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In This Issue

Latro in Egypt

By Cheryl Morgan

I don't need to tell you that the new Gene Wolfe novel, *Soldier of Sidon*, is wonderful, do I? Of course not. But I'm going to anyway.

Latro, or Lucius the Roman as Wolfe has finally admitted he should really be

known, is in Egypt. This is a fine place for him to be. After all, if one is blessed with the ability to see the gods, what better place to go. Egypt, it sometimes seems, has more gods than people. And dying pharaohs add to their number all the time. There will be plenty of new people for Latro to meet.

Every blessing, of course, has its downside. Latro, as we should all know by now, is cursed with an inability to remember any of his life before he last slept. At some time in the past he took a head wound that damaged part of his brain. Or at least that is the physical manifestation of the curse laid upon him. Now he must write every day in a scroll he carries with him, so that he can remember the next morning who he is traveling with, who his friends are, and who he has to be wary of.

We are, it appears, in the days of the Great King Xerxes, Lord of All Persia and many lands besides. Even Egypt has fallen beneath his sway. Latro is traveling in the company of his friend Muslak, a Phoenician sailor. The Persian satrap has hired Muslak and his boat to explore south along the Nile to find out what they can about Nubia and the other lands there of which the Egyptians know much but the Persians little. There is a rumor of gold mines. The expedition has other members too, including a priest of Set whose introduction Robert E. Howard would have been proud of.

"The man on my left is Sahuset, a wise man of Kemet. He too will go with you." The strap turned to this Sahuset. "Will you have a servant, Holy One?"

If I had shut my eyes when Sahuset spoke, I might have thought it a snake, so cold and cunning was that voice. "No servant who must be fed, Great Prince."

Kemet, of course, is Egypt. It means "black", and is the name the Egyptians gave their own country, covered as it so often is in the black muds of the Nile floods. Wolfe plays this game a lot. Muslak is a "Crimson Man", the Phoenicians being fond of red clothing. The "Tin Isles" refers to Britain as the Phoenicians are known to have bought tin from Cornwall. And so on. Disappointingly for the Wolfe addict, many of these terms are explained in a glossary at the back. If they hadn't been I would not have spoiled your fun working them out. But there are plenty of other puzzles for you to ponder over.

There's no doubt that Wolfe has a fascination with issues of identity and trust. People in his books are forever pretending to be other than they are, often for the purpose deceiving both the hero and the readers. Perhaps most famously, towards the end of the Book of the Short Sun, the identity of the hero of the story is in doubt. Is he still Horn? Or has Horn died and the mind of Pater Silk been downloaded into his body? To solve such mysteries you often have to read the book several times, or rely on Robert Borski to do so for you.

Latro, however, is an ideal vehicle for this sort of game, because when he wakes in the morning he has no idea who anyone is. Until he has read his scroll, people can make the most outrageous claims and have him believe them. A continuing theme of the book is the attempts of Sabra, the wax golem woman that Sahuset brings with him, to persuade Latro that he loves her and have him cast aside his concubine, Myt-ser'eu, in her favor.

However, the trick also demands a lot of work from the reader. Latro cannot remember anyone unless he reads about them in his scroll. And as he is the narrator of the books there is no one to remind us who characters are either. On a few occasions Latro encounters people who say they have known him before. Are they characters from the previous two Soldier books, or are they from deeper into Latro's past, which would make them vital clues to the mystery of his life? I really should have read the previous two books before embarking on the new one. Perhaps I shall just read all three again.

But not quite yet. Certainly there is something going on. Towards the end of the book, Latro meets two characters who claim to know him well. One is an African king, the other a Babylonian princess who has married him. Interestingly Latro seems to have some vague recollection of King Seven Lions, which seems to suggest (without having re-read the previous books, which is the kiss of death where making pronouncements about Wolfe is concerned) that this is someone he knew before he suffered his wound. Exactly what is going on, however, will remain unclear for some time. *Soldier of Sidon* ends so utterly *in media res* that there can be no doubt that a sequel is planned. The good news is that there will be another Latro book. The bad news is that I have to wait for it. Wah!!!

Soldier of Sidon – Gene Wolfe – Tor - hardcover

The Old Gods Return

By Cheryl Morgan

Jay Lake is a successful cannibal. All writers are, of course, cannibals in one way or another. They recycle their own work, and they draw inspiration from others. But some are good at it, and some less good. Lake, I think, has learned to do it rather well.

I first encountered Jason the Factor, Bijaz the Dwarf and other inhabitants of The City Imperishable in the story, "The Soul Bottles", from the *Leviathan* #4 anthology (now available online here <http://www.forteanbureau.com/archives/april_2006/the_soul_bot.html>). Lake has now produced a novel in the same setting, *Trial of Flowers*. Thus far he seems to have plenty of ideas and there's no sign of things becoming stale. Another City Imperishable novel is apparently in production, so Lake clearly thinks he has more to say.

But writing a book of this sort is fraught with certain dangers. Night Shade, as is their job as publishers, have played up the "more like this" angle in the blurb, so readers will already be primed to compare Lake's book with *Perdido Street Station*, *City of Saints and Madmen*, and *The Etched City*. There will, I am sure, be reviews written complaining that Lake is "ripping off" Miéville, VanderMeer and Bishop. Lake, on the other hand, is well aware of the debts he owes. And he has done a good job of making his own creation unique. The City Imperishable is perhaps notable for its population of made dwarfs.

To be a dwarf was to spend the years of youth boxed in agony, while the full-men walked laughing and free in the sunlight. To be a

dwarf was to have your head stuffed with numbers and letters and facts until wax ran from your ears and your eyes bled, while the full-men drank and gambled and whored in the taverns and gaming parlors of the City Imperishable. To be a dwarf was to be sworn to service and a life of staring at cobblestones and twice-counted coins, while the full-men knelt for honors before the high folk of the city and rode fine horses through the bright streets.

Nor is this just a shock tactic. The idea of dwarfs, and their relationship to the City, is central to the entire plot of *Trial of Flowers*. At the same time Lake introduces affectionate nods to works that have inspired him. There is a character called Tomb, who of course this time is notable for **not** being a dwarf. And of course there are our tentacled friends.

"I seen strange things down these tunnels over the years, your worship. What's a god or two to me atop of the freshwater squid infestations…"

A little background would probably be helpful. The City Imperishable is the last remnant of a once-proud empire. In theory, the Burgesses govern only until such time as the Emperor should return. In practice the City is ruled by an oligarchy of businessmen and bureaucrats and is corrupt in precisely the ways you would expect from such a set-up. But things are not going well. The City's fortunes, it appears, are crumbling. Worse, there are rumors that foreign armies are marching on the City planning to conquer it. The City has no army, and the walls are a joke. Their one competent administrator, Jason's master Ignatius of Redtower, has gone missing, and someone, it seems, is summoning Things. Naturally everyone blames the dwarfs. Lake understands scapegoat politics very well.

"We shall both need to rally around the Lord Mayor when he appears, or we are dead dwarfs who have simply neglected to stop breathing yet. There will be no mercy from the Burgesses. Not after last night's riot."

"How many of our dwarven folk stormed the Coastard Gate last night, do you suppose?" Bijaz asked with a smile that crooked his face.

"It will be said that all of us did, should the Burgesses wish that to be so."

What is this Lord Mayor business, you might ask? Well, Jason and Bijaz have decided to support the efforts of Imago of Lockwood to have himself declared Mayor. Imago has discovered an ancient provision that allows a Mayor to be elected by acclamation should he survive something called the Trial of Flowers. This would get around the refusal of the Burgesses to hold elections. The plotters hope that this will provide the City with some desperately needed decisive leadership, rather than the grasping fools who see in the crisis only a further opportunity to enrich themselves at the expense of others.

