

EMERALD CITY

Issue 47

July 1999

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Introduction

We have something of a hiatus here. My mind, I must confess, is focussed on the Aussiecon Three issue which I hope to fill with lots of recommendations of good Australian SF. Here I am marking time a bit, but I've managed to find some excellent stuff to fill in the gap. In particular we have some fine feminist fiction from Suzy McKee Charnas and another blockbuster from the excellent Ken MacLeod. That and a report from this year's Westercon seem to fill things in pretty well. Hopefully you will enjoy it too.

If all goes according to plan (and it may not because I'm very busy with work at the moment) this issue should be available at the August Tun and at WinCon. Should you happen to pick up an issue there, I will have some more of that rather nice new Guinness Extra Cold, if you please. It might not be that warm in Britain (compared to what I've left in California), but I'm always prepared to do whatever I can to rid the world of the pernicious habit of warm beer.

The Edge of Nowhere

If you told a lot of people where this year's Westercon was being held the typical reaction would be "where?". Americans are, of course, notoriously ignorant about geography. It comes of living in a country that has so much to offer you hardly ever need to leave it. And that goes doubly so for California. But in the case of Spokane it appears that they have an excuse. It is not exactly in the middle of nowhere, but it is certainly on the edge.

Spokane is in eastern Washington (the state, not the city). It is only a few miles from Idaho, and indeed many of the flights in and out of the city go through Boise as well. This puts it close to the northern heartland of the Aryan Nation. No one was surprised to see the local paper discussing white supremacist demonstrations. Of course the place was crawling with neo-fascists. You only had to encounter the security staff at Spokane airport to work that out.

As a further example of the city's passion for petty bullying, the place has an utterly paranoid attitude to alcohol. Look folks, I do try to keep myself looking young and sprightly, but I don't do very well at it and I haven't been mistaken for being under 21 in a very long time. Nevertheless, the good people of Spokane insisted on seeing my ID every time I wanted alcohol, even in the convention. People seemed so used to this officious behaviour that most of the locals carried their driving licences in the backs of their con badges and routinely flashed them on entering any party. It was almost enough to make

you want to write a letter to the Daily Frefanzine, Sam Konkin's entertainingly outrageous collection of Libertarian lies.

Talking of Konkin, massive applause is due to John Galt, Hero of the BA2002 Party Crew, who managed to sell Konkin a pre-support in our bid. John is a bit of a Libertarian himself, though nowhere near as extreme as most. Now Konkin politicises everything and regards Kevin with about the same disdain as the average Trot views Margaret Thatcher. We can only assume that the Defender of Individual Liberty (who has almost always exercised his God-Given Right to get blind drunk by mid evening at conventions) saw John and mistakenly thought he had stumbled on a Libertarian Worldcon bid. We laughed ourselves silly.

The unpleasantness of the city was a great shame for the nice folks from EmpireCon, most of whom were doing their level best to put on a good convention in the best facilities that they had available to them in their local area. The DoubleTree hotel was actually very comfortable, and the staff were amazing. There was some sort of customer service competition going on at the time which clearly had everyone massively incentivised. The idea was that you should be so helpful to guests that they would feel moved to fill in a report card saying just how wonderful you had been. Boy did it work well. I ended up doing two of them.

The first one was a result of my turning up to the coffee bar in search of breakfast at around 13.00 when the staff were busy with the brunch. I spotted a pile of pastries and asked if I could just have a coffee and a couple of those. "No problem", said the waitress, "they are part of the brunch, but if you just take what you want and let me see I'll only charge you for what you eat". The other occasion was when a bunch of us were trying to get to the Cajun restaurant for dinner. We asked the concierge for directions, and he offered to drive us there. On finding the place closed (it was Sunday in Spokane) he then recommended somewhere the other side of town and drove us there instead. Amazing. If either of those people had been working for a British hotel they would have been fired for what they did.

In contrast, the convention itself was rather mixed. Some of it worked very well. Registration was smooth and efficient and the names on the badges were, for once, in a perfectly adequate font size. The pocket program, on the other hand, was practically unreadable. Hospitality was another disaster. The room they had was minuscule (though a much larger room was set aside nearby for a poorly frequented bar), they charged for just about everything, and the poor woman in charge was quite clearly in the wrong job because she was stressed to the eyeballs all weekend and never had a civil word for anyone.

