. Then two friends, Harry and Sarah, show up with the perfect solution: taking the kids to see the Crucifixion. 'If [the children] could see exactly how Jesus died to save us – or our souls or whatever it was that he saved – it might have a profound effect on them. At least, we hope it will.' (128) There is no great religious sensibility on display here, as Simon scoffs: 'You've not mentioned going to church in ten years' (128), but rather a very middle class concern with how the children are brought up. And this is very much a story about middle class complacency. (Parenthetically, we might wonder how there are still places to see the Crucifixion if 'the Coronation of Elizabeth the First is fully booked' (126), but we'll let that pass.)

But all of this is just set-up. The story really gets going when we move to the offices of Pan Time-Tours Limited in Southend (a location that adds to the impression that time travel is a normal, mundane activity). The holiday begins with an orientation lecture:

We do not lay down any rules, but it is important you should know how to act because on this tour, as on many others, you will be mixing with the locals. You must be inconspicuous – this is the primary rule. (129)

Around the time that this story was written, package holidays had started to become accessible for and popular with many people in Britain, and one of the tricks that Kilworth pulls off in this story is to equate a trip to first century Judea with a fortnight on the Costa Blanca. The past is not alien and incomprehensible, it is not a place that can be entered only with great difficulty and after elaborate procedures. Here the only imperative is not to be strange. So appropriate clothing is issued, a simple, reversible treatment means you don't look out of place, and 'A few days before the trip you will be invited to visit our language laboratory, where you will be taught Hebrew by the knowledge-injection principle during one afternoon' (130). Even the language is domestic and unthreatening: language

laboratories for learning foreign languages came into our schools during the 1960s. And when one of the holidaymakers asks to be a Roman soldier he is turned down because 'a soldier is too vulnerable' and 'we would be sure to give ourselves away' (130). Again the emphasis is on providing a safe family holiday with nothing too strange or too risky, the potential impact upon the past does not come into the equation at all.

So when the vicar giving this orientation lecture begins to talk about how they should behave, it is part and parcel of the same thing: blending in so that they don't seem alien, and don't put themselves in danger. Their holiday will begin just at the point when Pilate asks the crowd which of the condemned men should be released. 'When the crowd begins to shout "Barabbas", as we know it must, then you must shout it too. You must not appear to be different in any way from the rest of the citizens' (131). They must behave as history records not because to do otherwise might change history, but because to do otherwise might endanger the visitor. History is simply assumed to be robust; in contrast to Bradbury's story, the influx of time travellers at key moments in the past is understood to make no difference whatsoever to how things turn out. When the past is a holiday destination, it becomes a fixed place not a changeable process.

Behind this assumption that they know how history will behave lies another assumption, of superiority: 'You will be sure to give yourselves away under stress – not because you are idiots but because you are clever. People in those times were simple' (131). Yet they behave as simply, as selfishly as people have always behaved. The treatment they receive in preparation for the trip is as simple and painless as promised, yet even on a practical level it doesn't really prepare them for the reality of first century Judea: 'None of them were used to walking on uneven ground covered in sharp stones' (132). And then they come to the small square where a man we assume is Pilate is addressing the crowd. 'He looked harassed and a little ill. He was speaking in Latin. "What is he saying?" whispered Simon to Harry' (133).

This is one of the key moments in the story of the Crucifixion, but the crowd shuffles and remains silent until Simon's son, James, daydreaming and caught off guard, blurts out: Barabbas. At once the crowd is spurred into action and begins to call out Barabbas in their turn, just as the Bible, and the tour leader, say they are supposed to. In that involuntary cry is the climax of the story, but neither Simon nor the reader realises it just yet. When James is unhappy about it, Simon reassures him: 'It would have happened anyway. You just jumped the gun, that's all.' (134).

But that is not all. When the heat starts to make Simon's daughter, Julie, feel unwell, he and Mandy take her away from the crowd in the hope of finding somewhere shady. When there is nowhere outside that will serve, Mandy looks inside the open doorway of a house, only to find a family 'sitting on stools in the middle of the room with their hands clasped in

Panther Science Fiction

The Gollancz/Sunday Times Best SF Stories

Let's Go to Golgotha

introduction by Brian Aldiss

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front of them ... it was obvious that she was intruding on something private' (134). As they discover, all the people of the city who are supposed to be out crowding the streets, watching Jesus carry his cross along what would become known as the Via Dolorosa, are actually indoors, at prayer.

Realising, at last, that it was not the people of Jerusalem who were complicit in the crucifixion, but the time travellers who made it happen just the way they had been told it would happen, Simon rushes to the scene of execution. It is too late, of course. And when he begs his friend Harry to help him stop it, he is told, 'It's got to happen, you know. This is the way it is' (136).

In my last column I wrote about what I described as America's Golgotha, the assassination of Abraham Lincoln on Good Friday, 1865. In Karen Joy Fowler's story, "Standing Room Only", we see the events of that day from the point of view of a person from that time, someone who is unaware that momentous events are about to happen, and does not understand that the

crowds she is beginning to see in the streets around her are time travellers come to be spectators. "Let's Go to Golgotha" provides a counterpoint to that story, because it relates what are essentially the same circumstances from a different perspective. Here it is the original Golgotha, and this time the story is told from the perspective of the time travellers, but again they are here to be spectators and the locals are unaware of the broader significance of the events being played out around them. In both stories, historical knowledge renders the travellers hyper-aware but curiously unsophisticated; in both stories, contemporary dress makes the travellers clumsy, which acts as a metaphor for their deeper failure to take on the mores and practices of the time as anything more than a temporary costume.

And in both stories the travellers act on the assumption that history is robust, that they are there not to affect anything but only to watch as events play out with an inevitability that is part of the sick attraction of the experience. The past cannot be changed, must not be changed, nor would they wish to change it. They are an audience and no more, wishing to have just as much effect upon what they witness as they might on a film in a cinema. Fowler gives the lie to this assumption subtly in the effect her time travellers have upon Anna Surratt; Kilworth does so more strikingly. For in "Let's Go to Golgotha" we see that the time travellers are the event, that things only happened in the way they came to witness because of their presence. Perhaps history is not so robust after all, perhaps things might have turned out very differently if the time travellers had not behaved like sheep, obediently following the script they had learned from the Bible.

Quotations taken from 'Let's Go to Golgotha' by Garry Kilworth in *Let's Go to Golgotha: The Gollancz/Sunday Times Best SF Stories*, London, Panther, 1979, pp125-137.

recurrent:

FOUNDATION FAVOURITES

Andy Sawyer

The Bowmen and Other Legends of the War by Arthur Machen

Commemorations of World War One are everywhere at the moment, and it seems appropriate that this column should join in, especially as it is only recently that the Science Fiction Foundation Collection acquired a copy of Arthur Machen's little book *The Bowmen*, which was issued in 1915 to settle once and for all the issue raised by what became (rather annoyingly to him) his most famous story.

On September 29th 1914 the *Evening News* published what seemed to be a factual account of a supernatural occurrence at the retreat from Mons, the first major engagement of the war. Both sides, it was reported, 'fought like lions'. The British threw off a German offensive which greatly outnumbered them, and then were forced to retreat. Machen's account has a British force holding the line against overwhelming odds. If they collapse, the whole line will be broken. In the face of a 'terrific cannonade', which has already torn half the English force to pieces, a tremendous host of German troops attack: ten thousand against five hundred. 'There was no hope at all.'

what irreverently, he speaks this. Then he feels something like an electric shock and he hears a tumult of voices shouting 'St George! St George!' and sees 'a long line of shapes, with a shining about them. They were like men who drew the bow, and with another shout, their cloud of arrows flew singing and tingling through the air towards the German hosts.'

The attacking Germans fall by the thousand. No wounds are discovered on their bodies. The German High Command puts it down to a new form of gas, but our vegetarian soldier knows that St George has brought the bowmen of England's famous victory against the French at Agincourt (1415) to aid their modern brothers in arms.

This account was presented, if not as fact (it is highly coloured, full of realistic-sounding but clearly rhetorical devices, and contains viewpoint shifts which would at the very least be conjecture), then not clearly as fiction. (Apparently, another piece was flagged as 'our short story'). And a few days later, Machen was asked by the editor of an occult magazine what his sources were. He re-

'They were like men who drew the bow, and with another shout, their cloud of arrows flew singing and tingling through the air towards the German hosts.'

In good old "Tommy Atkins" tradition the British troops exchange darkly humorous quips and set out to sell their lives dearly.

One soldier (an educated man who 'happened to know Latin') remembers a vegetarian restaurant where the plates were printed with a figure of Saint George, with the motto 'Adsit Anglis Sanctus Georgius'. (May Saint George be a present help to the English). Some-

plied that there were no sources, it was fiction. Then he began to get requests for reprinting the story in parish magazines. One of them, after selling out the issue in which "The Bowmen" was printed, asked permission to reissue it as a pamphlet and requested Machen to write a short introduction citing his authorities. Once again, Machen replied that the tale was 'pure invention'. To his amazement, he says, the priest wrote back and suggested

that he must have been mistaken, because the main facts of "The Bowmen" were true. 'If I had failed in the art of letters,' Machen ruefully reflected, 'I had succeeded, unwittingly, in the art of deceit'. The story of the "Bowmen" began to circulate widely in the religious and occult press, and in many accounts St George and Agincourt archers were replaced by angels.

Machen issued *The Bowmen* (pointedly subtitled 'and Other Legends of the War') as an attempt to settle the matter, and (no doubt) as an opportunist attempt to cash in on the publicity. It is an attractive little book with, of course, a medieval bowman on the cover. It contains four stories, including "The Bowmen" and both an introduction and an afterword in which he describes the context in which the story was written, and the response to it. It arose, he says, from reading an account of the Retreat from Mons and being moved by the heroism of the troops, although his first response, he says, was "The Soldier's Rest" (included in this volume) in which a soldier gradually realises that he is not in hospital but in heaven. The story is clearly a tribute to the ordinary British "Tommy" and Machen says that he much preferred it to "The Bowmen" which he dismisses

as a piece of hackwork inspired by the commonplace idea that in times of crisis gods and saints come to the aid of their worshippers, by a story of Kipling's, and his own general love for the medieval. While the book (which also contained "The Monstrance" and "The Dazzling Light") was in press, a Phyllis Campbell published an account in the *Occult Review* in which she relates that, while she was nursing wounded soldiers, she came across a Lancashire Fusilier asked for a picture of St George 'because he had seen him on a white horse, leading the British at Vitry-le-Française, when the Allies turned.' While the English saw St George, the French saw the Archangel Michael and Joan of Arc. Machen pointed to inconsistencies in her account, and remarked that 'hearsay is not evidence. The Society for Psychical Research wrote to Campbell for more information, but received no reply'

The story of the "Angels" became part of the folklore of World War One, with some decrying it as mass delusion akin to the "flying saucer" craze of later in the century, and others suggesting that an original story involving visions of "Angels" seen by one or more soldiers at the Front had become mixed up with, and coloured by, Machen's story of "Bowmen".