This brings up a very interesting aspect of the book. Lake is a very long way from using traditional fantasy characters. Jason is a merchant, Bijaz a political leader of the dwarfs, and Imago a lawyer. They are very much City folk, not in the least bit like heroes. Of course they need to hire mercenaries, but Enero, the captain of the Winter Boys, turns out to be a hard-headed military commander who has no time for fantastical nonsense.

"The Alate was to be coming to me, to be speaking of your danger."

"Alate?" Jason didn't know the term.

"Wingèd man. A race of the uttermost east, some are to be saying, from high in the Shattercliff Mountains. I am being told they are noumenal, but I am knowing these fliers to be the Alate. A creature which eats and shits and bleeds and is crying pain." Enero flexed his fists and smiled. "I am to have killed them before. They are dying simple as pigeons, but with having more of the fuss about them."

The net result of all this is a fascinating book that has sufficient magical weirdness to satisfy fantasy fans, but at the same time demonstrates an awareness of political theories from sources as diverse as the American Revolution and Frazer's *Golden Bough*. There is a certain amount of stomach-churning material in the book. It doesn't get an enthusiastic blurb from Richard Calder by accident. But I can see why Lake has done it, and it is clearly a means to an end rather than an end in itself. I think I would describe the book as admirably intelligent rather than spectacularly literary, but not everyone can be Hal Duncan and Lake does what he does very well. Recommended.

Trial of Flowers – Jay Lake – Night Shade Books – trade paperback

Faries and Society

By Cheryl Morgan

The new book from Susanna Clarke comes as a splendid hardcover edition complete even with a ribbon bookmark. Bloomsbury is pushing the boat out on this one, and so they should. According to their publicity, *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell* sold almost half a million copies in the UK alone. That's not bad going for a very long book packed with footnotes.

The new book, *The Ladies of Grace Adieu and Other Stories*, is a collection of short stories dating back to 1996. Only one of the stories is new, though some of them may surprise. The title story, which is also the oldest, comes from Patrick Nielsen Hayden's *Starlight 1* anthology, and features Jonathan Strange. Yes, really, that long ago.

Fans who came to Clarke's work via the novel will probably be disappointed that it is only the title story that involves the lead characters from the novel, although other stories are set in the same milieu. All of the tales are fairy-related in some way. But perhaps the most striking thing about them is that they illustrate what a magnificent balancing act *JS&MN* is.

What do I mean by that? Well, let's look at the stories. "The Ladies of Grace Adieu" could have jumped straight out of the novel. Indeed, I suspect it might have originally been part of it, but was extracted separately because the book was getting over-long. The only thing it doesn't have is footnotes. So far so good.

"On Lickerish Hill", in contrast, is a classic fairy story. So classic, in fact, that anyone who has read a fair amount of English folklore will recognize it instantly and be able to guess the ending. It is also written in very heavy dialect, which would have been very hard going in a long novel.

Next up is "Mrs. Mabb", which is set in the same historical period as *JS&MN*, but is again a classic fairy story. Again you know pretty much what will happen, and

there's no sense of "this is something strange and new" because the mortals are mortals, the fairies are fairies and there are no English Magicians.

"The Duke of Wellington Misplaces His Horse" is actually set in the world of Neil Gaiman's novel, *Stardust*, although it isn't necessary to know that to read the story. As with *JS&MN*, it makes good use of an historical character, but again it is a re-telling of standard fairy themes and is, I thought, rather unconvincing.

Next we have "Mr. Simonelli or The Fairy Widower". This is again set in the Regency period, or thereabouts, and features a character who is part-fairy. It has many of the features of Regency fiction that really irritate me, and I was left thinking that if *JS&MN* had been like this, while it might have done OK, it would not have been nearly so successful. I certainly wouldn't have read it.

"Oh! And they read English novels! David! Did you ever look into an English novel? Well, do not trouble yourself. It is nothing but a lot of nonsense about girls with fanciful names getting married."

From "Tom Brightwind"

"Tom Brightwind or How the Fairy Bridge was Built at Thoresby" is my favorite story from the book. It takes a slightly different tack to *JS&MN* in that it has a fairy prince (Tom of the title) living in London amongst mortals. The story tells how Tom accompanies a mortal friend on a trip to the Midlands and the interesting effect they have on a small country town. It is again a good mix of traditional fairy themes with sharp observation of people and society. It also exhibits plenty of the sparkling Clarke wit.

With characteristic exuberance Tom named this curiously constructed house Castel de Tours saunz Nowmbre*, which means the Castle of Innumerable Towers. David Montefiore had counted the innumerable towers in 1764. There were fourteen of them.*

From "Tom Brightwind"

And it has footnotes. This one is part of a note on the sort of places in which fairies lived before they got civilization.

The truth is that the brugh *was a hole or series of interconnecting holes what was dug into a barrow, very like a rabbit's warren or badger's set. To paraphrase a writer of fanciful stories for children, this was not a comfortable hole, it was not even a dry, bare sandy hole; it was a nasty, dirty, wet hole.*

From "Tom Brightwind"

"Antickes and Frets" is the odd story out in that it is set in Elizabethan times. It tells of how Mary Queen of Scots tried to use witchcraft to kill Elizabeth I. It s not at all clear whether any real magic happens, although to the people of that time I'm sure it would seem as if it had.

Finally we have the new story, "John Uskglass and the Cumbrian Charcoal Burner". Although this features the Raven King, it is in fact another re-telling of folklore, this time of the type in which a mighty fairy prince is outwitted by a stubborn peasant and a bunch of saints. It feels like a story that might be told within *JS&MN*, but not at all part of the plot.

What I've tried to illustrate here is that Clarke has written a whole bunch of good folklore tales, many of them set in the Regency period, but most of which lack the spark that made *JS&MN* such a successful book. The collection may introduce a lot of new people to traditional English folk tales, which will be a good thing (I fondly await reviews that compliment Clarke on the originality of her plots). Also the stories, with the possible exception of the Wellington one, are very well written. But they are, for the most part, not *JS&MN*, or even "more like this." They all have an excellent sense of British folklore, and will appeal to lovers of good fairy fiction because of it. Some of them also have the air of Regency novels. But only rarely do they exhibit that magnificent feat of literary alchemy that made *JS&MN* so good. And that, I submit, is because it is very hard to do. So while I am slightly disappointed with the collection as a collection, I have come away with it even more impressed by Clarke's novel.

The book includes numerous illustrations by Charles Vess. I'm assuming that most *Emerald City* readers will be familiar with his work, so I don't have to go on about how good he is at illustrating matters of faerie.

The Ladies of Grace Adieu and Other Stories – Susanna Clarke – Bloomsbury - hardcover

Rapture without Rancor?

By Cheryl Morgan

I first heard about John Shirley's new novel, *The Other End*, when he read an extract from it at one of Terry Bisson's SF in SF readings. The whole idea of the book, of reclaiming the End Times from the Fundamentalists, sounded fascinating. It also sounded a very brave thing to attempt. So I wanted to make sure that I got a copy of this book.

Now when I say "brave," I don't mean brave in the sense of not being scared of any reaction from the Fundies. Let's face it, that's a risk any author takes these days. No, I meant intellectually brave, in that what Shirley has set out to do is quite challenging. There were two major difficulties that I could foresee. The first was avoiding creating yet another revenge fantasy. After all, that's what the whole End Times thing is about: it is a revenge fantasy in which "people we like" get rewarded and "people we don't like" suffer horribly for all eternity. There's no point in reclaiming the End Times if all you are going to do is be just as petty as the original. The other problem is that in setting out your own program for the salvation of mankind you have to show that your own morality is somehow superior to that of the version you want to replace. Neither of those things is, in my view, easy to achieve.

Shirley starts out simply and honestly with Jim Swift, a reporter for the *Sacramento Bee*, chasing up a story about illegal immigration. He's at an RV park in Fresno that he believes is being used by a criminal gang to house large numbers of immigrants brought in from Cambodia whilst buyers are found for them. Swift know that he won't be able to get the police to act without firm evidence — evidence he can only get by breaking into the compound at the probable risk of his life. He opts to take the risk, and is just about to lose his bet when he is saved by, well, something mysterious.