The most spectacular snafu of the weekend concerned the masquerade. It was due to be held across the road in the large hall of the convention centre where the con had also been staging dances. The plan for the masquerade called for seating to be brought in to cover the dance floor, and sometime during the weekend the ConCom discovered that this wasn't going to be allowed. It was a very nice wooden dance floor, and the even centre did not want chairs scratching it. The con was given the choice of paying a very large sum of money to have the dance floor taken up and re-laid again afterwards, or moving the masquerade. Somehow they managed the latter, which, when you think about it, was quite an achievement.

A lot of old hands were going round the convention complaining about what a disaster the event was. This, I think, was unfair. Yes, a lot went wrong, but also a lot went right. For the EmpireCon crowd it was their first major convention. All things considered, they did pretty well, and if we don't allow youngsters to come in and make mistakes occasionally, there will never be any young blood. I think a lot of the problems came from the convention committee being an alliance of several smaller groups who all vaguely knew each other but had never worked together as a united team before. Communication and lack of consistency seemed to have been a problem. They might also have asked for help a bit more often. But overall, they tried hard, and got a lot more right than other, supposedly more experienced Westercon committees have done.

But what did I get up to at the convention? Well you may ask. I spent rather a lot of it writing a report on the California electricity industry. Quite a bit more was spent running parties. Then there was the Chico campaign - Kevin's long running spoof Westercon bid which finally came to a glorious conclusion gaining a good 20% of the votes (though thankfully no more) despite not being on the ballot. Not to mention the even more silly Both bid which took advantage of July 4th 2001 being a Wednesday to propose running the Chico convention the weekend before and Portland, the serious bid, the weekend after.

Other than that, I spent a lot of money in the dealers' room, I went out for dinner a few times. After that there didn't seem to be a whole lot of time left. I don't think I went to any panel items at all. Another convention bites the dust.

Well, almost. There is always the business meeting. Somehow I had managed to let myself get talked into being secretary again. Last year, you will remember, we had the infamous annexation motion whereby Terry Frost managed to pass an amendment that would allow Westercons to be held in Australia, provided that Australia annexed the USA first (or vice versa). That caused a tremendous amount of entertainment, and everyone was agog to see if we could provide a repeat performance.

The supposed main attraction was the Battle of the Parliamentary Rules, in which Mr. Standlee and Mr. Yalow would face off against each other in a bid to get their own favourite rules system adopted for Westercons. Sadly the grand tussle turned into a damp squib because Ben, in a travel nightmare worthy of Reno Air at their worst, ended up spending two days trapped in Denver airport. He arrived on the Sunday and made a valiant effort to reverse the decision of the previous day's meeting, but Kevin held him off with a masterful display of command of procedure.

Of course this was something of a hollow victory. The main reason why Kevin wanted Westercon to adopt Sturgis' rules in place of Roberts is because they are simpler and more easily understood. The fact that he had to use obscure points of procedure to get them adopted did not make him happy at all. And it is all moot anyway, because next year's Westercon is in Hawaii, which means a largely SMOFish attendance and a high likelihood that Ben and his buddies will get their preferred rule set back again.

Interestingly, both Ben and Kevin claim that they are on the side of democracy. Kevin wants easily understood rules so that everyone can participate. Ben wants highly flexible rules so that a meeting can, if it wishes, do anything. Viewed from a political perspective, Ben's is a highly Libertarian approach whereas Kevin is more interested in protecting the less well informed and capable majority against highly skilled minorities, a more Social Democrat approach. It is an argument that would be familiar to the likes of Pericles and Socrates. Who says business meetings are not educational.

The star turn, however, was provided by Seth Breidbart, courtesy of yet another stuff up by the convention. Seth was in charge of site selection, the ballot between Portland and Chico for the 2001 Westercon. As is usual with these things, the vote was supposed to be by a preferential ballot (like that used in the Hugo awards) in which you place a 1 next to your favourite candidate, 2 against the next best and so on. Unfortunately some idiot had written on the printed ballot paper that you should place a check mark (tick for non-Americans) against the site you wanted to win. Many people had done this. Rather more had used an X-mark (cross for non-Americans) instead.