Why was the legend of "The Angels of Mons" so popular? There is certainly something in the suggestion that the traumatic effect of Mons, which comprehensively

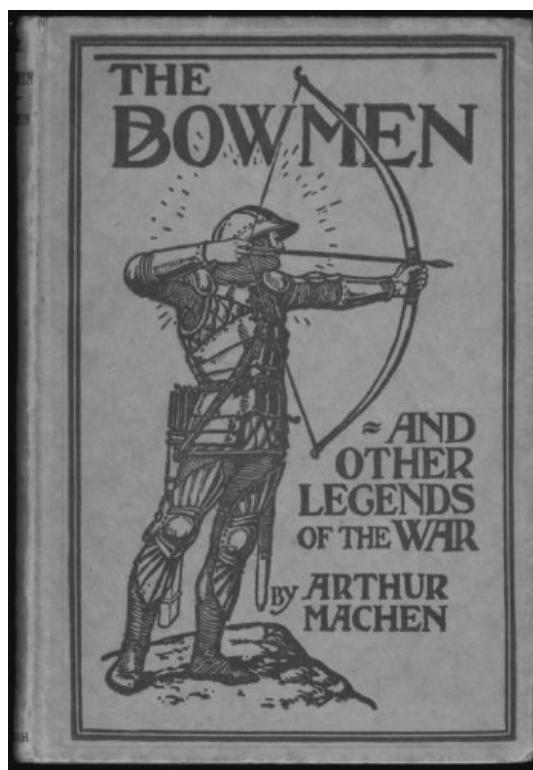
dismissed any notion that the war would be "over by Christmas" made many people look to the comforts of religion and the reassurance that God was on "our" side, and uncritically accept the story. A more sceptical interpretation, that the horrific stress of combat made many people prone to hallucinations and that the shape that these hallucinations would take would be influenced by religious imagery, also served to perpetuate the legend. There is also a third factor, that as the war progressed many of the front-line troops would have been people who had read the story or heard the legend in any of its numerous retellings, and accepted it as fact, and passed it on to others and a kind of feedback effect took place by which these second-hand "confirmations" were retold by troops who had heard it this way, adding to the status of the tale as what we would now call an "urban myth", passed on with the authority that this is a "true story" without verifiable eyewitnesses.

There is also a further possibility that the story of the "Angels" was tacitly if not openly encouraged by the authorities as a kind of propaganda, heightening public morale and confirming the civilian population in the rightness and justice of their cause. There is certainly evidence that embroidered accounts of German atrocities and such gruesome tales that the Germans were rendering down human corpses to

use fats and minerals were in circulation with official approval. A letter dated 5th September 1914, by General John Charteris, Haig's chief intelligence officer, who was associated with using, perhaps inventing, the "corpse factory" story, refers to the "Angel of Mons" rumour as sweeping through the men. This predates Machen's story. However, the letter was not actually published until 1931, and given Charteris's background, is hardly independent evidence.

Whatever the case, there are still websites which say that Machen based his story on rumours that were already circulating, even though the Society for Psychical Research, which reported the matter thoroughly, came up with no evidence that there had been any supernatural incident at Mons. Ironically, Machen, who at one point was a member of the Order of The Golden Dawn, which practiced Hermetic Magic, and who was (as "The Soldier's Rest" and "The Monstrance" make clear), a Christian of a somewhat mystical nature, was certainly open to the possibility of miracles and supernatural events. He admits so himself. But all the same, he kept for the rest of his life insisting that "The Bowmen" was fiction, made up, a story, and a rather poor one at that; an invention inspired by other invention.

Of course, he could have been covering something up...



recurrent: THE BSFA REVIEW Edited by Martin Petto

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The Awards Are Dead, Long Live The Awards!

I'm writing this a few weeks after Loncon 3 and though - with the aid of green vegetables and a few early nights - I've kicked the con crud, I still can't shake the Hugos hangover. This year's awards were a pretty poor showing for British SF that reflected a mediocre 2013 in terms of what was published. Not so 2014: *Wolves* by Simon Ings and *The Race* by Nina Allan are both works of British SF as well as being simply SF by British authors and are two of the best examples in recent years. Allan, in particular, seems like she is hitting the peak of her career, a deepening and coalescing even of the obvious talent on

Reach trilogy is already a clear award contender. Dan Hartland will be reviewing the series for Vector as soon as the final book is out (although he may have to wait for me to read it first).

Short fiction is always harder for me than novels and I need to do much more reading around (or, even, better, I need more people to perform triage for me). I do have one early contender for Best Novella though: 'Trading Rosemary' by OJ Cade. A web of memories strung together into a surprisingly satisfying story, it is made by its atmosphere and the steel of its protagonist.

I'm really looking forward to reading her latest novella, *The Don't Girls*.

In his review on page XX of *Noir* and *La Femme*, both edited by Ian Whates, Martin McGrath points readers towards some other potential candidates come awards time, including my own favourite stories in the anthology courtesy of Frances Hardinge and Vector's own Paul Graham Raven. We have quite a few more anthology reviews forthcoming and my own resolution is to check out the online magazines more often.

But if I could compel you to go out and read one piece of fiction it would be *Sex Criminals* by Matt Fraction and Chip Zdarsky. Best Graphic Story is always a bit of a weak category because the Worldcon membership simply don't know enough about comics (me included) but this is the real deal. Suzie can make time stop every time she has an orgasm. She thinks she is alone until she meets Jon who has the same 'gift'. Obviously, they decide to rob a bank. There was so much potential for this to go wrong but Fraction and Zdarsky get it deliriously right. One for your Christmas list.

Oh, and if you were at Loncon, I really hope you saw Tessa

Farmer's extraordinary realisation of a wasp factory (pictured), one of several tributes to the late Iain Banks. I'll certainly be nominating it for the BSFA Award for Best Artwork.

Martin Petto
Reviews Editor



display in last year's BSFA Award-winning *Spin*. Of course, neither have a hope in hell of getting anywhere near the Hugos but I'm hoping the Clarke Award judges and BSFA members may look more favourably on them.

Being less parochial for minute, I'm going to cheat and cast a pre-emptive vote for work that hasn't actually finished being published yet. However, on the strengths of the first two volumes, Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern*

**Noir and La Femme, edited by Ian Whates
(Newcon Press, 2014)**

Reviewed by Martin McGrath

Ian Whates, through Newcon Press and the *Solaris Rising* series, has established himself as a key editor in UK short fiction and I, like a number of authors, have reason to be grateful for his generosity. But it is clear from his introduction that putting together these books was difficult. As Whates notes in *Noir*, these two volumes started as a single project “to publish a collection of stories each featuring a femme fatale” and, even when that restriction fell by the wayside, he struggled to produce “a volume that hung together with a definable identity.” I think the evidence of the struggle remains visible. There are good stories here but neither book coheres into something more than the sum of its parts.

This was particularly obvious with *Noir*. My expectation – not unreasonably, I think, given the book’s title – was that these stories would relate to ideas of film noir. However, the majority of the book consists of more standard dark fantasy and horror fare. It took me some time to adjust my expectations.

There’s something of the detective story in EJ Swift’s ‘The Crepuscular Hunter’ – which opens the volume – but after a promising start with a mysterious entity brutally stripping victims of their privacy in a media saturated world, the story takes us into virtual reality for a conclusion where anything is possible and, therefore, the stakes seem diminished. The relationships never properly resolve themselves and the end left me shrugging not shuddering. The second story, ‘Gross Thousand’ by Adam Roberts, plays games with the implications of biblical mathematics as a social worker interviews a client who believes they can see who is saved and who is damned. ‘Gross Thousand’ is short, understated and the cold breeze of the conclusion brings a chill.

I have an instinctive suspicion of stories about the magic of books and bookshops. They always strike me as self-aggrandizing, coming with the sense of authors shouting, ‘Look how *amazing* my job is!’ So, while Donna Scott’s ‘The Grimoire’ does nothing wrong in itself, it also failed to win me over. I found the magic books unconvincing and the bookshop owner’s transformation unlikely. Emma Coleman’s ‘The Treehouse’ felt juvenile in the wrong ways. The protagonist has the whiny quality of a grumpy teenager whose idea of paradise involves picnics, a talking cat and a band of animal musicians. There’s too much messing around with shadows at the start and the conclusion didn’t really make sense, with the protagonist getting the escape she wanted and then reacting in horror. By sharp contrast, Paula Wakefield’s ‘Red In Tooth And Claw’ takes the Little Red Riding Hood story to Hollywood with some style. This grandmother is fierce but I wanted more meat. I also enjoyed ‘The Private Ambulance’ by Simon Kurt Unsworth, which has the feel of a good fireside ghost story,

with an atmospheric build-up and clean, direct prose. As with most ghost stories, the revealed phantasm is a little disappointing but it’s still a memorable journey. Next came two stories about serial killers: ‘Bite Marks’ by Jay Caselberg and ‘Inspiration Point’ by Marie O’Regan. Both are well constructed and will find many admirers but neither were for me; I find the tendency to fetishize killers problematic and while Caselberg at least has his murderer face their comeuppance, the O’Regan story turns a pair of monstrous predators into some sort of heroes – that’s a step too far for me.

The best two stories in *Noir* come back-to-back. Paul Graham Raven’s ‘A Boardinghouse Heart’ is very fine indeed – compact, dense and intelligent, it is more-or-less everything I’d hoped for when I picked up this collection. It’s a detective story – or at least it’s a story with a detective in it – set on the slippery streets of a richly realised city. The protagonist, as should be the case in all good noir stories, is hopelessly out of his depth and beset by those more powerful and cleverer than he is. The most effective element is the way in which the story immerses you in a city, gives it history and heft, yet never burdens the reader with weighty exposition. I also liked its refusal of any heroic narrative. It’s a fine achievement and worth the price of admission on its own. Simon Morden’s ‘Entr’acte’ could hardly be more different – both the setting and the set-up are preposterous: a superfluous private investigator on a corporate-run moonbase finds himself drawn to help a beautiful woman who has lost her husband in some time-travel, Bond-villain-style hokum. Morden revels in the essential silliness of the set-up and draws the reader into it, writing with impressive pace, wit and gloss. ‘Entr’acte’ is fun and even squeezes in an unlikely emotional punch.

I also enjoyed ‘Silent In Her Vastness’ by James Worrall. I liked the idea: the abandoned University of California campus is to become a work of art, with the aid of Chinese money, a small nuclear device and some mannequins. I liked, too, the

way the artist gradually crumbles, though his final sacrifice, while it works dramatically, felt an emotional stretch too far.

Paul Kane’s ‘Grief Stricken’ is another serial killer story – this time with an unlikely mental health twist as Detective John Lomax hunts down the doctor apparently responsible for the death of his wife. I didn’t buy anything in this story, the portrayal of the protagonist’s breakdown, the ‘fridging’ of the female character or the showdown in which an experienced cop faces a dangerous killer without back-up.

The final story in *Noir* is ‘The (De)Composition Of Evidence’ by Alex Dally MacFarlane. It’s cleverly done as a murder is revealed by the words on a rotting piece of skin and it has a certain chilling elegance. It is essentially the working through of a smart idea rather than a story but it *is* a very good idea.

La Femme promises tales with strong female characters and opens with a cracking story, ‘Palestinian Sweets’ by Stephen Palmer, set in a transformed

noir

London that has imported the ancient conflicts of the Middle East. There are some good ideas here – the transfer of secret information through scents shared via complexly designed meals, the struggle of one generation to leave behind the conflicts of the past and a well-handled love story. My only quibble is that we see so little of Ghinwa, the female character, and that's all through the male protagonist's eyes. It is a very good story but it's hard to see how it meets the 'strong female' criterion. Frances Hardinge's 'Slink-Thinking' is even better. I didn't expect to like a talking animal story but this clever re-imagining of the noir detective as a hapless (ghost) dog being manipulated by the smooth charms of the house cat and taking a beating from the big boss (the ghosts of a broiled hamster and his gerbil henchmen) to save his master's life is cleverly done. More convincing than it sounds in summary, my only quibble is that it's in the wrong book.