Swift soon finds out, via his oddball friend, Ed Gallivant, that such mysterious interventions are happening all over the world. Perhaps it is aliens, perhaps it is angels, who knows? The only thing that is certain is that "bad people" all over the world are finally being brought to book. Be they criminal gangs or pedophiles in the US, militias in Africa raiding villages for child recruits, Muslims murdering their daughters in "honor killings" or whatever, someone has decided it is time that there was a little justice in the world.

From this it should be obvious that Shirley is getting around defining his rules of morality by providing examples. That isn't necessarily a bad thing. Simple rules like "Thou shalt not do X" tend to work far better in a computer program than as a means of running a society. Attempts to impose absolute rules of morality tend to result in fundamentalism, which is, after all, what Shirley is railing against. Besides, the idea of "do unto others as you would have them do unto you" has been espoused by adherents of many world religions, including Buddhism, Confucianism, Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Sikhism and Zoroastrianism (and probably quite a few others). If the readers agree that Shirley's bad people are doing bad things (i.e. things they would not like done to them) then he'll have broad agreement that his morality is workable.

The difficulty with such an approach is that you have to avoid contentious cases. If you have examples where only a fraction of your readers agree that the bad person is actually bad then you start to lose support. Mostly Shirley has neatly stepped around this, but there is one example that may upset people. Jim Swift is a divorced father. His wife, Linda, kicked him out for having too many affairs. She's now being difficult about letting him have access to his daughter, Erin. As it turns out, Swift genuinely cares about Erin whereas Linda, a recent convert to a fundamentalist cult, puts obedience to her church leaders ahead of her daughter's best interests. Most non-fundamentalists would agree that this makes Jim a "better person" than Linda, but I can see hard-line feminists arguing that Shirley has set the situation up in such a way as to imply that women who make it difficult for ex-husbands to see their children are all bad, regardless of their reasons. I make no comment on Shirley's intentions — I'm just observing that issues of morality are not always clear cut, and if you argue by example you can end up having to provide way more examples than you would want in order to make your case.

One thing that Shirley does make very clear is that morality is a matter of actions rather than theory. Those who put systems of rules ahead of assessment of individual situations come off badly in Shirley's universe. That generally means fundamentalists, but it can also mean political revolutionaries of all shades. I should also add that, unlike the popular image of the Californian, Shirley does not elevate "niceness" above all else. He might think that it is better that humans should not kill and eat other animals, but he doesn't think that carnivores should be exterminated because they are murderers, or that paradise should be free of all dangers.

I should note in passing that Shirley adopts a Gnostic cosmology in the book. If you are going to have intervention by aliens/angels than it is entirely reasonable for mankind to ask what God has been up to all these millennia. Why did He/She/It let things get so badly out of control? The

Gnostic answer (simplistic version thereof) is that the being worshipped by most religious people is in fact not God at all, but a malicious demigod who has usurped the role of the Almighty. Ialdabaoth, the name used by Shirley for his bad godling, is a character out of Gnostic mythology.

So far so good, but what about the Rapture itself? Who gets saved and who does not? Because he hasn't set down any hard and fast rules for who is good and who is not, Shirley cannot simply divide the world into believers and unbelievers. However, he deftly manages to achieve the same effect (and what follows is probably a spoiler, but it is something I think I need to talk about).

The logic behind the Rapture is basically one of choice. Those who choose to adopt the belief system of the fundamentalist group in question will be Saved, those who do not will suffer Eternal Torment. Note that there is no concept of redemption through good deeds here. Mankind is fundamentally sinful, and can be redeemed only through belief (a theory that conveniently allows believers to do all sorts of unpleasant things to others without jeopardizing their own salvation).

Shirley also allows mankind a choice, but it is a rather more informed choice. The aliens/angels/whatever have arrived and are beginning to put the world to rights. But that isn't enough. Those who wish to be Saved have to put their trust in these strange beings and agree to be part of the new world that they are creating. The trick here is that Shirley's emissaries of God have been given a chance to prove themselves. They have done Good Works. Given the choice between believing in beings that have proven themselves by their actions, or believing in a cult that bases its beliefs in a holy book that contains some highly dubious pronouncements alongside the good ones, which would you chose? But if the choice was simply between the supposed emissaries of God and life as normal, would you trust these paranormal beings? I mean, given all that has been said and done in the name of "God" down the millennia?

At which point I shall leave you to read the book. I'll just wrap up by saying that I think, given the very obvious difficulties, Shirley has a done a very creditable job. However, given the choice between being Left Behind and dying horribly, or taking a risk on supposed supernatural beings, let's just say that I'm not convinced.

The Other End - John Shirley – Cemetery Dance – publisher's proof

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Childhood Reading

By Cheryl Morgan

At the beginning of Umberto Eco's *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana* the novel's central character, Giambattista 'Yambo' Bodoni wakes up in hospital. It appears that he has suffered a stroke. He cannot remember any of his life before he was taken ill, but he can remember every book he ever read.

The doctor asked me what first came to mind when I woke up. I wrote: "When Gregor Samsa woke one morning, he found himself transformed in his bed into an enormous insect."

When Dr. Gratarolo asks Yambo his name, the patient replies, "My name is Arthur

Gordon Pym." Realizing this is wrong, he tries again: "Call me… Ishmael?"

If you are beginning to think that this plot device is a transparent excuse for Eco to show off his vast erudition then you would be quite right. Eco spends an awful lot of time talking about books in *Queen Loana*. But he does so in interesting ways, and the memory loss excuse is put to other, profitable, uses as well.

Yambo, it turns out, is a bit of a cad. His best friend tells him that he has had a string of affairs, though embarrassingly Yambo can't remember any of the women involved, even when he encounters them in the street. Because the book is written from Yambo's point of view, this philandering is viewed by his long-suffering wife, Paola, and his two adult daughters, as further evidence of his substantial masculine charm. What they actually thought of him is not recorded.

However, Paola clearly retains some affection for Yambo and, being a psychologist, she tries to help him regain his memories. At his suggestion, he returns to his childhood home in a country village where, by one of those handy coincidences that are allowed to happen in mainstream novels but would probably be greeted with derision in SF, all of his youthful possessions have been carefully preserved by a faithful old woman retainer who appears to be the Italian equivalent of a Mummerset character.

This is where the book gets interesting, for two reasons. The first is that, being a fairly normal boy of his time, Yambo spent a lot of time reading comics and adventure books. Thus Eco stops talking about Kafka, Poe and Melville and instead turns his attention to the great pulp heroes of the early 20th century. We get to learn about Sandokan, Fantômas, Mandrake the Magician and, of course, Flash Gordon. Even the Queen Loana of the title turns out to be a She-like character from a pulp adventure story. Because he can get away with this sort of thing, Eco has spent a lot of time researching book covers and the like, and fills his novel with color illustrations of Yambo's childhood delights.

The other area of interest is that Yambo does not grow up in the home of pulp literature, the United States, he grows up in an Italy that is succumbing to the lure of Fascism and is about to enter World War II on the side of Nazi Germany. This results in a certain amount of alternate history writing on the part of Italian publishers. Buffalo Bill, we learn, was not really called William Cody, he was an Italian immigrant called Domenico Tombini who was, coincidentally, born in Romagna, just like Mussolini. Only Mickey Mouse, it turns out, was so closely associated with the hated Americans that he had to suffer an unfortunate and terminal accident rather than be reclaimed with Italian parentage.