Now Seth, being an amusing sort of fellow, decided to see what would happen if he tried to go overboard in enforcing the regulations. He ruled that all ballots which had only a check were OK and would be counted, but he argued that an X was normally used as a sign of displeasure and that he would count ballots marked with an X as a vote against the candidate so marked. Now Chico and Both, being SMOFish jokes, were not even on the ballot. Most of the people who knew to write them in were also the sort of people who knew how to fill in a ballot. The less well informed folks who followed the printed instructions mostly voted for the only official candidate. By Seth's counting method, Portland achieved the massive total of zero votes ("Portland, nil points" for fans of the Eurovision Song Contest, a joke which a surprising number of Americans understood) Chico got 11 and Both 20, making Both the clear winner.

Naturally we all had a very good laugh when Seth announced the results. Then we told him not to be so silly and give us the real numbers. Kevin and I drew a sigh of relief and normality was resumed. See, who says business meetings are not entertaining.

Herstory

"When I think of all the wrongs that have been heaped upon womankind, I am ashamed that I am not forever in a condition of chronic wrath, stark mad, skin and bone, my eyes a fountain of tears, my lips overflowing with curses, and my hand against every man and brother!"

Elizabeth Cady Stanton, quoted at the beginning of *The Furies*

If there is a seminal feminist SF story, then Suzy McKee Charnas's *Holdfast Chronicles* are almost certainly it. This is not necessarily because of the quality of writing, though Suzy is very good, but because of the openness and honesty with which she approaches the subject, and because of the breadth of feminist history that the books cover. This is a tetralogy that has been a long time in the making, and the world has changed a lot in the 25 years it has taken to come to fruition. Here is the story of our liberation, encapsulated and writ large.

Before I get stuck in, a few words of warning. I am going to review a whole four-book series here, including a lot of interpretation. It simply isn't possible to do that job properly without a few spoilers. If you don't want to know the basics of the plot (and by the way there isn't that much really surprising in it) stop reading after this paragraph. The two older books are out of print and hard to get hold of, but Tor has taken the sensible step of repackaging them as a single companion book to the final instalment so you should be able

to get the whole series quite easily. Male readers should, of course, approach with caution, it ain't going to be comfortable.

Probably the place to start is to admit that yes, this is another post-disaster novel. David Brin gets very angry about the fact that feminist SF almost always starts with the destruction of the known world and he attributes this to some sort of collective revenge fantasy amongst feminists. A more likely reason is that many feminists believe that it will not be possible to construct a feminist society from one in which men are currently in charge. That again is a debatable claim. You could, for example, employ extreme violence, but that would just be sinking to the level of the opposition. You could espouse separatism instead, but the men would probably resist that. Suzy looks at all these issues and more. The Wasting, as Suzy terms it, seems to be simply a device which allows her to set up an allegorical world rather than deal with the real one. That is a standard SF technique, and it seems to work.

And so to the first novel. *Walk to the End of the World* is, perhaps surprisingly, not really about women at all. It introduces us to the world of Holdfast, a small, post-holocaust community of men learning to find their way in a world in which all animal life, and most edible plants are extinct. The men, who survived the Wasting in a bunker, are all white. Blame for the disaster is placed squarely on the shoulders of the blacks, browns, yellows, reds, liberals and, of course, the women. Inconveniently, all of those are dead except a few white women needed for breeding stock. Guess who gets to pay the price of their past sins.

So we have a world in which all women, known as "Fems" (short, of course, for Feminists) are despised slaves, used only for labour and breeding. This results in an unusual innovation on Suzy's part. Despite their WASP origins, the men of Holdfast are avowedly homosexual. Breeding is a duty, not a pleasure, and men who enjoy sex with Fems are looked upon as disgusting perverts. The other unusual feature of Holdfast is that there is a strong age distinction. The old men, the Seniors, are in charge, the young do as they are told and are kept well in their place because they are dangerous. This is exemplified in the Holy Book, for is it not written that the Son rebelled against his Father, preaching all sorts of wishy-washy, liberal nonsense, and was crucified for his sins. In Holdfast, it is an abomination for fathers and sons to know each other, for if they did, nature would surely lead them to try to kill one another.