Next was 'A Winter Bewitchment' by Storm Constantine, the longest story in either book. It is a story of romantic pursuit or, perhaps more accurately, the story of the pursuit of romance, set in a fantasy world with hints of a sanitised, pre-war Confederacy. It's a story of rich people behaving frivolously and I'm certain there's an audience for whom the gowns and magical shenanigans are catnip. I'm not in that audience. I appreciated the slickness of the writing and recognise the richness of the setting but never

warmed to it. It felt too distant, cool and settled.

'Softwood' by Andrew Hook is odd – Apricot, a mathematician and codebreaker, allows herself to be locked in a small underground facility in a government base, believing she is running a mysterious 'number station'. Nothing about this story made sense: the locking up of Apricot; her sudden - and total - mental breakdown; the fact that this results in the cracking of a code that has resisted all other attacks; nor the ending, in which her bosses don't appear to have noticed that their agent has suffered a massive mental breakdown. There are good moments but I couldn't see the logic. Adele Kirby's 'Soleil' is a spy romp featuring Soleil, an artificially intelligent robot, hunting Eclipse, a rogue artificially intelligent robot. The female protagonist is 'strong' in the sense that she wears a dress that "made every woman subconsciously tug down or hoist up her own dress as appropriate, and made every man want to dig his fingers through its sleek shining folds to experience the terrain of the taut body below" and she does kung fu. There's a fight and a resolution and then Eclipse and Soleil go off to be a robot Adam and Eve on Earth. The ending suggests this is the start of something bigger but it lacks substance.

'Haecceity' is the property of 'thisness' – that which distinguishes the specific from the general – and a story by Stewart Hotson, though I'm not entirely sure why he chose the title. The story opens with the investigation of an explosion, at the centre of which is an unharmed woman. There follows a police interrogation in which the woman reveals she has the power to leap between alternate timelines – though this pow-

er has odd limits (she can be in two places simultaneously, arrange wildly complex strings of events, but not have two guns to jam at a key moment) - and then she escapes. The talky core of the story doesn't make the most of the initial, interesting, set-up.

John Llewellyn-Probert's 'The Girl With No Face' has the feel of something from the Thirties. A fleeing female gangster stumbles into the home of a mad scientist with a laboratory in the attic and his deformed, insane son locked in a dungeon below. The 'twist' is hardly surprising but there's pleasure to be had getting there. Jonathon Oliver's 'High Church' is the tale of a female priest taking on forces of reaction and malevolent magic in the Church of England. It works quite well, though I wasn't sure how seriously we are meant to take the ending. Maura McHugh's 'Valerie' makes a case for acceptance and tolerance in those who dress or love differently from the majority. McHugh's position is never in doubt so there's no sense of attempting to convince naysayers but perhaps that's the point. Perhaps it is enough to offer consolation and a sense of fellowship. Regardless, the element of the fantastic in the story feels unnecessary and tacked on. 'Trysting Antlers' by Holly Ice has a cheating man get his comeuppance thanks to a feisty protagonist and her hacksaw, although it's not quite as gross as I've suggested since the story features a world where

men behave like stags, complete with antlers. It's both likeable and smart.

I really wanted to love Ruth EJ Booth's 'The Honey Trap' – it is sharply written, has a great setting, an interesting young protagonist and a strong core idea. Set post-environmental collapse, the story of a gifted home fruit grower getting talent-spotted and offered the opportunity to escape poverty and realise her potential is well conceived and delivered effectively. And I did love it, until the last two pages. I've read it several times and I still can't work out precisely what happens or why. Perhaps it's my fault.

The final story in *La Femme* is 'Elision' by Benjanun Sriduangkaew, which is excellent. Set against the background of a star-spanning theocracy that feels thought through and rich, Kita-Ushma is a former operative who gets dragged back into the machinations of the church. There are traces of cyberpunk in the story of a mutating video revealing murder and corruption, but the strangeness of setting and technology and the complexity of the character interactions are very well handled.

Like all anthologies, *Noir* and *La Femme* force the reader to accept the crunchy with the smooth in their reading but when they are good, they are very good. Many of the stories that didn't click with me had qualities that were obvious. I found it frustrating that neither volume quite hangs together as a strongly themed anthology but that may not bother other readers as much. Read individually, or without pre-conception, there are a number of stories within these covers that are worth your time.



Astra by Naomi Foyle (Jo Fletcher Books, 2014)
 Reviewed by Jim Steel

Naomi Foyle's second novel suffers many of the faults of her first, *Seoul Survivors* but at least we are spared a punning title. Astra, the titular star, starts off as a seven-year-old girl, moves to age twelve in the middle of Foyle's triptych structure and finally finishes the book as a sixteen-year-old teenager. On one level it is very much a coming-of-age novel but, since Foyle's viewpoint is so tightly wound around Astra, this can make it difficult to work out what is going on in the rest of the world. And this is a complex world, even if it does sometimes feel as if Foyle is making it up as she goes along.

Is-Land initially appears to be a utopia. Its precise location is fuzzy. Iceland is out of the question since the characters spend a large part of the time naked. Besides, there are heavily-guarded land borders. Aldous Huxley's *Island* is an obvious touchstone and so, therefore, is *Brave New World*. Foyle seems to have taken much from Huxley's dialectic approach to both of those novels when plotting her own novel – Astra is a peculiarly uncurious child; things happen to her and around her but she instigates little herself. It makes for a very slow-moving novel until near the end when there is a rush to pack everything; even at that, there are major plotlines left hanging.

The year is 77 RE – the nature of the apocalypse is not specified, although there are hints of ecological

collapse and nuclear war. The Gaians of Is-Land have many myths and stories and their customs and religion are well established. Descended from British ecologists (stories of ancestors being transported in aircraft carrier prison hulks; occasional mentions of cricket), they have entirely replaced all other religions with worship of Gaia. They have an obsession with sex education for the young which, although unstated, may be a necessary result of their relaxed attitudes to clothing. Maybe seventy-seven years would be long enough for such a transformation but it does seem to be cutting things fine.

Anyway, 77RE and the seven-year-old Astra is playing in the woods – she lives, naturally, in an arboreal wonderland – when she comes across a feral girl called Lil. Lil is adopted into the communal family. Astra is also taken under the wing of Hokma, a scientist who is working on genetically engineering owls in order that they can carry messages. Astra loves pottering around with the Owleons and grows very fond of them. Hokma covertly arranges for Astra to be the only one in her class to miss her security vaccine which has the effect of making the others more even-tempered but doesn't appear to do

much else. Hokma, however, claims that it would also suppress Astra's potential as a future scientist, although Astra has her heart set on joining IMBOD, the security service. Truth be told, Astra's character is such that it is hard for the reader to tell the difference between her and the inoculated others. Lil, on the other hand, is noticeably more chaotic since she has spent several years living off the grid with her late father.

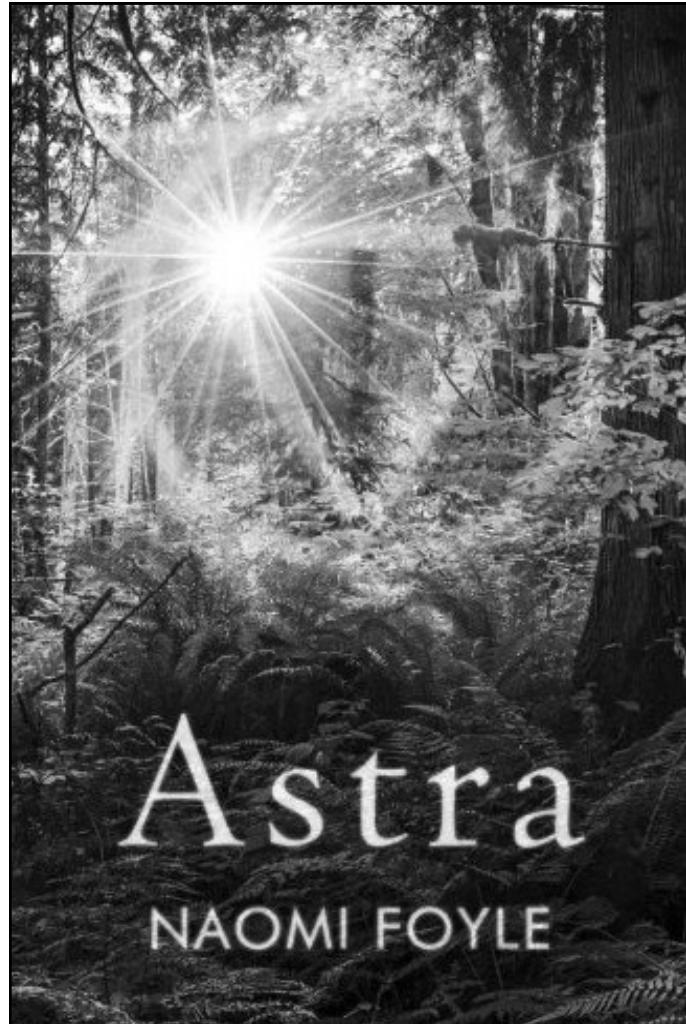
The middle section deals with the twelve-year-old Astra and a coming-of-age ceremony that is very reminiscent of many sub-Saharan ceremonies. It also deals with her growing friendship with Lil and it is not until we reach those sections that the novel begins to breath. Astra and Lil, initially suspicious of each other, grow into friends and even something more as they begin to explore their feelings for one another. Their exploration of the remote woods also reveals more of their world in a way that doesn't make it feel as if the reader is being force-fed information (or, at least, not quite as much as in other sections at any rate). The middle passage ends with a situation that is left surprisingly unresolved at the end of the novel. It's possibly deliberately open-ended, leaving readers free to decide for themselves. Or maybe another volume is planned, although the book gives no hint of this. However, one gets the feeling that the culprit is most probably sloppiness.

Foyle's prose flows nicely but her choice of words is another matter entirely. The characters speak in Received Pronunciation most of the time except when it comes to neologisms, portmanteau words and acronyms which have often been added to the vocabulary unnecessarily; the objects they describe are frequently no different to the

ones we use today. We are not looking at another *Riddley Walker* here. We are not even anywhere near *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome*. There is virtually no bad language or slang; occasionally a character will take Gaia's name in vain but frigging seems to be the only swearword that has survived the collapse of civilisation; a curious choice given that it is barely used today. There is a mention of someone being "grassed" later on in *Astra* but that was probably an editorial oversight.

The Gaian's technology seems to have been frozen at current levels; characters have tablet computers, vaccines, drones and cars (presumably electric, given their antipathy to oil). There is talk of a force field that will someday cover this xenophobic land to keep out illegal immigrants but that has, as yet, to be built. There is an urban and industrial component to Is-Land but it is barely explored.

This novel feels as if it could have benefited from another draft. Foyle clearly has an important point to make – it becomes obvious when we reach the third part of the novel – but she has done it in a manner that feels poorly planned.