The book paints a convincing tale of how Yambo's family, whilst opposed to the Fascists, are unable to do much positive with their political convictions as they are in no position to take to the hills with the partisans. The best they can do is to prevent young Yambo, a voracious reader even then, from taking everything he sees at face value. For example, the adult Yambo discovers copies of a magazine called *Defence of the Race*:

They contained photos that compared aborigines to an ape and others that revealed the monstrous consequences of crossing a Chinese with a European (such degenerate phenomena, however, apparently occurred only

in France). They spoke highly of the Japanese race and pointed out the unmistakable stigmata of the English race – women with double chins, ruddy gentlemen with alcoholic noses – and one cartoon showed a woman wearing a British helmet, immodestly covered with nothing but a few pages of the Times arranged like a tutu: she was looking in the mirror, and TIMES, backwards, appeared as SEMIT.

As he grows up, little Yambo learns what the word 'Jew' means, and what happened to that nice Signor Ferrara who taught him to play marbles.

Inevitably, however, the book returns to the subject of sex. We are, after all, dealing with an old man reminiscing about his childhood and adolescence. I mean, why would a young boy read Flash Gordon comics if not to see pictures of Dale Arden and Princess Aura wearing those strange, futuristic clothes that seemed to involve so much less fabric than was worn by one's mother and her friends.

Ultimately *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana* is embarrassing, as only old men looking back on their childhood can be. But before it gets to that stage the book gives us a fascinating (and hopefully not too glamorized) look at life in wartime Italy. It also treats pulp fiction with a warmth and affection that must have left many mainstream critics cringing. For that I can forgive Eco a lot.

The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana - Umberto Eco – Vintage – trade paperback

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A Mosaic of Music

By Cheryl Morgan

The latest mosaic novel by Zoran Živković will be the first and last book I review from a new small publisher that is causing a few waves in the industry. Aio Publishing has to date produced only four books. However, one of them, *The Summer Isles* by Ian R. MacLeod, has won both a Sidewise Award (for alternate history novels) and also a top book design award at the Chicago Book Clinic Book and Media Show. Živković, while guest blogging for Jeff VanderMeer, has been enthusing about how happy his is with his new publisher. Of the Aio edition of *Seven Touches of Magic*, he said:

"…it is without doubt the most beautiful of more than eighty foreign and Serbian editions of my prose books. I can now only humbly hope that the contents won't betray the perfect form..."

Having received a copy of the book, I begin to understand. In the genre publishing industry we are used to cheap-looking books. The mass-market paperback has been a staple of the industry for a long time, and even hardcovers are now beginning to be produced with miniscule type so as to save money. A few top authors, such as Susanna Clarke (see elsewhere in this issue) get top quality production. But the majority has to put up with what they can get. As for us reviewers, we often get sent proof copies of books with production standards that are even poorer. If publishers really wanted to bribe reviewers then they would send us books of the quality that Aio produces.

The finished version of *Seven Touches of Music* is a masterpiece of understated style and elegance. The cover is in varying shades of black and gray, with the title picked out in green. The pages are edged in black as well, and the whole product oozes quality. This book, Aio is saying, is not just a collection of stories; it is a work of Art. Any author would, I think, be proud to have their work showcased so beautifully.

But what of that content? Does it fulfill Živković's humble hopes? Well, it kind of depends on whether you are a Živković sort of reader.

Seven Touches of Music is another "mosaic novel" of a form and style that Živković readers have become familiar with over the past few years. The book consists of seven short stories linked by the theme of music. In each of them perfectly ordinary people have their lives touched in some way by bizarre and unusual events, each of which is brought on in some way by music. Furthermore, the characters tend to be of a type that is something of a Živković specialty. They tend to be older, to be loners, to be eccentric in a very reserved way, and to be very particular about how they live their lives. One is tempted to speculate that the typical Živković character is a borderline Aspberger's sufferer. Here is an example:

Mr. Adam did not behave like the ordinary sort of visitor, who just wanders around enjoying himself. First he found out which animals were housed in the zoo, then he drew up a schedule of visits. Each animal was allotted a whole day. Few of the zoo's inhabitants were worthy of such dedication, but the systematic patience with which Mr. Adam approached everything he did would not allow him to act otherwise.

Quite why Živković is so fond of characters like this is a mystery to me. Perhaps he thinks that science fiction readers like to read about people who share some of their personality traits. But it is probably more likely that people with strongly fixed ideas about how their lives should be lived — with strong and somewhat eccentric personal morals, and rigid habits of behavior — are more likely to be convincingly disturbed by the odd things that happen to them than us more laid back types. Maybe Živković thinks his characters deserve what happens to them; maybe he thinks that getting jolted out of their routine will do them good, although often it appears that it does not.

In any case, things happen. Živković writes the sort of short story of which more populist critics might complain, "nothing happens". Traditionally stories are supposed to have conclusions, but Živković stories often do not. Things happen to the characters — often very odd things — but then the oddness ceases and the reader if left on her own to imagine what it all meant. Where did all that strangeness come from? What effect did it have on the protagonist? Živković often does not say. In his stories things just happen.

It so happens that this is just the sort of short fiction that I like. Živković stories are impressionist rather than realist. They convey mood rather than meaning. They are disturbing rather than comforting, but strange rather than frightening or disgusting. If you like that sort of fiction then, like me you will continue to seek out Zoran Živković's work wherever you can find it. If, on the other hand, you prefer stories with some neat and surprising denouement, or the sort of sentimentality-

and-cats fiction that seems so popular with voters in the short fiction category of the Hugos, then you should give Živković a miss.

Unless, of course, you have an adventurous streak to you. You never know: you might discover, if you give his work a try, just how good he is. And besides, who would not want to own such a beautiful book?

Seven Touches of Music - Zoran Živković – Aio – hardcover

The Little House of Horrors

By Cheryl Morgan

It is May, and WisCon. Mike Levy and I are browsing the shelves of A Room of One's Own, Madison's feminist bookstore. Mike pulls a book of the shelf. "Have you read this?" he asks. "It was recommended to me by Jeff VanderMeer. It is quite extraordinary. And so it is.

Extraordinary, adj

1. Beyond what is ordinary or usual

2. Highly exceptional; remarkable.

American Heritage Dictionary

Life isn't all roses being a celebrity couple. He, Will "Navy" Navidson is a Pulitzer Prize-winning photojournalist. She, Karen Green, is a top model. He spends way too much of his life rushing off a short notice to risk his life in search of interesting photos. She spends his absences consoling herself in the arms of her many suitors. Eventually they agree that something must be done. They buy a country house in Virginia and move in with their two children. Navy starts a project making a home movie about their new life. He hopes it will distract him from adventures. Instead it provides valuable documentary evidence that **The House** they have bought is not a normal house at all. Normal houses do not spawn additional hallways overnight.

Zampanò was eighty years old when he died. He was perhaps an archetypal fanatic, for he had devoted most of the latter part of his life to writing a book about his favorite movie. *The Navidson Record* is deservedly one of the world's most famous horror movies. Although the footage was shot by amateurs, one of those amateurs was an award-winning photojournalist with a genius of an eye for shot composition. And then there is the mystery surrounding the film. Will Navidson and Karen Green continue to this day to maintain that the film is a truthful record of actual events. Certainly the people who died in it have never been seen again. And there is one compelling piece of evidence. Hollywood professionals attest that producing special effects of that quality would have cost millions: money that Navidson and his associates clearly never had.

So Zampanò devoted his life to writing a book about the film. It is part fan eulogy, part academic study. It covers all of the many areas of controversy surrounding the film, and occasionally takes off into lengthy diversions on subjects as diverse as the architecture of mazes, the physics required to explain what Navidson has filmed, and Biblical parallels to the relationship between Navy and his brother, Tom.

Somewhat by accident, Johnny Truant came into possession of Zampanò's papers after he died. It wasn't something Truant was planning to do. Life was too good. He and his pal, Lude, had a nice life going cruising parties in Los Angeles. They took lots of drugs, they had lots of sex with lots of (mainly artificially) perfect women. They had no thought for literature, or even for horror movies. But Truant made the mistake of starting to read the book, and thus he made three discoveries. Firstly, rather like the notorious *Necronomicon*, Zampanò's book holds a curious fascination for those who read it. Second, aside from a small group of women who had helped Zampanò transcribe his thoughts, no on had ever heard of *The Navidson Record*. The famous people supposedly interviewed by Zampanò, or in the film, responded to Truant's enquires with bemusement or anger. And finally, Zampanò needed his cadre of female assistants because he, the great movie critic, was totally blind. Perhaps that explains his fascination with Navidson's tale of a journey into bottomless darkness. If, indeed, Navidson ever existed.