To understand this strange set-up, we have to remember that the book was written in America in 1974. It comes from the world of Hippies and Vietnam War demonstrations. It is no accident that rebellious young men are known as "freaks". By finding a logical explanation for why Holdfast should embrace homosexuality (and, indeed, cannabis), Suzy is pointing a none-too-subtle dig at the arbitrary nature of social prohibitions.

It is a time too when feminism, despite the good work of the suffragettes, seemed hopeless. For all their rebelliousness in other areas, Hippy men were just as much unregenerate, chauvinist pigs as their fathers. For those who dared to think rebellion, it was a time of anger.

The main characters of the book are two young men. Servan d Layo is a loafer and a drug dealer, a classic, laid-back, golden-haired surfer boy for whom everything seems to go as he would wish it. His lover, Eykar Bek, is more thoughtful, though no less rebellious. He is also a man with a problem, for he knows who his father is, and is anxious to kill the man before he himself is killed. As it happens, Eykar's father engineered the situation. He too is a thinker, an engineer and a reader. He has all sorts of grand ideas for Holdfast and, having

read a few old books, wants to make sure that he has a son to take over from him when he is gone.

The book is a story of plots within plots. The Seniors wish to use Eykar to kill his father who is threatening to become too powerful. The young men see a potential father-killer as a focus for rebellion. Servan sees the whole affair as a big opportunity for self-advancement. And the Fems see a small chink of hope.

Alldera, a young girl trained as a courier, is inserted into Eykar and Servan's group as a slave in return for help against the Seniors. The hope is that she can use her running skills to escape as the rebels travel on the edge of the wilds and perhaps reach the mythical "Free Fems", escaped slaves rumoured to live free in the wilds. In fact what happens is that Eykar and Alldera discover in each other a common passion for intellectual discussion (here Alldera is highly unusual, for their own safety most girl children are not taught speech, and many have their tongues cut out to keep them quiet).

You might think at this point that we are destined for a sappy ending. No such cop out is in store. What happens, of course, is that Eykar finds his father and quarrels with him, significantly over the father's plans to use Fems for food. In the ensuing chaos, Alldera escapes, and Holdfast is plunged into war.

And so to book two. Alldera, alone, hungry and pregnant (both Eykar and Servan have raped her), struggles across the great desert in search of the Free Fems. On the brink of death she is discovered by a scouting party of Riding Women, a society whose existence Holdfast never suspect.

The Women (so called to distinguish them from Fems) operate a mounted society based on that of some American Indians. They are clones, the result of a pre-Wasting experiment to ensure the survival of the race. Male sperm is required to quicken the child, but any male sperm will do and they choose to use their horses. The Women know how men treat the Fems in Holdfast, and they have a simple solution to the problem. Male humans are killed on sight. Each woman and her clone daughters forms a Motherline, hence the title of the book. Naturally, the Women are all lesbians.

(I note in passing and with some amusement that Suzy has chosen pretty much the same method for constructing a feminist society as David Brin used in *Glory Season*. David chose a biological method of keeping men under control rather than get rid of them, but other than that the idea is the same. Suzy, of course, did it first.)

What Suzy has done here is create a society that is every Rad Fem's dream. No men, no need for men, even an opportunity to get even with the bastards every now and again. And a social structure that every liberal American could approve of. Were this a Joanna Russ book, the story would probably end there. But Suzy is made of sterner stuff. She is not afraid to examine this "perfect" society and find it wanting.

After a while, Alldera gets to be reasonably comfortable amongst the Women, despite the animosity of the ferocious warrior, Sheel, who thinks the Fem will bring nothing but trouble. However, there are ways in which a Fem simply cannot fit into the Women's society. To start with, Alldera is not a clone. More importantly, her daughter, now being raised with the camp's children, is not a clone either. There will be trouble for her when she grows up.

More subtly, Alldera cannot get used to clone society. As clones, the Women place great store on tradition. Everything is done precisely the way it was always done. This suits their

tribal society just fine. But, as we have seen, Alldera is a thinker, she is forever seeing ways in which things could be done better. In frustration, she goes off to try life in an alternative society.