Aliens: Recent Encounters edited by Alex Dally

MacFarlane (Prime, 2013)

Reviewed by David Hebbethwaite

As Alex Dally MacFarlane notes in her introduction to this anthology, the concept of extra-terrestrial life raises questions which have been a perennial source of fascination for writers: "What will we encounter? Will we be able to encounter it at all?" And, of course, since alien life remains undiscovered, it becomes a blank canvas that writers can fill however they wish. In *Aliens: Recent Encounters*, MacFarlane has assembled thirty-two recent tales (the earliest are from 2002) which take a variety of approaches to the subject.

In 'Sun Dogs', Brooke Bolander imagines Laika on her involuntary mission in space, where she meets some strange fiery dog-creatures who can give her whatever she wants, which the humans (whom Laika calls "whitecoats") never could or would. 'Sun Dogs' is very much a story that stands or falls on its ability to create and sustain a convincing narrative viewpoint for Laika. Happily, it succeeds: Bolander's third-person narration is a combination of persuasively non-human terminology and perception ("The world through the window is black and empty, marked with tiny faraway gleams that might be the eyes of unknown animals") with detail that emphasises instinct and feeling. The ending, too, is satisfying, because in retrospect it fits right in.

The Four Generations Of Chang E by Zen Cho is a drily humorous tale of diaspora experience. We begin as Chang E has won a lottery to leave Earth for the moon, which has been colonised by aliens. We then follow three successive generations of her daughters (also named Chang E) as they react to, and are changed by, the world in which they find themselves: from wanting to fit in with the Moonites, through to a point where Earth is itself an alien place. There are some sharp lines, especially around attitudes to the native moon rabbits, which are discovered to be sentient ("The entire hall smelled of rabbit food. You worried other people would smell it on you."); but the complex emotions of the ending are perhaps most powerful of all.

Interestingly inverting the idea of encounter, Genevieve Valentine's 'Carthago Delenda Est' is set four hundred years after a message was picked up from a planet in the Oort cloud, which caused any number of worlds to send delegations. The ambassadors have been cloned and reincarnated ever since, waiting for the unknown alien to show up. There's a nicely wry tone to Valentine's writing (on the number of delegates: "You wonder how amazing the message must be, to get them all up off their asses") which fits in with the rather

absurd nature of what she's depicting: a whole existence created, entire lives lived, for an event that might never happen.

Though some reach into the depths of space, other stories in the anthology remain earthbound. For example, 'Lambing Season' by Molly Gloss is a resolutely – almost stiflingly – down-to-earth tale of encounter. Delia spends six months of the year tending her flock of sheep on the mountain, with only her two dogs for company. This year, a strange craft falls from the sky; Delia investigates and comes across a person who looks rather like a dog. Then she goes back to her sheep. Gloss's prose evokes the vastness of the landscape that Delia inhabits and the hard nature of her farming life; the focus on the quotidian rather than the extraordinary gives 'Lambing Season' a highly distinctive feel.

Courtney, the narrator of Elizabeth Bear's 'The Death Of Terrestrial Radio', grew up feeling estranged from other people but with a yearning to talk to aliens. Eventually, they talked to us – or rather they transmitted a jumble of old Earth broadcasts back at us. Courtney is the astronomer who pinpointed the source of the 'Echoes' but it's not so much a cause for celebration as for rueing the impossible distances that must be crossed in the universe. She reflects: "I can't decide if knowing they were out there and that they reached out in friendship with a map and the sound of their voices, is worse than imagining they were never there at all." All the vistas of space fall back into the story of a woman facing up to the possibility that her life's work may have been for nothing.

There's a bitter irony to the title of Nisi Shawl's 'Honorary Earthling', an irony which is only underlined by its inclusion in an alien-themed anthology. The story takes the form of monologues by various African American characters, who are all either talking to – or are themselves – a figure from urban legend, such as a phantom hitchhiker or doppelganger; these are then paired with related extracts of 'found' reportage. As a whole, these monologues show just how much their narrators – and others like them – still feel that they're treated as outsiders ("Aren't we lucky Seattle lets dogs ride the bus? I don't think they'd understand if someone were to tell them they couldn't"). Besides being a fine piece of work, 'Honorary Earthling' illustrates just how widely this anthology ranges.

Ken Liu's 'The Bookmaking Habits Of Select Species' is, as its title suggests, a tour of how various alien races pass on their knowledge to each other. There's some wonderfully

evocative imagery here, as Liu imagines radically contrasting modes of existence: from mechanical creatures whose experience becomes etched into their stone brains by shifting channels of water, to beings of energy who see the vast structures of the universe as books to be read. That diversity of life is echoed in all the different kinds of stories in MacFarlane's anthology.

Glaze by Kim Curran (Jurassic London, 2014)
Reviewed by Maureen Kincaid Speller

It happened that while I was reading Kim Curran's *Glaze*, *Slate* writer Martha Graham decided the moment was perfect to lambast adults for reading Young Adult novels when they could, and indeed should, be maintaining their hard-won maturity by reading books for grown-ups, from which they would learn so much more about the business of being an adult than from the necessarily limited viewpoint of young adult novels, with their "uniformly satisfying" but "far too simple" endings. And then Graham went on to criticise adults reading YA for seeking "escapism, instant gratification, and nostalgia" and abandoning "mature insights".

Graham's article tells us more perhaps about her own concerns and SE Smith took issue with it in the *Daily Dot*, arguing that many readers of YA fiction are Millennials, for whom growing up has become a lengthier and more challenging process, thanks to economic crises which force them to live with their parents. Reading YA fiction reflects this prolonged childhood. I'm not convinced by the argument but it might say something about the fascination with the so-called dystopian, as well as that desire for a 'satisfying' ending.

Coincidentally, at the same time I read an article by Ursula K Le Guin in which she observed that "My fiction, especially for kids and young adults, is often reviewed as if it existed in order to deliver a useful little sermon." Le Guin dismisses this by suggesting that "the meaning of the story might lie in the language itself, in the movement of the story as read, in an inexpressible sense of discovery, rather than a tidy bit of advice?" Indeed, Curran herself comments that "In writing for teens, there's one thing that makes me more wary than anything else. And that's 'issue books'. Books which are written with the sole purpose of 'helping young people these days'. Books with 'clear moral messages'."

It is almost certainly true that there is no overt moral message in *Glaze* but I would argue that regardless of what Curran may think, and *pace* Le Guin's comments, there is more than a passing whiff of 'issue' to the novel. In fact, I suspect it is part of the nature of YA fiction but the question is whether the writer allows such issues to drive the narrative or else lets them sit in the background, to be noticed or ignored as the reader sees fit.

In *Glaze* the 'issue' certainly doesn't drive the narrative but neither is it inconspicuous. As we read we're constantly asked to think about the significance of opening ourselves to being controlled yet encouraged simultaneously to ignore it, which is somewhat confusing. *Glaze* is pretty much every social network you've ever experienced, all rolled into one and delivered via a chip inserted into the brain, requiring its restriction to the over-sixteens (and hence the concern about control and suggestibility). It is, as one might expect, theulti-

mate adolescent rite of passage. While it fosters a sense of togetherness in those who do have access to it, those who are not chipped inevitably feel excluded. It is also possible to revoke chip privileges. Given we live in a society which more and more often uses the threat of exclusion as a tool for social management, it's difficult not to think of *Glaze* standing in for a range of other things, everything from poor internet access to denial of benefits.

However, that part of the story is mostly relegated to the background. We focus instead on Petri, who feels this exclusion particularly strongly, given she is a year younger than most of the people in her class and already set apart by her intelligence. Yet, one suspects that Petri already knows that things won't change significantly but her desire to be part of the crowd, come what may, is instantly recognisable, as indeed is the conviction that possession of the latest technology will somehow fix everything. Neglected by her mother, Zizi, politically if anachronistically right on, well-intentioned but clueless about bringing up a child, it is perhaps not surprising that Petri invests so much in attempting to build her own community even though she is painfully isolated from people, and that this leads first to acquiring an illegal chip and then to the discover that *Glaze* is not – surprise - as innocent as it seems.

Glaze works best when Curran's characters are interacting with one another moment by moment or when Petri suddenly grasps a situation. In terms of emotional intelligence, the novel is streets ahead of its plotting, which is, bluntly, either ho-hum or intensely melodramatic. The setting feels more like a stage backdrop than a convincing recreation of a near-future London. There is nothing distinctive about the school which Petri attends (although we are clearly in a future in which Michael Gove never existed) and there is some general handwaving towards a political situation which has school students with a strong sense of social justice out on the streets but uncertain what it is they're campaigning for or against. Clearly, something is wrong with society but, given we see it through the eyes of a self-absorbed teenager, we're left with an interpretation that is necessarily partial and superficial.

Which I found very frustrating as there were moments when Curran hinted at other fascinating narrative possibilities, only for

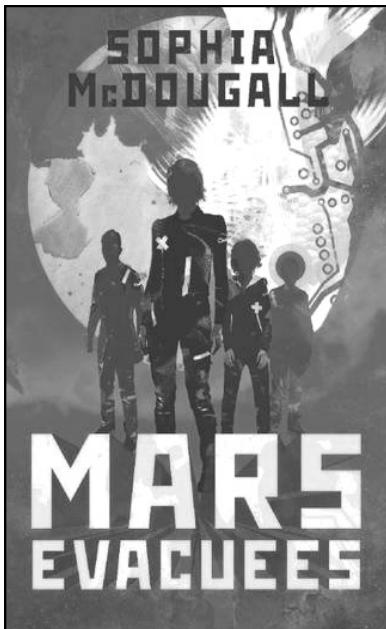
Petri to turn away distracted, although what she was doing didn't always seem as interesting. I often questioned the plausibility of the story while accepting the need to just run with it, because this was Petri's experience. Irritation was balanced by the recognition that Curran generates enough pace to bridge that gap between accepting and resisting the story. What makes it work finally is that however bizarre Petri's experiences seem to be, Curran catches that tension between an adolescent conviction that the world can be made a better place and the realisation that the world is actually a lot more complicated than it initially seems.



Mars Evacuees by Sophia McDougall (Egmont 2014)
Reviewed by Anne F Wilson

When the polar ice advanced as far as Nottingham, my school was closed and I was evacuated to Mars."

Alice Dare's mother is a fighter pilot in the war against the alien Morrors, who have taken over the Earth's poles and are transforming the planet into a place that suits their cold-loving species. The war is not going well and Alice is among three hundred children (aged seven to fifteen) being evacuated to



the terraforming base on Mars, where they will be enrolled in the Earth's Exo-Defence Force and taught to kill Morrors. Although Alice is only twelve, she accepts this resignedly. The war has been going on for years, and doesn't look as though it will be ending any time soon.

On the journey Alice meets Josephine, Carl and Noel and forms an ethnically diverse group of friends. Josephine is a genius, Carl a boy with a joyous disrespect for rules, and Noel is Carl's sensible eight year old brother. All the

characters are very believable and I was impressed by the way Alice develops as a person as she defends Josephine against bullying. However, I did think there was maybe a bit too much bullying in the novel, ranging from girls at Alice's school, who "tended to think I was in constant need of taking down a peg or two" to a number of teenagers on the space ship, who start with low level harassment and move on to victimisation of Josephine. One has to ask why they would bother, or be allowed to, at such a dangerous and stressful time.