House of Leaves, a book edited from confused notes left by Johnny Truant, cannot possibly have existed. After all, Will Navidson took a copy of it with him to read on his final expedition into **The House**. He finally got to read it as he lay dying of hunger and exposure somewhere deep within the infinitely extensible bowels of the building. There being no light in the depths of **The House**, Navidson first exhausted his matches, and then began to burn the pages he had already read as a source of light. At this point he became seriously irritated with Truant, or whoever the author was, because someone had made the darned book very difficult to read.

Not only is *House of Leaves* a book by a crazy person, edited by a crazy person, and about the adventures of a crazy person, it is also very oddly structured. It must have driven the production department crazy. The text wanders all over the place. It turns upside down and sideways. It expands and contracts. It litters the pages like autumn leaves. Chunks of it are in foreign languages. Many people who try to read *House of Leaves* will end up throwing the book against a wall. Will Navidson couldn't, because where he was at the time there were no walls.

And the text has footnotes. So do the footnotes. Have footnotes, that is. Some of the footnotes to the footnotes have footnotes. The editors have helpfully set the footnotes in different typefaces so that the reader can tell who is footnoting who, which is important because both Zampanò and Truant were occasionally in the habit of footnoting their own footnotes. Besides, Truant's footnotes tend to ramble over several pages. He seems to think it important to tell us the story of his life as well as tell us about Zampanò's book.

Like the great wyrm, Orobouros, also known as Jörmungandr, the Midgard Serpent, *House of Leaves* spends a lot of time eating its own tail.

Which is perhaps significant. This has nothing to do with the plethora of footnotes, but if you look carefully you will see that *House of Leaves* is, stripped of the centuries of civilizing influences of folklorists that went into creating Susanna Clarke's beautiful confection, simply the

tale of how Will Navidson became the Raven King. Read the final page again if you don't believe me.

There is no such film as *The Navidson Record*.

There is no such book as *House of Leaves*.

There is no such person as Mark Z. Danielewski.

Everything I say three times is True.

House of Leaves – Mark Z. Danielewski – Pantheon – trade paperback

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Those Horrible Academics

By Cheryl Morgan

It would have been a sad thing indeed if the last issue of *Emerald City* had come and gone without a review of a book by an Australian writer. That was, after all, one of the major impetuses for the magazine in the first place. Fortunately I happened to have, on my "to read" pile, a book that is not only by an Australian, but which was up for an International Horror Guild Award (the awards were presented at World Fantasy Con – see Miscellany for the winners). I'd actually been trying to get to this book for ages, but the vast flood of new material kept pushing it down the list. Now that flood has more or less ceased, it immediately popped up the stack.

The book, *The Stone Ship* by Peter Raftos, begins with its central character, Shipton, about to commit suicide. As it turns out, he doesn't have the courage to carry the job through. As he is sitting there pondering the fact that he is such a failure at life he can't even manage to kill himself, he sees a stranger approach. They strike up a conversation, and it soon turns out that the stranger is more strange than he looks.

"What are you doing on this island?" I asked this fellow, Finch.

He half-smiled at that, a rueful look. "The same as you."

Silence. If telling the truth, he too had come to the island to suicide. And he had watched me fail.

Finch took a deep breath, and looked into the fire, both longingly and morosely. "But unlike you, I succeeded."

In common with many ghosts, Finch is a vengeful spirit. He soon has the hapless Shipton signed up to help him get revenge on the man who ruined his life and drove him to suicide. This involves a long journey to a place known only as The University, upon arrival at which we discover that we are no longer in Kansas.

Forget the ghost. Lots of books have ghosts in them. You can write mainstream novels with ghosts in them and no one will turn a hair. But the minute we get to The University we realize that we are closer to the mind of Mervyn Peake than of any ordinary writer. We know now why Raftos (or his publisher) chose Pieter Bruegel's magnificent painting of the Tower of Babel for the front cover. The University is immense, labyrinthine, and packed with the sort of characters that one would expect to find in Gormenghast, and possibly in the mustier corners of Oxford or Cambridge, but never in Stanford or Berkeley. Of course that doesn't mean that

they don't behave like academics everywhere else.

Once again, I had found myself in a conversation in which I understood many – although not all – of the words used by the other person, while the order of presentation of those words rendered the whole thing gibberish.

Getting into The University is a challenge in itself, involving hefty bribes to grizzled and grotesque functionaries, lengthy journeys through ancient corridors, and an inordinate amount of form-filling. Eventually, however, Shipton finds himself employed by the eccentric Professor Margolis, an intimidating and predatory woman of boundless ambition and monstrous ego.

"Now," she said, "for the most part you will take dictation for me. My thoughts are free, unfettered and original and very important. I cannot be expected to both have thoughts and write them down. No, that's just not acceptable. It will be your task to write my thoughts as I have them. I will lie on the couch and tell you what to write. Is that simple enough for you?

And if you think she's bad, wait until you meet the Librarians. Think Vernor Vinge's *Rainbows End* where the belief circle is centered on the Furies from Greek mythology. Let's just say that you do NOT want to get into a dispute about where a book should be shelved.

Eventually, of course, Shipton finds the man he is supposed to kill. He also finds out more about The University than men (or at least students) were meant to know. But then there would not be a story otherwise, would there?

You may well find that when you get to the end of *The Stone Ship* you find yourself asking, "What was that all about?" Don't ask me. Besides it being an amusing satire of academic life (Raftos claims to have been an "academic in-training" and the book is published by an academic press), I haven't a clue. It does, however, have some startling imagery and some nicely grotesque characters. It is, I think, the sort of book I would like to have up for horror awards, although I suspect that it is not anywhere near disturbing enough for the average horror reader.

The Stone Ship – Peter Raftos – Pandanus Books – mass market paperback

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Strange Because it is Foreign

By Cheryl Morgan

There are many reasons why I have made a point of seeking out books from writers whose first language is not English. Here are a couple. Firstly there is rarity. There must be lots of science fiction writers in Germany, most of whom we never hear of. If Andreas Eschbach is the best of them, it is likely he's very good indeed. Second, no matter how hard we try, we tend to fall into culturally determined patterns in our writing. Someone who is writing in German may have a fresh and innovative approach. Certainly, on the basis of *The Carpet Makers*, this is very much true of Eschbach.

The book starts out conventionally enough with an introduction to a strange society.

The city of Yahannochia is home to a community of carpet makers. These craftsmen spend their entire lives weaving just one carpet. It is made entirely from the hair of their wives and daughters (it helps to have several wives with different colored hair). When a carpet is finished, it is sold to a hair-carpet trader. It is then taken to Port City where it is collected by an Imperial ship and taken off to furnish the Emperor's palace. The money paid for the carpet is bequeathed to the carpet maker's son, in order to support him and his family throughout the time he is making his carpet. Because no carpet makes enough money to support more than one carpet maker, excess boy children are killed.

No sooner have we been presented to this rigid and, in many ways, cruel culture than we find that it is under threat. Rumors abound that there has been a rebellion, that the Emperor has been deposed. Yet the traders still come, and the ships still take away the hair-carpets. Can life carry on as it always has?

It soon becomes clear that Eschbach is not planning to tell the story of any individual character. Each new chapter introduces us to someone new, someone who can cast a different light on the society Eschbach has created. And slowly a mystery develops. It turns out that Yahannochia is by no means the only city on the second planet of sun G-101 that is home to hair-carpet makers. Nor is that the only planet on which such activities take place. The Empire, after all, spanned many galaxies. The new Rebel government is perplexed. What was the purpose of all this carpet-making? Certainly none of the carpets ever found their way to the palace. And how are they going to restructure all of these societies that are geared solely to worship of the Emperor and making carpets? The Rebel forces are finding spreading the good news to be hard.