For it turns out that the Free Fems do exist. Some women have managed to escape from Holdfast, and now they live on the edge of the plains, growing tea and trading it with the Riding Women. But whilst they might have escaped physically, they have yet to escape from Holdfast's memes. Once a slave, always a slave. Unable to imagine a society without masters, the Free Fems have created their own, specifically the fat bully, Enola Green Eyes. The Free Fem camp is a hot bed of sedition and intrigue as each person does her utmost to insinuate herself into Enola's favours, and by doing so demote her rivals. Alldera, who has learned the meaning of freedom from the Women, does not fit in at all. Eventually she is beaten up and expelled.

It is at the Free Fem camp that we first meet the character who is to become the greatest villain of the series. Daya is a Pet Fem, a woman whose beauty had caught the eye of a perverted Senior and who was kept in a harem rather than used for labour. She escaped after a jealous rival caused her face to be scarred. Many readers, I suspect, will see Daya's role as a villain simply as a case of jealous revenge upon the beautiful, but Suzy is never that crude. Daya's "crime", the reason for her evil, has nothing to do with her looks, or her liking for sex with men. It is because she knows no other life but the pleasing of others. Briefly, amongst the Riding Women, she has a taste of freedom and courage, but away from them she immediately reverts to her suspicious, servile lifestyle and her habit of intrigue.

What Daya represents is the traditional role of women in a male-dominated society. She is the schemer, the power behind the throne, the woman who, although clever, cannot act on her own because it is not seemly for a woman to do so. Because she sees her life solely in terms of her relationship to others, she can never be free. It is no accident either that she is an expert story teller. Daya lives in a world of fantasy, convincing herself that all is well, and that others are brave, because she doesn't have the courage to come forward herself. This is what Suzy is telling us is wrong with women's lives. This is what we must reject in order to be free.

By the end of *Motherlines*, egged on by Daya's mythologizing, the Free Fems have come to believe that Alldera was right all along. They have abandoned Elnoa and come to ask Alldera to be their new leader. What they want, of course, is for her to teach them to be warriors like the Women. Eventually, they want her to lead them home to Holdfast in triumph. Perhaps they are learning freedom at last.

"Men are forked like us, even if they carry different equipment between their legs," Sheel said. "A man could sit that horse of yours, if he was let."

The Rois laughed. "I don't believe they could ride at all, with that tender sex-flesh of theirs stuffed between them and a horse's backbone."

"They'd manage, if it was the difference between freedom and slavery," Sheel said. "You could design a saddle with some kind of special pocket..."

That was in 1978. It took over a decade for Suzy's friends and fans to persuade her to write the next volume. I'm glad it did, for things changed a lot in the meantime. *The Furies* was published in 1994 and by that time a lot had changed for feminism. I may be doing Suzy an injustice, in fact I probably am, but there is a danger that if *The Furies* had been published

in, say, 1980, the Free Fems would simply have conquered Holdfast and that would have been an end to it. The 1994 version is an entirely different tale.

Of course Alldera's army marches. It is the only possible thing for the Free Fems to do. But it is a very different Holdfast that awaits them. The war between the young and old that Eykar started has left the men severely weakened and the social structure all but collapsed. In desperation, the men have started treating women better because they need every hand they can find just to survive. The arrival of Alldera's warriors is like a group of Rad Fems from the 70s suddenly turning up in a modern workplace and wondering what the hell all those gaudily dressed women are doing in the management offices.

Nevertheless, the condition of Fems is still bad enough for most of them to be grateful for being liberated. A few side with the men against the invaders. Significantly, the army's first death comes at the hands of a Holdfast Fem. But in the end, the army of liberation triumphs, and with it, brings a whole new set of problems.

The most obvious question is what to do with the men. Some of the Free Fems argue that they should simply all be killed. Clearly this is not feasible. The Fems are not clones. They will die out without men. Besides, many of the Free Fems are getting old, and are desperate to get pregnant while they still can. Alldera, reunited with Eykar, hopes for some sort of peaceful resolution, but her hand is forced when a small group of men escape and wreak bloody vengeance on their captors. The die is cast: Holdfast will survive, but now it is the men who will be slaves.