But the author needs to prepare us for when the adults on the base suddenly disappear and things all go a bit *Lord Of The Flies*. Assisted by a robot tutor in the shape of a goldfish, our quartet steal a ship to try to get to the military base 3,000 miles away and this adventure makes up the second half of the book. Everybody contributes but it is Alice who hauls them through by refusing to give up even when things are at their darkest.

Alice's voice is the great charm in the book. Her narrative style is light and ironic, with a nice line in humorous understatement. She breezily imparts a lot of information and the reader accepts what's going on without asking too many questions. I did struggle to keep thinking of Alice as twelve – her viewpoint is just a bit too mature, even accepting that she's narrating retrospectively.

McDougall also conveys supremely well how different people feel about the war – from Alice's headmistress grieving (rather comically) at the school having to shut down, to the army driver who implies that Alice having to join the army aged twelve is something awful, to Josephine who desperately wants a future that doesn't include shooting Morrors. Perhaps the weakest part of the novel is the rather formulaic plot. However, this is far outweighed by the engaging characters and vivacious writing. I'm looking forward to the sequel.

Lupus Rex by John Carter Cash
(Ravenstone Books, 2013)

Reviewed by Alan Fraser

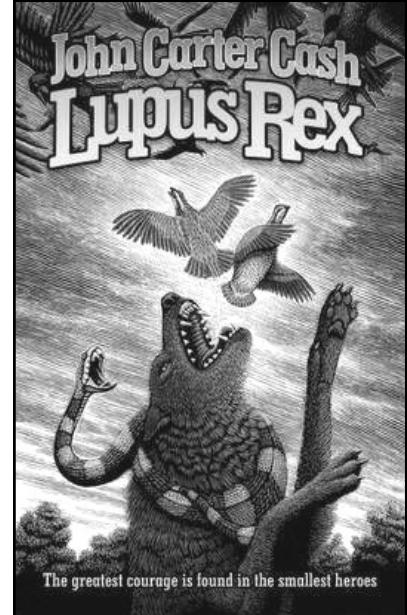
John Carter Cash, son of Johnny Cash and June Carter, has already written several books, including illustrated children's books and a biography of his mother. *Lupus Rex* is his first novel, described by his publisher as "in the tradition of *Watership Down*, *The Rats of Nimh*, *Redwall* and *Duncton Wood*". It is the story of Ysill, Cormo and Harlequin, three quail who find themselves caught up in a deadly battle between the crows that rule the field where they live and have to undertake a perilous quest to find a protector who can bring peace to the field and restore safety to their lives. And I do mean perilous; this is nature red in tooth and claw, with no holding back.

The book is set in and around a large field somewhere in the United States, probably in Tennessee. The field is dominated by the Murder Tree, where a huge flock of crows live. The crow king has died and the murder of crows is choosing a new king from his three rival sons, Sintus, Milus and Nascus. The crows drive everyone from the field to keep the meeting secret but the quail can't get away in time and are forced to hide while the reckoning takes place.

Each crow prince is tested to prove he is worthy of the crown. The second brother Milus fails his test and is pecked to death by the flock. When the elder brother Sintus fails his test, he refuses to accept his fate and declares himself king. War breaks out between his supporters and those of his younger brother Nascus, now declared the rightful king. The quail are spotted and a quail elder sacrifices himself so that the others can escape. The fleeing quail go in search of Pitrin, the hawk who used to live in another tree in the field. He is the only one they believe can keep the crows in check, despite the fact that he's as dangerous to them as he is to the crows. They soon meet two 'friendly' foxes who offer to guide them to Pitrin's new tree, a decision that isn't going to end well...

Meanwhile, Sintus and his rebel crows enlist the last local wolf, Asmod (seen on the cover illustration by Douglas Smith), to join their bid for the kingdom and help raise an army. However, since he is named after the demon king Asmodeus from the Book of Tobit, part of the Biblical Apocrypha, the reader isn't surprised that he has his own agenda (one that Sintus won't like). Can our brave but weak quail reach Pitrin in time and convince him to lead a rival force to thwart these plans for a brutal dictatorship?

We've seen this before, of course: a small band of plucky goodies up against a seemingly invincible group of strong and evil baddies. Even so, it's a well-told tale with a strong moral tone and a satisfying ending. However, I wouldn't give it to an eight year old, as Ravenstone recommend; too many animals meet their ends in graphic ways that would distress young children.



Martian Sands (PS Publishing, 2013) and **The Violent Century** (Hodder & Stoughton, 2013) by Lavie Tidhar
 Reviewed by Shaun Green

Lavie Tidhar is an author many writers must envy. He is not only prolific, having released seven novels and numerous novellas and short stories in the last five years, he is also inventive, playful and ambitious. The sight of Tidhar's name on a work of fiction provides little guarantee beyond knowing events are unlikely play out as you expect. He is not an author content to extrude consistent commercial products.

There are nonetheless some common themes to his work. Dislocation is a particularly powerful one, befitting an Israeli-born and kibbutz-raised author who has lived on several continents and whose family lost members in Auschwitz. I mention this last point not to intrude into a review with excessive biography but to prepare you for how pertinent this fact proves to both these books.

Another theme common to much of Tidhar's work is his interest in narratives - not only those he lays upon the page but also those that guide, contextualise or define human lives. This often emerges directly through conflict between characters with opposing cultural worldviews but is also evident from his love of inventing writers and characters within his fiction. Tidhar often sketches out a cultural milieu within his stories and this often helps provide the fabric that connects apparently disparate tales.

Take, for example, his 'Central Station' stories. British readers may be most familiar with those that appeared in *Interzone* - 'The Indignity of Rain', 'Strigoi', 'The Book Seller' and 'The Core' - although others appeared in *Analog*, *Strange Horizons*, *Clarkesworld* and elsewhere. These stories are connected to one another by place (the eponymous station) more often than character, although minor characters in one story often come into their own in another.

It is in 'The Book Seller' that Tidhar's habit of inventing cultural works within his fiction most clearly emerges. In this story his protagonist describes a series of books named for their hero, Ringo. These once-popular Wild West pulps describe a chisel-jawed cowboy hero but what's most interesting about them is that they are the work of 'Jeffrey McNamara'. McNamara is a pseudonym for a group of Tel Aviv-based writers who are writing these pulp stories to pay the bills. Ringo and

McNamara are mentioned in this story for several reasons, but one that it's easy to talk about without delving further into 'The Book Seller' is that they contextualise the protagonist's trade as one that has economically struggled for a long time and Tel Aviv (the story's setting) as one in which such struggle is commonplace. There is, of course, an allusive tip of the hat to the present day reader inherent in any such aside.

McNamara is a minor invention in the context of what I've read of Tidhar's fiction; a forgotten footnote in a fictional future's history. Far more significant is Bill Glimmung. Or Bill

Glimmung!, or what would Bill Glimmung do?, as his name is most regularly invoked. He is a character referenced numerous times in the 'Central Station' stories, primarily in the context of remembered books or films about this classic, archetypal character. The films that made Glimmung a household name are old enough that memories are always unspecific, and the character and actor (Elvis Mandela, ho ho) have been essentially conflated into one. Glimmung sometimes seems to be a bit of a chameleonic cipher, fulfilling whatever anecdotal purpose is required at the time, though it's in *Martian Sands* that this idea comes into its own.

The novel opens with a man appearing in the Oval Office through a door that the President has never seen before. This man - who is, of course, Bill Glimmung - offers Franklin Delano Roosevelt the military material necessary to accelerate success in the European theatre of war. The condition attached to this aid is that it is to be used exclusively to defeat the German war machine and liberate Jewish prisoners.

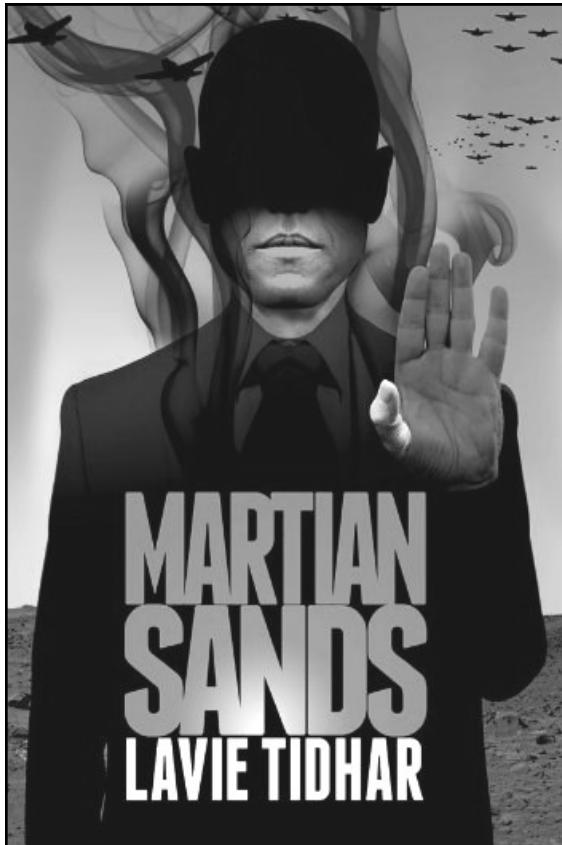
From there we hop elsewhere in time and space to Mars, many generations later, colonised and occupied by Jews, Chinese, Indians, Russians and more. Here we meet Josh (ah, the Anglic peoples have also arrived on Mars) whose life, for all that it is lived out upon the red planet, is much like many of our lives today. He works in telesales, flogging fertiliser to anyone that will buy it (a task he usually struggles with). One day he makes a sale that will have ramifications far beyond the spreading of nutritious shit and which draws co-worker

Shay into his life - briefly and disastrously.

Miriam works with the Martian presidential office and has been tasked with stopping by a body shop in which a new president is being prepared. The current president, Ben Gurion, has served his purpose and it's time he was replaced with a new model: Golda Meir. These historical Israeli presidents are essentially figureheads, with administrators getting on with the real business of government in their shadows, but there's something about this new president that seems a little different. Carl works in the body shop responsible for creating the Golda Meir but it is not his work which drives him, for Carl he is also K't'Amin, a four-armed warrior of long-vanished Barsoomian Mars. The reborn warrior caste of ancient Martian society has its own plans to put in motion, even if they are a little few in number these days, and the body modifications expenses are high.

Martian Sands is a charmingly odd collision of inspirations. In large part it plays out like a Golden Age pulp story, one full of adventure and mystery. Yet its backdrop and grander scale concerns several cultures and, ultimately, their elision. The long-forgotten Martian culture may or may not be truly dead but with the interference of Glimmung in the history of Earth - and in the formation of the state of Israel - it may find itself fused with something both old and new. This will have ramifications for Mars both past and present.

Glimmung's role is at the heart of it all - as befits a story that is greatly concerned with the way in which we look to



narratives to make sense of the world around us. We use stories to understand events that are otherwise inexplicable, and to define our place in the world. When these narratives are threatened or shaken, the experience can be powerfully disorienting - and *Martian Sands* is a disorienting ride.

There is no Bill Glimmung in *The Violent Century* but that is not to say that our love of narratives do not also drive this story. In this longer novel, Tidhar posits a moment in the Thirties when a Nazi scientist called Vomacht flipped a switch and subtly changed the world forever. The superheroes that were once the preserve of American comic books came to be, with a few thousand people the world over gifted with unusual abilities.