Reactions to the news of the end of the Empire had been wildly divergent – which provided at least some distraction from the monotony of their task. On some planets, people were happy to be able to discard the feudal drudgery of knotting hair carpets. On others, however, they had been denounced as heretics, insulted, and stoned. They had come across Guild Elders who already knew of the Emperor's death from mysterious sources, but who begged them not to announce it to the populace for fear of losing their status in society. Wasra realized that, in the end, they had no control over what actually happened after they left. On many worlds, centuries might pass before the old ways would really come to an end.

In the end, *The Carpet Makers* turns out to be a fine example of traditional sociological science fiction, if rather unusually structured. It also does a fine job of conveying the sense of wonder that a universe-spanning Empire should engender. It also occurs to me that the book would have been valuable reading material for the idiots who thought that they could completely re-structure Iraqi society in a year or two. Like so many other front-line military officers, Captain Wasra knows that it is pipe dream.

I understand that Andreas Eschbach has written rather a lot of SF novels. Only one has been translated into English (a fine job by Doryl Jensen). I hope I'll be able to read some more of his work soon.

The Carpet Makers – Andreas Eschbach – Tor – hardcover

Elves in Black Leather

By Cheryl Morgan

I gave the job of reviewing the new Justina Robson book, *Keeping It Real*, to Karina for the very simple reason that she had the book in her hands and I was in America and not sure when I'd see a copy. I also figured that it was her sort of book, and I was right. But this is a Justina Robson book we are talking about, so you could be sure I'd be reading it sometime. Besides, it has a heroine who wears black leathers and rides a motorbike. My kind of girl. But is it my kind of book? On the way back over to California I finally found time to read it.

Lila was used to the routines of self-checking, tending and managing herself. She was fast and efficient with the machines stored in her smaller case; a toolkit for self-maintenance. The last one was a power unit diagnostic that tested her reactor block. It was running sweetly. The fist-sized tokamak would outlast her, if nobody blew it up.

Lila Black, then, is not your ordinary sort of heroine. But she's not your ordinary sort of cyborg, or secret agent, either. Although her masters in Earth government have done a decent job on her appearance, she still has more in common with Deathlok the Destroyer than Jamie Sommers. It is all the fault of the elves, really. Humans don't seem to worry too much about cyborgs, at least as long as they don't know they are carrying around a small fusion reactor. But elves are a bunch of technophobic bigots, which is no fun if you have to deal with them.

Did I mention that *Keeping It Real* is an elf-shagging book? Well there you go, now you know. I'm not really into elf-shagging myself. Demons, for obvious physiological reasons, are rather more interesting, but I fail to see how a pair of pointy ears enhances a guy's sex appeal, and I've never been one to fall for the spiritual union chat-up line. Lila shouldn't either. Her bike might dump her if it thought she was that wet. But at least the elf she's been given the job of bodyguarding is a rock star. Zal has a reasonable sense of humor as well, unlike the rest of the elves…

Zal turned around slowly and said, in a voice so convincing Lila barely recognized it, though she knew it was the start of an old song, "I am the god of hell fire, and I bring you…"

Nobody got the joke.

Well they wouldn't, being elves.

But this is the point, really. Your average elf rock star is probably actually a folk singer; possibly one who still hasn't forgiven Bob Dylan for going electric. Zal, on the other hand, has not only heard of The Crazy World of Arthur Brown, he's covered their most famous song. It is rather a shame that Robson wrote the book before Lordi won Eurovision, or I suspect Zal might have mentioned them once or twice, instead of merely channeling them by accident.

Are you getting the idea by now? Black leather, motorbikes, elf rock stars who actually know what an electric guitar is for, a small nuclear reactor, and some big guns. And, because this is Justina Robson we are talking about, a heroine with a great deal of self-doubt who is just as likely to let go with the tears as with an Uzi. I don't recall Lila indulging in a chocolate binge when she got depressed,

but that's probably because much of the action takes place in Alfheim and the elves would disapprove of chocolate because it isn't healthy, and they are all vegans to boot and therefore don't allow dairy products.

And if you are starting to think that Robson might just be having a go at environmentalist fundies, well, I suspect you are right.

Because, you know, this is Justina Robson we are talking about here. You can't just turn round and stop being a top class science fiction writer with a degree in philosophy and linguistics. Which is why, in amongst all of the high octane action and inter-species sex, you get occasional paragraphs like this:

"When speech is careless and labels people, instead of simply stating what was done, when speech is used as a weapon, there is nothing we can do but fight. It is not simply the way you talk in Otopia. Speech defines the world. But be aware that in Alfheim these matters take on even greater weight, because our magic is tied to sounds, and no sounds are more powerful than those of words, except music."

So there you have it. Yes, *Keeping It Real* is a thrill-a-minute adventure yarn full of sex and elves and motorbikes. But it is also a book in which dragons are well versed in quantum mechanics.

There are, apparently, three books in the Quantum Gravity series, of which *Keeping It Real* is the first. I'm not sure when Gollancz will be publishing the others, but US readers will no doubt be pleased to hear that Lou Anders has bought all three for Pyr. Patience. Good things will come.

Keeping It Real – Justina Robson – Gollancz – trade paperback

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Dead Again

By Cheryl Morgan

Mike Carey has turned out his second Felix Castor novel very quickly. *The Devil You Know* was reviewed in April, and here we have *Vicious Circle* already. Maybe Carey had more than one book written when he made the sale. Maybe they are easy to write. One thing I have noticed already is that there is a formula.

Well OK, this is crime fiction that we are talking about here, so of course there is a formula. And there's all of the supernatural stuff as well. Castor's modus operandi is that, being an exorcist, he can wheedle the dead into telling him what happened to them. Very useful, if you are a detective. From there on the book proceeds like this: the police tend to be suspicious of Castor; Castor gets beaten up lots; and there are about five sub-plots going on, all of which turn out to be connected in the end. This is actually a problem, because if you know that everything in the book is going to end up being related somehow then you can see some of the plot twists coming a mile off. Carey might want to think about that.

Minor gripe aside, however, Felix Castor novels are seriously page-turning stuff. *Vicious Circle* lasted considerably less time than the 10 hours necessary to get from Heathrow to San Francisco. And there is plenty of fun writing along the way.

So now the music was bringing this dead man inside the perceptual orbit of Coldwood and his coppers – which meant that they were seeing Sheehan's ghost materialize out of that proverbially popular substance, thin air. The plods gaped, and the men in white coats visibly bridled and tensed as they saw this piece of superstition and unreason made manifest before their eyes.

Of course the question you will all be asking is, is Juliet in the book? Fear not, dear reader, everyone's favorite reformed succubus does get a number of key scenes. Carey is careful not to over-use her, which is probably just as well. She could very easily overpower the entire book. Besides, there has to be a limit to the bloodshed.

Juliet accelerated so that they'd reach her first, taking out two of them with strikes that I'd be happy to call surgical because most surgery leaves you unable to walk for a while and maybe a body part or so short.

What's the book about? Oh, you know, the usual stuff: drug dealers, gangland murders, demonic possession, Satanic child sacrifice. The sort of stuff that only appears in the lurid imaginations of crime writers, horror writers, tabloid newspaper journalists and Christian fundamentalists. But that's what Felix Castor novels are like. Carey did, after all, cut his writing teeth on characters such as John Constantine.

There is plenty to warm to in Carey's work. To start with he knows London very well, even down to mentioning well known local eccentrics, or much missed landmarks such as MOMI. But most of all he is one of us. Carey is a geek at heart. He knows about MOMI because he loves movies. And because he loves movies he knows things like just how inflammable old movie film is, and what useful chemicals it might have in it. In amongst all of the stomach-churning gore and macho fisticuffs beats the heart of a science fiction writer. I suspect that Carey will be able to churn out new Castor novels on a regular basis for a few years yet, but I hope he does something different as well.