The other burning issue is one of leadership. Many of the Free are followers of the Cult of Moonwoman. Alldera, an intellectual, frowns on this superstition. This does her no favours with her followers. But the real danger comes from Daya. Now that Alldera is triumphant, it seems that she no longer needs the Pet Fem's support. Without Alldera to serve, Daya must find another master, and that means Alldera must die.

In the end, it is Eykar, a bright young woman from the newly free, and her old enemy Sheel who save Alldera's life. Having seen the pent up violence of her own people explode into action, and how readily they revert to the ways of the past, Alldera at last understands why Sheel was so afraid of her. Holdfast has not been liberated, it has been conquered.

"Fems aren't Riding Women." Alldera paced away from her, hands behind her back. "Though I'm not sure we're fems any more, either. We were slaves, isn't that why you despised us? But we're not slaves now. Are we Women, if we're free? Can we be Women of the Holdfast, as you and Nenisi and the rest are Women of the Grasslands? Help me make it so."

Sheel's throat felt tight. "You ask too much, and of the wrong person."

There had to be a resolution, but it was another five years in coming. Now, at last the cycle is complete. *The Conqueror's Child* is the story of Alldera's daughter, Sorrel, and of the fight to make Holdfast a place fit for humans, not just for Fems.

During the liberation of Holdfast, one of the newly freed Fems, Juya was discovered to be pregnant. For her own safety, Sheel had her sent to the Riding Women to give birth. It has never occurred to Sheel that the child might be a boy. Normally he would have been killed, but with Alldera's daughter living at the camp, no one dared touch the child. Left to care for young Veree because no Woman would touch him, Sorrel tried putting him with the camp children, but it was obvious he was different and he was rejected. In despair, Sorrel

took the boy to live with her mother, unaware that she was condemning him to a life of slavery.

Sorrel is not the only Fem with sympathy for the men. Many of the Free Fems have taken partners for breeding purposes and are getting fond of them. Eykar is free to run the city library, and this is seen as a sign of Alldera's patronage, though in truth there is too much pain between them for them to be lovers. Yet others, led by the implacable Kobba Red Hand, still call for all men to die. The majority are just scared. Given what they have done in the past, how could they dare let men be free?

The answer is that before they can be free, a dream must die. That dream is the macho ideal of conquest and mastery. It is exemplified by the Bear Cult, an underground movement amongst the slave men which preaches that the mythical Sunbear will come and save them. Little do they know that the Sunbear is real. After many years travelling the wilderness with a band of brigands, Servan d Layo is about to return to Holdfast. He has women, he has strange and highly edible animals called goats, and best of all he has a gun. Servan's dream is of conquest.

We are in allegory land here. Not only does Servan have to die, he has to do so in a way that redeems his fellow men. The key to this redemption must, of course, be Daya. Desperate to revive her position in society after the failed attempt on Alldera's life, the Pet Fem determines to save Holdfast from d Layo. To do so, of course, she needs an agent, because she would never have the courage to do it herself. In order to get herself into d Layo's camp, she needs a man.

Daya might be old and scarred, but she has lost none of her old skills. She easily seduces a young runaway called Galligan and persuades him to get her to Servan. Once there she contrives to make him attack her. Galligan rushes to her rescue, and the younger man prevails. Thus the cycle is complete. The Sunbear, and the dream he represents, is dead, killed not by a Fem, nor by one of the alien Women, but by a man protecting the woman he loves.

So at last Holdfast is on its way to being truly free. The Riding Women, the old Rad Fems of our past, have outlived their usefulness and ride away into the west, into legend. Alldera goes with them, leaving Sorrel to guide the new nation into adulthood and Veree as its symbol of hope and unity. Gosh but it is corny stuff, put like that, but remember that I'm extracting all the meaning from the allegory for you. This is no *Star Wars*, bearing its message on the belly of a 20-mile long Imperial Battle Cruiser just in case you might miss it. Suzy is a great story teller, and for the most part the parable does not interfere with the plot.