The nation states of the Thirties were haunted by the spectre of a terrible war and, in some cases, preparing for another. Nationalism was at its height and it's no surprise that the ways in which these *ubermensch* found themselves used reflected the character and intentions of their home states.

The Americans, of course, clad their heroes in colourful suits, parading this new addition to their military might in front of television cameras. The USSR's heroes are similarly exploited for propaganda purposes — although their stature may not be enough to save them from internal purges. Germany attaches its heroes to various military divisions; Wehrmacht, SS, and, of course, a sinister secret unit tasked with capturing foreign *ubermensch*. Jewish heroes are scattered throughout the European nations. Britain, meanwhile, hoards its secret heroes, training them into drably-dressed spies who will observe in secret and, infrequently, act with precision.

Oblivion and Fogg are two such British cloak-and-dagger heroes. It is primarily Fogg we follow, through recruitment and training, various Second World War locales - the siege of Stalingrad, occupied Paris, the forested mountains of Romania - and further afield as the Cold War settles in for the long haul. As befits the relationship between two spies, theirs is a subtle dynamic and some secrets are rarely spoken.

Oblivion has the ability to 'oblivate' matter; to render it undone and reduce it to sub-atomic nothing. Fogg's name gives away his ability; he is a master of concealment and obfuscation. It is particularly useful in these partners' common role as invisible observers. Other British agents have names that are an unambiguous reflection of their character and ability (Tank, Spit) or employ a degree of whimsy (Mrs Tinkle, Mr Blur).

The novel's narrative framework is that of a retired Fogg being brought in by his old partner in order to answer some questions for their old boss (suitably enough known only as the Old Man). The bulk of the book's events are recounted from the past, although it seems to be a given that the accounts we are presented with are trustworthy representations. Although broadly chronological, brief events may be presented out of sequence in order to reinforce this or that point and as the novel wears on it becomes clear that this is less a novel about war, cold or hot, than one about the roles superheroes find themselves playing in a world driven by conflict and realpolitik, about the wounded humanity that

lies at the heart of every person or group that finds themselves used, and about the sublimated impulse towards freedom or love.

The Violent Century does not read like anything else of Tidhar's I've so far encountered. Its prose is largely written in a clipped fashion, a texture composed of short and blunt sentences. It's a novel that draws inspiration from the Cold War spy novels of John Le Carre and his ilk. Its unadorned prose allows little room for ambiguity but in focusing so much on the small images conveyed within each truncated sentence there's also an obfuscation of subtler meanings - perfect for a cloak-and-dagger narrative.

At points Tidhar seems unable or unwilling to reign in his usual elegant and thoughtful prose in order to bind it to this stylistic commitment but these shifts are few enough to not weaken the novel's tone and, in any case, largely occur in moments of joy and colour, moments unlike the largely dehumanised and sepia-grey framework of the novel at large.

Although the use of superheroes in war will seem to many a fundamentally absurd premise, Tidhar largely succeeds with carrying his novel's conceit to its conclusion. This may rely greatly on his focus upon the British super-spy; a few scenes where *ubermensch* do fight amidst streams of bullets don't ring entirely true. Given that a superhero can be killed as easily by a bullet as any other human being, it is surprising that the story's protagonists get away as lightly as they do. Plot Armour, as always, trumps all other forms of protection.

Like *Martian Sands*, *The Violent Century* is concerned with the suffering of the Jewish people under Nazi crimes. A connection is drawn between captured *ubermensch* and

Jewish prisoners, both of whom are fodder for the barbaric experiments of Mengele and his compatriots, although by dint of being fewer in number the *ubermensch* are less likely to find themselves slaughtered in the name of bad science. Post-war, Vomacht finds himself put on trial as a high-ranking Nazi collaborator — at which a few cameos can be spotted by sharp-eyed comic aficionados.

If *Martian Sands* can be understood as a novel that is at least partly about the clashing and fusion of cultural narratives then *The Violent Century* can, like many wartime or post-war works, be recognised as about their failure. This is despite the integration of the often morally clear-cut world of comics superheroism into the picture (although I must acknowledge how many comics and writers have tackled similar questions since *Watchmen*).

In truth, neither novel informs greatly upon the other; they are conceptually entirely independent of one another. I'd happily recommend both or either to readers of interesting, experimental and well-executed science fiction. It just so happens that they were reviewed together and what has enhanced the reading of both are the ways in which their themes overlap: a Venn diagram of the narratives of Lavie Tidhar. Long may he continue to explore them.



The Brick Moon & Another Brick In The Moon by Edward Everett Hale and Adam Roberts (Jurassic London, 2014)

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

The *Brick Moon* was first published in two parts in *Atlantic Monthly*, to which Hale was a Contributing Editor. The first part, 'The Brick Moon', appeared over three issues in late 1869; the shorter sequel, 'Life On The Brick Moon', was published in February 1870. The two parts, brought together as one book in 1871, would appear to be the first story of an artificial satellite in science fiction. It is republished here, along with a new sequel (of sorts) by Adam Roberts, to coincide with the exhibition 'Stars To Satellites' at the Royal Observatory, Greenwich, and as such comes garnished with an introduction jointly written by Marek Kukula, Public Astronomer, and Richard Dunn, Head of Science and Technology.

Such are the basic facts about this book. But none of that tells you just how peculiar the whole thing is. It is described as a 'lost classic of Victorian science fiction'; well, it occupies an interesting place in the history of the genre and it is typical of Victorian science fiction but it is not a classic. Rather, it is an engaging oddity, the sort of short novel one reads with a certain pleasure while all the time wondering whether, even in the middle of the 19th Century, it made any sense whatsoever.

The Longitude Prize was offered by the British Government in 1714 to whomever would find the most accurate way of determining longitude while at sea. Although sun, moon and stars provided a fairly straightforward way of determining latitude, longitude was not so simple and lack of this knowledge was leading to a high volume of lost shipping. The prize was eventually awarded in 1765 to John Harrison for his chronometer, and though the Board of Longitude made a number of subsequent payments, mostly for refinements to the chronometer, the quest for longitude had effectively been settled. And yet, when Hale's novella opens, eighty or so years later, we are introduced to a group of American students earnestly discussing the Longitude Prize and calculating how they might win it.

They decide that what is needed is either an incredibly tall building on the zero longitude (which they concede is impracticable) or an artificial moon in a fixed polar orbit. They opt for the satellite, which they decide could not be made of wood (too likely to burn up) or iron (too heavy) and so they plan to make it of brick. Given our current use of ceramic tiles, this isn't quite as crazy as it sounds but still ...

Nothing happens for the next little while as the students go out into the world and, being American, inevitably make their fortunes. Then they get together and revive the plan. An

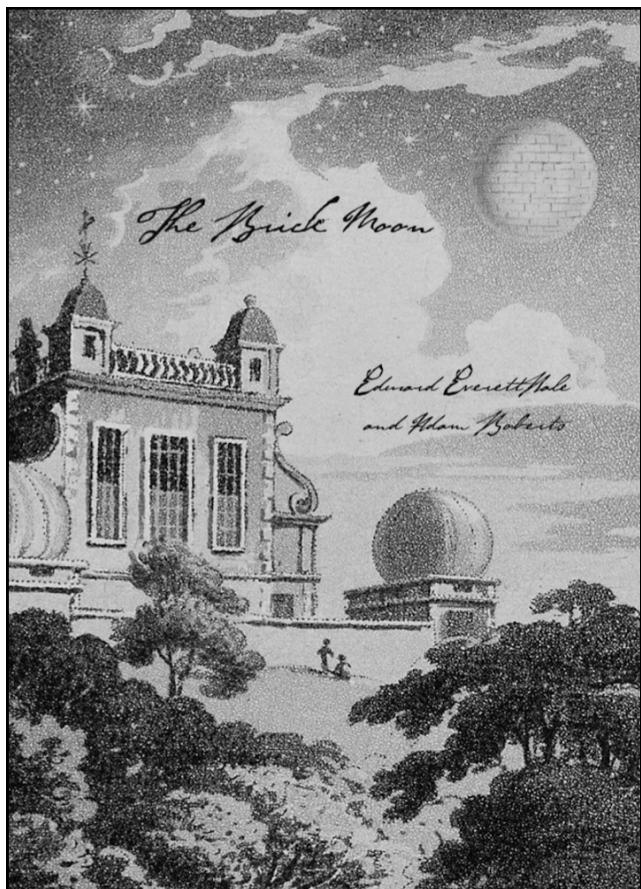
inordinate and fairly dull portion of the story is now given over to raising funding for the project, which is finally secured as a result of judicious investment in government bonds during the Civil War (or war profiteering, as we might think of it). Then, by chance, our narrator finds the ideal location to build their flywheel, with which they plan to launch the satellite in preference to the gun that both Verne and Wells would later choose. Must be some flywheel but although considerable attention is paid to the construction of the brick moon, we get very little information on the means of propulsion. But then, as the project nears its conclusion - with some of those involved making a temporary home inside the hollowed-out moon because it is so well constructed - a massive storm breaks out. The moon is swept from its moorings, the flywheel it released and the moon is flung into space. Which is where the first part of the story ends.

Hale's original sequel picks up a couple of years later, when our narrator finally locates the brick moon in its polar orbit. Watching it through a telescope, he sees small figures leaping up and down on the surface of the satellite. He realises that the people who had been living within the moon had survived their journey into space and that their rhythmic jumps are a form of code. A means of communication is established, though it allows for messages no longer than an average tweet. Painfully slowly, we get some glimpses of life on the brick moon. They have atmosphere, which seems to be deep enough for them to survive the very high jumps that low gravity allows, and for some reason the low gravity is resulting in plants evolving at great speed so they have plenty of food. And at that point the two sides run out of things to say to each other. Life on the brick moon is only ever seen from outside; it seems that they have established some sort of utopian society (Hale's narrator, variously Captain or Reverend Frederic Ingham, also featured in other utopian fictions by Hale) but we learn nothing of the nature of the utopia. In this curious silence, the narrative simply ends.

Nor does Adam Roberts's modern sequel, inevitably called 'Another Brick In The Moon', do anything to develop or amplify the issues that Hale raised but took no further. Instead, Roberts has his own narrator happen upon a transcript that reveals unexpected truths behind Hale's fiction.

Unfortunately, when he publishes the transcript, he becomes the object of shadowy government agencies and the story turns into a conspiracy thriller with an extended chase sequence. It's all good fun but it sits oddly with Hale's rather plodding original.

But oddity seems to be the watchword for this entire enterprise. 'The Brick Moon' is an engaging curiosity that stops just at the point when it might have become interesting. However, as an example of the Victorian habit of holding science fictional novelties at a distance, it is worth your attention.