Um, as long as it has Juliet in it.

Vicious Circle – Mike Carey – Orbit – mass market paperback

Monster Hunt Family Therapy

By Peter Wong

San Francisco's Museum of Modern Art provided the setting for a screening of one of the year's best monster-on-the-loose films. The occasion was Opening Night for the San Francisco Film Society's first International Animation Showcase. This mini-festival assembled a collection of animated films from around the world. *The Host*, the monster film in question, hails from South Korea.

Though *The Host* is a live action film, the titular creature is the product of computer animation. San Francisco-based computer animation company The Orphanage brought the mutant monster to life. Before the film's screening, representatives from The Orphanage presented slides and video footage of the creation process. Attendees saw early sketches of the creature. Also presented was reference material such as gaping mouths of

terrestrial creatures and motion footage of lizards running. Scrupulous care was taken to ensure the audience didn't see the finished product before the creature's first on-screen appearance.

The Host begins in 2000. On a US military officer's order, several dozen bottles of **very** dangerous chemicals get poured down a drain leading to the Han River. The effects of this military pollution don't become readily apparent until six years later. One Sunday, a mutant amphibian emerges from the river to cause lots of property damage and kill dozens of unfortunate victims. The creature snatches Park Hyun-seo (Ko A-sung) during the ensuing panic. The schoolgirl presumably becomes yet another piece of monster kibble.

However, Hyun-seo's father Gang-du (Song Kang-ho) receives a cell phone call from his daughter. The terrified girl tells him that the monster has trapped her in some sewer. Gang-du fails to enlist the authorities' aid. The South Korean government thinks Gang-du is crazed with grief. It also believes the distraught father has been exposed to a deadly virus carried by the mutant. The American government will not help out at all. Despite these refusals, Gang-du is determined to rescue his daughter.

Gang-du's only allies are the other members of the Park family. But it's very clear the Park clan doesn't come close to qualifying as a crack team of monster hunters. Gang-du's father (Byeon Heui-bong) can barely handle physical activity. Brother Nam-il (Park Hae-il) is a former student activist who's degenerated into a cynical and unemployed drunk. Sister Nam-joo (Bae Doo-na)'s archery skills are compromised by her unfortunate tendency to freeze under pressure. Gang-du himself suffers from noticeable mental retardation. In the words of *Buffy's* Giles, "the Earth is doomed."

The effort to rescue Hyun-seo may drive *The Host's* plot, but it's clear that the film's real struggles center on the Park family's efforts to overcome their individual dysfunctions. The mutant monster does not serve as an obvious metaphor for the state of the Park family dynamic.

The Host's fast moving and well-paced plot turns out to be one of the film's strengths. Despite its somewhat daunting running time, the film never feels padded or gratuitous in its violence. This doesn't mean the film is perfect. Subplots involving the infection's victims and public hostility towards use of Agent Yellow remain unclear. However, by the point these flaws become issues, viewers may overlook them for the thrill of seeing the film's very dramatic finale.

Thanks to the film's music, the viewer learns not to take the film's events too seriously. The musical soundtrack conveys an occasional sense of the absurdity of the crisis that has befallen the Han River area. The semi-farcical air makes the film's political points that much greater. One could hold the US military morally responsible for indirectly creating the monster. But the film's unstated assessment is that the American organization will not be punished for their role in creating the resulting panic. The incompetence of the South Korean first responders emphasizes the degree of the government's lack of preparation. Then again, could any reasonable government have prepared for the arrival of a mutant monster?

The film's titular creature is the obvious showstopper. Thanks to The Orphanage's work, the casual viewer can look at the

creature and believe such a freakish monstrosity could reasonably have come into existence. Despite its decidedly unusual appearance, The Host moves plausibly just like any other natural creature. The computer graphics work makes the creature look like a fixture in the environment. The only visual flaw comes at the finale, when the attempts to match computer animation to live action disaster look as if the animators lacked sufficient computer power to make the visuals appear seamless.

Though *The Host* may share some similarities to *Jaws* and *Alien*, comparing the South Korean film to the American action movies would do a disservice to the work of director Bong Joon-ho. *The Host's* plausible whipsaw changes of tone never seem gratuitous or undisciplined.

Interested readers should catch the film when it arrives in their town. One suspects the inevitable Hollywood remake will definitely drop the anti-US government slams.

The Host - Bong Joon-ho - Magnolia Pictures - theatrical release

Close Encounters of The Sexual Kind

By Peter Wong

Carla Speed McNeil's *Finder: Five Crazy Women* is the answer for those seeking, in one package, intelligent comics and mature discussions of male-female relations. Superhero comics won't do the trick. Even the genre's best writers, such as Greg Rucka and Grant Morrison, are constrained, by superhero comics' emphasis on action, from undertaking deep discussions of the ambiguities of sexual relations. In McNeil's work, one gets discussions of a variety of sexual preferences ranging from bisexuality to pedophilia.

GRAZIE: *What, did your attention span's pilot light go out again?*

Even though *Finder* is an ongoing comics series, new readers can approach *Five Crazy Women* without needing to be aware of the fantastic world created by McNeil. The comics creator provides enough details in the story that the reader can get a general understanding of her world. In addition, an extensive annotation in the back pages allows McNeil to provide further background information, as well as critically assess her efforts.

So what is *Five Crazy Women* about? It comprises two re-tellings of the sexual adventures of Jaeger Ayers. Jaeger is your prototypical wandering bad boy. He can come into a city with nothing more than the clothes on his back and whatever he can carry, yet within a couple of days, he can find a woman willing to share her living space and even have sex with him.

The first section of the book, the Eisner Award-nominated "Beware of Dog," occurs during Jaeger Ayers' latest visit to Anvard. His gift for finding willing female partners seems to have deserted him this time. The only room he can find is sharing a bar table with an unnamed gay acquaintance. The only sex the resolutely straight Jaeger can obtain is an unexpected public blow job from a guy.

During the long night, Jaeger reveals that he's an Ascian sin-eater. In terms of that

tribe's mores, he's an untouchable who also serves as a social purifier or an accepted scapegoat. Good Ascian girls may have sex with sin-eaters, but will never love them. Jaeger started chasing city women as an alternative to being treated as a tool of sexual revenge. Yet he seems doomed to repeat his behavior in the city. This story ends with Jaeger eventually finding a new female companion for the night.

Following an anecdotal interlude, the second conversation begins. Some years have passed since Jaeger last saw his gay friend. This conversation consists of anecdotes centering around five crazy women that Jaeger encounters. Linsey jumps into Jaeger's bed in revenge for her husband Vic's obliviousness. Candy takes Jaeger back to her apartment and wants his presence, yet is not interested in having sex with him. She's also an oddball sugar junkie. Genie is a cute and limber sweetheart that Jaeger encounters at a speed dating event. She also gets sexually excited from crapping into diapers. Yekat bleongs to a weirdly silent family that ties all the family members' beds together. In the longest tale, Grazie is a television journalist who is attracted to exotic forms of pain and suffering such as people dying of malaria. The book ends with some things coming full circle.

Jaeger's tales of his encounters with women never come across as male braggadocio. While he may be exasperated by women's quirks, he never condemns their flaws. Nor does he use the incidents to advance his own superiority. Instead, his recollections provide object lessons from which he draws some hard-won wisdom.

JAEGER: *I mutate rapidly under the influence of nice girls.*

In keeping with *Finder's* emotionally realistic tone, the artwork avoids the heavily thewed men and exaggerated supermodel women look beloved of superhero comics. McNeil's characters can be visually attractive. But they can also believably look anorexic or fatigued from lack of sleep. On the other hand, panels or even pages that look like illustrated monologues may frighten more visually oriented readers.