I've read better books than these, literary wise, but I don't think I've ever read any more thoughtful books. Suzy has taken one of the defining political questions of our times and has turned it into a tale that is both entertaining and insightful. And she never stops digging, never stops turning the searchlight on our complacency. You see, the women that Servan brought back from the wilds are black. Their welcome in Holdfast is uncertain. No matter how much we grow, we always have something new to learn.

Walk to the End of the World - Suzy McKee Charnas - Ballantine - softcover

Motherlines - Suzy McKee Charnas - Berkley - softcover

The Furies - Suzy McKee Charnas - Tor - softcover

Conqueror's Child - Suzy McKee Charnas - Tor - hardcover

A Little Backfill

Hove, Saturday morning, and I have an hour or so to kill before catching my train. We've got some half-way decent weather in Britain at last and I have gone down to the front to catch the sun. The National Windsurfing Championship is in town, and I could almost be back in California were it not for the fact that the plethora of male musculature on show has neither a perfect tan nor sun-bleached hair. The green sward by the sea front is covered in their vans and trailers. Flags identifying each team flutter above the encampments, giving the scene the look of a mediaeval tournament: proud young warriors about to risk their all for glory.

Tearing my eyes away, I contemplate the wide expanse of sea stretching into the distance. There is no mystery there, of course. Beyond the horizon lies France. People have swum there. Not even the great blue Pacific holds much terror for mankind these days. But there is one great challenge yet to be met, and in this month of the anniversary of the moon landings, it behoves us to have someone like Ken MacLeod to remind us of that little travelled road. It is a journey that, sooner or later, everyone will need to make, even the Greens.

MacLeod, of course, is not thinking sunny south coast. *The Sky Road*, more than any of his previous books, is set in his beloved Scotland. Next issue I will be talking at some length about Australian SF. Some of my friends in Melbourne spend much time pontificating about how their work is distinguishable from that of the Americans and British. The signs are there if you look for them, but Australia has so little history, and was invaded by television so early in it, that distinguishing the cultural traits takes some practice.

MacLeod has no such problem. *The Sky Road* is unquestionably, undeniably Scottish, from the Celtic fondness for music and dance, through the phenomenal capacity for alcohol that the characters possess to the miasma of cigarette smoke in which all of the action takes place. (If there is one thing that puts me off MacLeod's writing it is that I can almost smell the stale tobacco off the pages). The intimacy with the landscape, be it the majestic glens or the grimy streets of Glasgow, is total. The use of Gaelic is effortless and unforced, far outstripping even the better American Celtophiles such as Patricia Kennealy. And, of course, there is the politics. MacLeod's Socialism is as native to Scotland as Heinlein's Libertarianism is native to America. And, as is usual with Ken, that Socialism is a central element of the book.

The Sky Road has a twin-plotted structure with alternating chapters from two widely separated time streams. The Scottish section takes place well into MacLeod's future history in a Britain ruled by the Greens, descendants of the neo-barbarian terrorists who haunt the fringes of the plot in *The Star Fraction*. Ken told me back at Easter that the new book had a Green hero, but that isn't strictly true. Clovis colha Gree is not a Green by conviction, he is one by habit and culture, in the same way that mediaeval peasants could be said to be Catholic. Except that he is a historian, and he has this new girlfriend, Merial, who is a tinker, one who practices the dangerous magical art of programming. As Green society prepares for mankind's first venture into space in many decades, these influences will

cause him to learn far more than is perhaps good for him about his culture, and about its heroine, The Great Deliverer who saved the world from Capitalism.

The strangest aspect, to me, of this device was an arrangement of delicate levers, each marked with a letter of the alphabet, queerly ordered:

QWERTYUIOP...

Probably, I thought, a spell

The other half of the book is much closer to home and follows the fortunes of Myra Godwin after the Third World War. Myra is now the effective dictator of a small, purportedly Trotskyist state on the borders of Kazakhstan, but her position seems untenable. On the one hand she is under pressure from the nefarious Dave Reid and his multinational commercial empire. On the other her borders are under threat from the advancing hordes of the Sheenisov who, as readers of *The Cassini Division* will know, eventually come to found a solar-system-wide anarcho-communist empire, the Solar Union (well, they will if this story is part of the same time-line and not a branch off it).