Call And Response compiled by Paul Kincaid

(Beccan Publications, 2014)

Reviewed by Andy Sawyer

Structuring a collection of reviews, essays, and overviews can always be tricky, as is titling the same. The “call and response” of this collection is in fact a number of things – the call of a work of fiction and the critic’s response to it, the more mundane call of the editor or reviews editor to ask the critic to respond to a book (and in this sense I have made some of the calls which resulted in pieces published in *Foundation*) and, as Paul Kincaid notes in his introduction, the personal response to the call of a particular author or topic, which he sees as a kind of dialogue with himself, “discovering why you responded to the book the way you did”. And so here, the structure mirrors the third call, with various pieces written for different venues (including *Vector*) for different reasons grouped in accordance with (mostly) the author who is the subject of the discussion. The collection begins with pieces on Brian Aldiss and goes on to cover another twenty-five authors including Paul Auster, Samuel R Delany, Steve Erickson, Gwyneth Jones, Lucius Shepard and Jo Walton. There are also sections on the various ‘best of’ anthologies, which allows Kincaid to grapple (read: argue) with the idea of just what the compiler *means* by “best science fiction”; the various ‘New’ incarnations of standard sub-genres like space opera as well as New Wave Fabulists, the New Weird and the like; and “secret histories”, not the sub-genre but the revisionist readings of genre which have resulted in anthologies like James Patrick Kelly and John Kessel’s *The Secret History of Science Fiction* or Peter Beagle’s *The Secret History of Fantasy*.

Kincaid is a thoughtful, acute reader of a wide range of SF, who does not steer clear of expressing critical views of writers whom he clearly loves: in one piece on Paul Auster he writes “[t]here have been times when the fact that every other book is dreadful became such a regular feature of his work that I contemplated deliberately reading each second book.” (That “dreadful”, by the way, would probably not appear in a more academic study but the piece is all the better for Kincaid’s subjective, forthright clarity.) He has praise for the work of Paul J McAuley, though he is critical of some of his stories in the Dozois Best SF anthologies. He finds the “bibliographical” elements of Jo Walton’s *Among Others* – Mori’s engagement with the science fiction books that Walton, Kincaid and I were all reading at about the same time – “pabulum for the genre masses” even as he praises the book. His previously unpublished essay on Keith Roberts’s *Pavane* is one of the best things I have ever read on this classic alternative-history. He is possibly the most perceptive reader of Christopher Priest I can think of. His admiration of the fiction of Aldiss – with whom he disagrees profoundly as a historian

of sf – stems from “what can get in the way of my liking it”: the way Aldiss is a “restless writer, never content to plough the same furrow”. He is also interesting on the trap of reader-expectation and meta-fantasy that Gene Wolfe’s *Book Of The New Sun* seems to have lead him into.

Perhaps the most interesting facet of Kincaid’s response, though, is the way he notes his *development* as a reader. He remarks that the point of Gwyneth Jones’s fiction, for instance, is a failure to achieve the closure that fiction demands but emotional and psychological realism cannot assume. “This, I confess, is a late appreciation of her work, one that

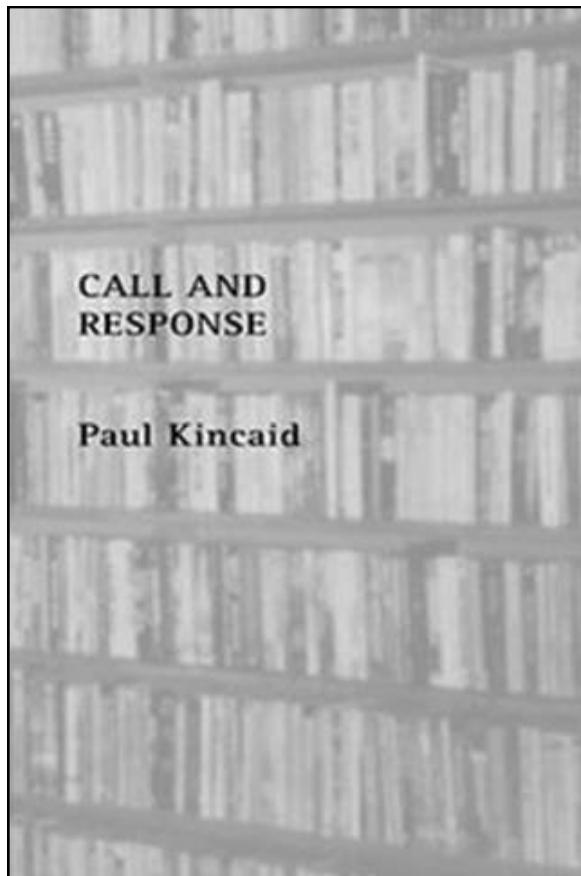
only occurred to me as I was reading [*The Universe of Things*].” He is enthusiastic about his unexpected discoveries such as Christopher Barzak or Ian McDonald. Although he suggests that he *might* be a “grumpy old curmudgeon” at times, he believes that the job of the critic is to “be excited about books and to excite other people about them”.

Call And Response then, is a book about this excitement. If some of his judgements can be argued with, that is the very point. Criticism as we see it here is an argument, a conversation, a sharing of views. What interests Kincaid is not necessarily the literary theorist’s concern with establishing a base for explanation, or even an academic sense of ‘teaching’, but his own continual and changing response to books and writers. Several times, Kincaid scrupulously notes that some of these writers are acquaintances, even friends, but we do not get a sense of privilege here. He is as acute and enthusiastic over writers he has never met, books which came to him via the random selection of an

editor’s choice.

Inevitably, the fact that these pieces were commissioned for different outlets at different times means that there is a certain sense of going over the same ground to set the scene or to make the point. Aldiss’s “restlessness” in the introductory matter to the five pieces on him appears again within a few pages. We are told several times, in so many words, that Alastair Reynolds writes big novels, full of spectacle. He has an uneasy response to postmodernism which comes out in the pieces on Auster, Steve Erickson, and Hal Duncan. But this is less unedited repetition, I think, than the call and response of the critic’s encounter with something interesting, even worrying.

Like many such books, this is perhaps best not read at one sitting but kept for browsing, for looking to see what a critic of wide knowledge and acute sensibility has to say about a writer you are interested in. One looks, in fact, for more: for discussions of those Paul Auster books Kincaid *doesn’t* like, for what he has to say about the other two books in the “Farthing” trilogy, for more on Robert Holdstock and M. John Harrison, and for the book (*Tourists* by Lisa Goldstein) which he says “blew him away when I first read it” to accompany the two reviews of books he found relatively lacklustre. But that looking for more is exactly what we should get from such a fine collection of critical pieces and I hope we get it.



***The Moon King* by Neil Williamson**
(NewCon Press, 2014)

Reviewed by Kate Onyett

On an island in the middle of a vast ocean is a city called Glassholm. In a prologue snippet from the history books of Glassholm, we learn that five hundred years ago survivors from a great civilisation came to the island, desperate and all but dying of hunger and thirst, fleeing from a great flooding disaster that had taken their home. A bit like *Waterworld* with a large dollop of *Gormenghast*'s claustrophobic, internalised community life.

Thankfully, this tale is much, *much* better than the former, although the flooded-world thing still applies and suggests a faint whiff of a post-apocalyptic time-scale. And like the latter, this story has grimness, wonder and a sense of the need for change. We live and breathe this place through the eyes of three main protagonists over the course of a lunar month, from the low shanty dwellings of artisans clinging perilously to mud banks through cul-de-sac courtyards, along paved streets of ascending superiority and right into the magical, mythical castle of the enigmatic and seemingly immortal Moon King.

Lottie is an artist who is trying to make a living and make it away from the cultish grip of her mother's female-centric Church of the Blood; a haven for embittered and frightened women, and which provides the city's midwifery services. Anton, an engineer, wakes up with the mother of all hangovers in the palace itself after drinking away his pain at being jilted. However, everyone there is calling *him* the King and he is starting to hear a voice in his head. John, an ex-policeman, is an *extremely* rough diamond. He is now a palace guard sergeant with a dodgy memory, an increasingly tenuous grip on reality and a series of worrying murders stacking up around him to solve. What follows is nothing less than the struggle for the life and soul of the islanders as these three are drawn ever deeper into a political and psychological battle that will climax with either self-destruction or the terrifying prospect of a brand new era.

The Moon King's plot dances delightfully along the balance of the bipolar nature of opposites, with Williamson plays with ideas of attraction and repulsion in equal measure. As we learn more about the city's past, huge themes of consensus versus individuality, restriction versus freedom and order versus chaos emerge. It is how these are resolved on the larger scale for the city through the will of the King, and on a personal level by the characters that provide Williamson's ripe ground for suggestion. However, when systems break down and questions drown out that consensus, outlets become the

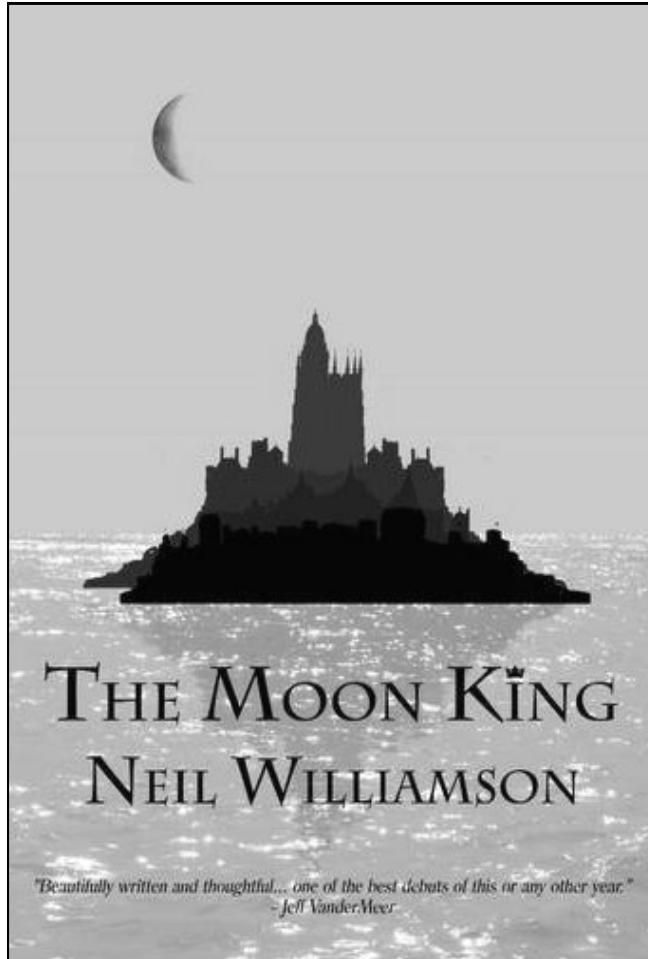
breaches in the dam: Lottie is present and part of most of the major upheavals and Anton has ideas of his own about how to fix the King's machinery but with his broken memories, John is a dangerous piece of the game - a loose part, rattling about causing problems.

It is human nature that to undergo change - a revolution - means a period of painful upheaval. It is, of course, new life usurping the previous, old order and Williamson maps this venerable truth across a fresh yet familiar fable with astonishing vividness. Over-layering this all is a cyclical pulse that gives an urgent pace, as well as underscoring the machine-like nature of society's functioning: Williamson has added strange, lunar-centric physics to which all on the island are subject. In an ultimate act of human pride and control, the King managed to trap the moon - the actual *moon* - overhead. Permanently. Under its influence, first life then entropy speed past each lunar month, bringing regular swings of dark sorrow and full-moon carnival to the people and flourish and wither to everything else. But even stranger things are breaking out: water-nymphs prance about, crabs storm the city from the sea and luck monkeys who distribute random items like little tokens of personal prophecy - a wonderful detail that tickled me pink - are going mad, their tokens confusing and murderous in origin. Nature is going loopy under the strain of mechanical control and regulation.