Science fiction fans will also be taken by the balance of exoticism and livability that typifies *Finder's* world. Pirate television stations and skull-jack phones are juxtaposed with smoky pubs and dirty cobblestoned streets.

McNeil's fictional world will also evoke the works of Ursula K. Le Guin and Gene Wolfe. The fascinating information about the nomadic Ascian tribes and their cultural mores recalls some of Le Guin's writings. But the enigmatic nature of *Finder's* world suggests a Wolfe influence. A futuristic world might have both domed cities and floating video cameras. Yet the architecture is present day at the latest. The Ascians are a freely nomadic and apparently thriving culture. McNeil leaves the exact nature of her world ambiguous. But her notes about her world's background indicate deliberate thought and consideration has been put into this work.

Because *Finder: Five Crazy Women* may not fit into the more commercial categories of genre fiction, it may be unfairly overlooked. For readers looking for intelligent and funny portraits of romance without the painful experience part, Mc

Neil's graphic novel comes highly recommended.

Finder: Five Crazy Women - Carla Speed McNeil – Lightspeed Press – graphic novel

A World of Horrors

By Cheryl Morgan

Those who love life do not read. Nor do they go to the movies, actually. No matter what might be said, access to the artistic universe is more or less entirely the preserve of those who are a little fed up *with the world.*

- Michel Houellebecq

I am so beastly tired of mankind and the world that nothing can interest me unless it contains a couple of murders on each page or deals with horrors unnameable and unaccountable that leer down from the external universes.

- Howard Phillips Lovecraft

Whatever bones to pick I may have with some of Michel Houellebecq's conclusions and assumptions, I never once doubted his central thesis, that Lovecraft's works stand against the world and against life.

- Stephen King

Like Stephen King, I am by no means convinced by all of the ideas put forward by Michel Houellebecq in the work from which I have been quoting. Nevertheless, I am convinced not only by the truthfulness of Houellebecq's assessment of the character of Lovecraft's work, but also by his claims for its greatness. More of that later, but first some background.

Michel Houellebecq is a well-known and successful French writer of mainstream fiction. He is also a fan of H.P. Lovecraft. In 1991 he published an extended essay in praise of Lovecraft's work. That essay has recently been translated in into English, thereby making it available to a much wider audience of Lovecraft aficionados. The book, which is bulked out to almost 250 pages thanks to the inclusion of two of Lovecraft's most famous tales — "The Call of Cthulhu" and "The Whisperer in Darkness" — is called *H.P. Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life*. Stephen King contributes an introduction.

So, Lovecraft is a great writer, but why? His prose is perhaps best described as eccentric (at least to our ears); some of his personal philosophy, especially his racism, is deeply unpleasant. And yet, as Houellebecq points out, he passes the first and most obvious test of a great writer: his work is still in print, and selling well, many years after his death. How many other writers active in the first half of the 20th Century can claim as much?

Houellebecq also has another cogent point to make regarding Lovecraft's greatness. How many writers, he asks, are known and loved by people who have never read their books? Conan Doyle, certainly, Tolkien and Agatha Christie. Sherlock Holmes, Gandalf and Hercule Poirot are cultural icons. And so is Great Cthulhu. Houellebecq explains in a forward to the new edition:

At book signings, once in a while, young people come to see me and ask me to sign this book. They have discovered Lovecraft through role-playing games or CD-ROMs. They have not read his work and don't even intend to. Nonetheless, oddly, they want to find out more

— *about the individual and about how he constructed his world.*

And Houellebecq's book, like books about Tolkien, can be found in bookstores shelves alongside the subject's novels, not in the literary criticism section where one might think they belong.

Houellebecq, however, does not content himself with merely proclaiming the greatness of his subject; he attempts to understand it as well. Consequently the book is not just an essay in praise of Lovecraft's work; it is a partial biography as well. In particular it traces the brilliance of Lovecraft's later works, not to some brilliant leap of the imagination or bizarre dream, but to the very real hatreds and horrors that Lovecraft developed while living in poverty in New York. For a cultured New England gentleman, apparently fit only for a life as a literary hobbyist, the need to seek work in one of the world's great urban jungles was a profoundly disturbing experience. It did not make Lovecraft a better man; it did make him a better writer.

Those of you who are of an academic bent will perhaps be disappointed by Houellebecq's book. It is not in any way rigorous. Translator Dorna Khazeni describes the frustration that he and S.T. Joshi experienced in attempting to find the sources for all of the quotations that Houellebecq used. (Some may turn out to have been inventions of those who translated Lovecraft's work into French.) However, there is no denying the passion of Houellebecq's work. And from my point of view, I find his stance — that of a mainstream novelist defending genre literature by its own standards rather than trying to shoehorn it into accepted literary traditions — pleasantly refreshing. In any case if, like me, you are a Lovecraft fan, then you will want to own this book.

H.P. Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life - Michel Houellebecq – Weidenfield & Nicholson – trade paperback

Out of Synch

By Cheryl Morgan

There are no books that qualify for this column this month, but Peter Wong has let me know that *District B13* is now available on DVD.

Other news from Peter is that *American Born Chinese* has been named one of five National Book Award finalists in the Young People's Literature category. It's the first graphic novel to be nominated for this award.

Miscellany

By Cheryl Morgan

Being a few days late, I figured I might as well wait for the weekend's awards to come out. Here they are:

World Fantasy Awards

Novel: Haruki Murakami, *Kafka on the Shore* (Harvill; Knopf);

Novella: Joe Hill, *Voluntary Committal* (Subterranean Press);

Short Fiction: George Saunders, "CommComm" (*The New Yorker*, 08/01, 2005);

Anthology: *The Fair Folk* ed. Marvin Kaye (Science Fiction Book Club);

Collection: Bruce Holland Rogers, *The Keyhole Opera* (Wheatland Press);

Artist: James Jean;

Special Award, Professional: Sean Wallace (for Prime Books);

Special Award, Non-Professional: David Howe and Stephen Walker (for Telos Books);

Lifetime Achievement: Stephen Fabian & John Crowley.

International Horror Guild Awards

Novel: *Lunar Park* by Brett Easton Ellis (US: Knopf, UK:Macmillan/Picador);

Short Fiction: "There's a Hole in the City" by Rick Bowes (*SciFiction* 15 June 2005);

Mid-Length Fiction: "La Peau Verte" by Caitlín Kiernan (*To Charles Fort, with Love*, Subterranean Press);

Long Fiction: "Kiss of the Mudman" by Gary Braunbeck (*Home Before Dark*, Earthling Publications);

Collection: *20th Century Ghosts* by Joe Hill (PS Publishing);

Periodical: *Postscripts* (Peter Crowther, Editor/Publisher, PS Publishing);

Illustrated Narrative: *Memories* by Enki Bilal (Humanoid/DC);

Non-Fiction: *Supernatural Literature of the World: An Encyclopedia* (Three Volumes) by S.T. Joshi and Stefan Dziemianowicz, eds. (Greenwood Press);

Art: *Exhibition: Visions of Heaven and Hell (and Then Some)* by Clive Barker, Bert Green Fine Art, Los Angeles, CA;

Living Legend: Chelsea Quinn Yarbro.

Editorial Matters

By Cheryl Morgan

And that's it. All done.

I'm sorry this issue is a couple of weeks late. I'd promised Jay that I would review his novel, and then a combination of work and a Gene Wolfe novel conspired to ensure that I had other things on my mind than finishing the issue. In the past, of course, I would just have stayed up all night finishing it. But I don't have to do that any more.

So, this is the final issue. Many thanks once again to everyone who has helped with the production of this magazine, or who has simply read it and enjoyed it. I shall miss you all.

In answer to those of you who are still enquiring, the web site will remain online for the foreseeable future. I may even tidy it up a bit. But only if I haven't found anything else to do that is more interesting.

Exeunt, pursued by a giant squid.

Best wishes,

Cheryl

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