Like *Gormenghast*, the greatest struggle to overcome is the momentum of personal apathy, especially when people are conditioned to live a certain pattern of life. The fear of the new is the biggest enemy to any understanding, any growth and any true sense of

self. Williamson proves adept at sprinkling in just enough thought-provokingly grand Themes and then refining them in the delicate work of drawing character portraits, incorporating that struggle above in the minds and hearts of his protagonists. Acknowledging the struggle and acting on that acknowledgement is what separates the heroes from the boys. Not one of these characters is even very *nice* but they are all utterly human and feel completely alive. While no one in the novel ever fails to try to take advantage of a situation - in other words to *survive* - there are still ties that bind them, taking them almost by surprise, as if the cogs in the machine are not meant to interact too much.

It's a real delight to find a debut full-length novel where the characters pop, the situations glisten with sheer wonder and you realise you were meant to have put the book down and gone to bed sensibly a good hour or more ago. The confident, assured style sweeps the reader up compliantly into what is expected to be the arms of a very satisfying story and at no point is this impression dismayed.



The Corpse-Rat King by Lee Battersby
(Angry Robot, 2012)

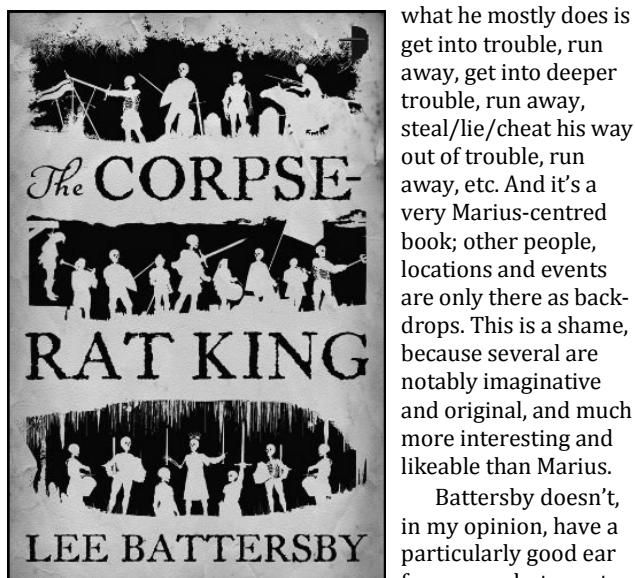
Reviewed by Sue Thomason

I don't really feel it's a spoiler alert to inform you, gentle Reader, that the protagonist and his sidekick are both killed in chapter one. The remainder of this inventive and filthy novel follows their attempt to regain life in exchange for finding a King for the Dead. In other words, this is Zombies in Fantasyland.

For much of the book, the primary emotion seems to be revulsion. Everything is filthy, rotting, smelly: the city, the country, the houses, the clothes, the food... People repeatedly jump into shit. Then they curse. (This book is Not Recommended for people who don't like four-letter words.) Initially I assumed this was a book for the "poo is funny" brigade; twelve to fourteen year old boys, perhaps. But the language level is far too complex, the subject matter too adult, and the cynical-humorous authorial asides too heavy with world-weary sophistication. The book only contains one female character (whore-with-a-heart-of-gold), so I'm sure the target audience is male, and old/well-read enough to recognise the Caligula-analogue in the *dramatis personae*.

Marius, the protagonist, is a thief, liar, cheat, swindler, and professional battlefield looter. His only motivation is self-interest and immediate self-gratification. He's brighter than everyone else in the book, and despises nearly everyone else he meets; if he rips them off, it's only what they deserve. His infrequent glimmers of empathy are quickly overwhelmed by greed. I *think* the target audience is supposed to like and admire him, and find him funny. I don't.

The plot is episodic. Although Marius is supposedly searching for a suitable candidate for the post of King of the Dead,



what he mostly does is get into trouble, run away, get into deeper trouble, run away, steal/lie/cheat his way out of trouble, run away, etc. And it's a very Marius-centred book; other people, locations and events are only there as backdrops. This is a shame, because several are notably imaginative and original, and much more interesting and likeable than Marius.

Battersby doesn't, in my opinion, have a particularly good ear for names, but apart from that, he can certainly write. There are many sharp and telling observations, particularly in the know-all authorial voice, which is superbly maintained. However, although the Official Plot Problem is solved at the end of the book, there is no true resolution. If Marius has cheated death, he has cheated life as well – and cheated himself. He's such a good liar that he can lie to himself, convincingly, and believe the lies. He can believe he's alive. He can believe he's dead. He can believe there's no difference, *really*, between life and death, although he's clearly terrified of death and decay, and spends the whole book trying to run away from it. He can believe he's a good man at heart, *really*. He could reform if he really wanted to. Honest. Perhaps Marius is Everyman – and an Awful Warning. In which case this book isn't really funny at all.

The Leopard by KV Johansen (Pyr, 2014)

Reviewed by Graham Andrews

For me, there can be few more off-putting endorsements than the one Pyr have used on the front cover of *The Leopard* by KV Johansen: "Should appeal to fans of Robert Jordan." I soon gave up on Jordan's *Wheel Of Time* serial time-killer saga, although I did have some nice things to say about his Conan pastiche novels. I was more encouraged by the "mix of magic, Tibetan-style religion, and Harold Lamb-style adventure" encomium from James Enge. But a conscientious reviewer should never judge a book by its blurbs – so that's me telling myself off, then.

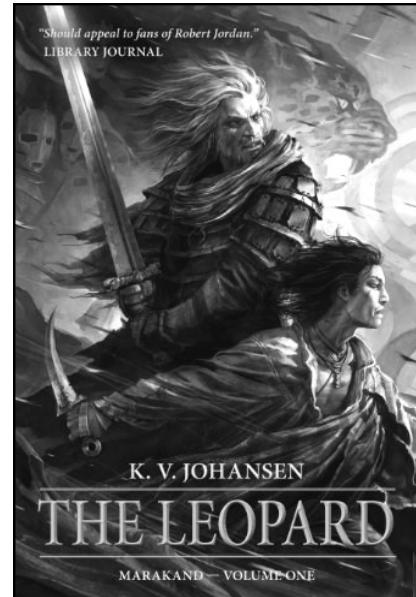
The Leopard is set in the same world as Johansen's *Blackdog* (2011), where gods and demons and devils rule and humanity lives in terror, or at least subjection. Actually it is one long novel divided into two books: the second volume, *The*

Lady, was published just four months later. Both are set in and around the city-state of Marakand, an obvious allusion to terrestrial Samarkand, through which all caravans heading West or East had to pass.

Blackdog is about a goddess on the run with her troubled bodyguard, which resembles the kick-start situation here. Ahjvar, a semi-retired assassin nicknamed the Leopard, who languishes in Sand Cove with his runaway-slave sidekick, Ghu – pronounced *Goo*, I daresay – is the nearest thing we have to a standard-issue hero. He is sorely afflicted by a curse that "binds him to a life of horror" (an unmentionable horror until well into the book). Deyandara, an agent of the goddess Cataranach, promises him that if he kills the mad prophet called the Voice of Marakand, the curse will be lifted. And off they all not-so-jolly well go. I'm glad to report that the Trudge Quotient level is commendably low.

But the most gripping character is best presented in her own italicized words: "*I was Sien-Mor, and I came over the warm, sweet, killing sea of the south and up the chain of islands in my brother's shadow. I am Tu'usha the Restless, and the cold hells could not hold me. And if the madwoman of the southern islands taints me though her bones are burnt to ash, you are not she and I am not what I was. I was Sien-Mor, but I am Tu'usha, and I am Zora, and we are one.*" Under any name whatsoever, she hates everyone and everything in the world, with the kind of monomaniacal frenzy that carries all before it.

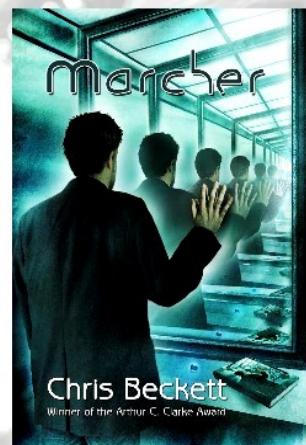
The second half of *The Leopard* introduces a whole new set of characters, including the werebear Mikki and the demon lover of a wandering Northern warrior-wizard called Moth – not, it must be said, the fairy from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. I was all at sea (or steppe?) with so many unexpected events, distracted by the spade-thuds of groundwork being laid. The narrative drive of the whole book is strong, for the most part, even if I did keep tripping up over the often clunky style. But one thing is for sure: no one will mistake this all-hell-raising novel for *The Leopard* by Giuseppe di Lampedusa.



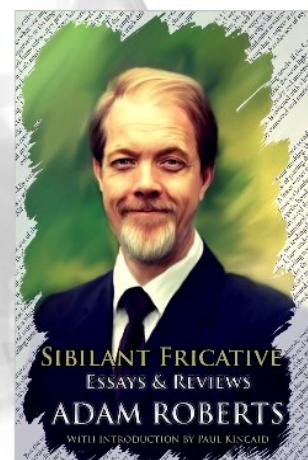
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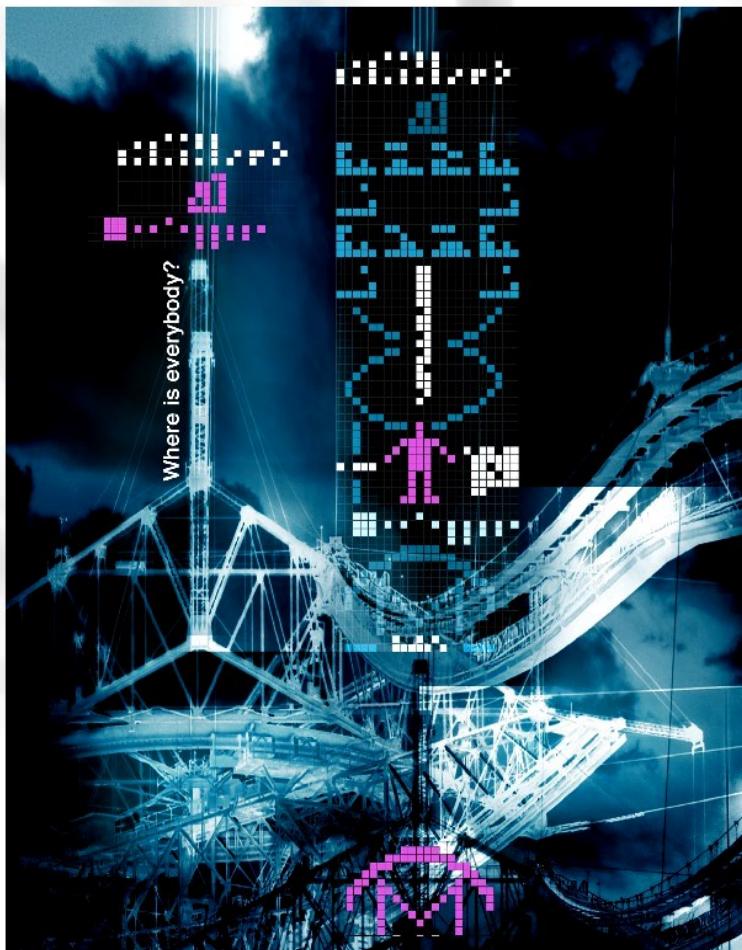
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