This should give you a good idea of the place of *The Sky Road* in MacLeod's future history. It is, in fact, a direct sequel to *The Star Fraction*. It tells us what The Gun got up to after its part in the British Revolution, and gives us a brief glimpse of how things fell out for Jordan Brown and Cat Duvalier. There is even a brief vignette from a very young Ellen May Ngwethu. From that point of view, the book is aimed squarely at MacLeod's established (and hopefully extensive) regular readership. But it is also a return to the excellent evocation of far left politics: the factionalism, the putsches and coups that made *The Star Fraction* such an entertaining read.

I'm changing trains at Reading and drinking bad cappuccino because railway coffee stores don't know what you mean by mocha. Coffee isn't an ideal drink in the circumstances, but it keeps me awake in the sultry heat and, despite the weather, you have about as much chance of finding a juice bar here as you do of seeing a decent baseball game. This weekend sees the 10th anniversary Womad concert, so the town is full of MacLeod's neo-barbarians. Tribal music, tribal body decoration, tribal politics. There are times when MacLeod's vision of future Britain is startlingly close at hand.

Myra is in New York, desperately seeking help from the UN, or from the rump East American state. Ken sets the negotiations in an Argentine restaurant called Las Malvinas and cheekily places a poster of Lady Thatcher on the wall. My fellow passengers probably think I must be reading Terry Pratchett. The book is full of little details like this, but you have to be British to understand them.

Those of you expecting another in-depth political dialectic will probably be disappointed. There is some debate: MacLeod makes a half-hearted attempt to defend the Green position, but he doesn't do so with much passion. The purpose of the book is more an exercise in irony, following the career of Myra from Trotskyist revolutionary to mass murdering dictator to heroine of the Green movement that she despised. A strong streak of cynicism runs through the text, exemplified by Merrial's contempt for historical record which, as we later learn, is only too well founded. And yet somehow Myra manages to keep faith.

Despite all she has done in the name of practical politics, deep down she still believes. And her last words to the world before enacting *The Deliverance* just might save as many lives as she has taken. Certainly they ensure that the dream continues, and that one day even the barbarians will aspire to the stars.

There is, along the way, much musing on the role of the individual in history. Perhaps Ken has been reading *To Say Nothing of the Dog*. And then perhaps not because the history of Socialism is littered with far more Significant Persons than would seem appropriate for a supposedly egalitarian philosophy. Longevity, of course, could change everything. Heinlein needed it to reinforce his cult of the individual. As yet MacLeod hasn't seriously addressed the issue, though he has made enough openings to do so and will doubtless get round to it in a later novel.

To sum up, what we have here is another highly entertaining book from one of the most individual and distinctive writers in SF today. A writer too whose command of his craft is visibly growing. MacLeod's books are being published in the US now, and are available, if a little patchily, from Slow Glass in Melbourne. Get hold of them if you can. They are well worth it.

I have just one small complaint: the photo inside the back cover. It really doesn't do Ken justice. Publishers, bah!

The Sky Road - Ken MacLeod - Orbit - hardcover

Jolly Sorcerous Stuff

Last issue we had some books that were a cross-over between hard SF and romance fiction. This issue, just to be different, we have one which is a cross-over between fantasy and schoolgirl fiction.

Now I must confess to not having read much of the schoolgirl stuff, but as I understand it the basic plot goes something like this. Tomboyish country girl is sent to very posh girls school where she does not fit in and is bullied by very beautiful rich girl. Eventually she finds some chums, does some great deeds, is doted upon by handsome boy, inherits great wealth, and turns out to be stunningly beautiful when she bothers to make an effort.

That, pretty much, is the plot of *A College of Magics*, except there is a bit of sorcery mixed in and nothing turns out quite as expected. Our heroine (whose name I cannot for the life of me remember and the damn book is in California) is the heir to a small, nondescript country in a small, nondescript country somewhere in Eastern Europe. She is sent by her Wicked Uncle to a famous French finishing school which just happens to prefer students to have magical talents and, with a little bit of geographical knowledge, can be discerned to be based on Mont St. Michel. Her best chum is Jane who is English and knows all about making tea, proper behaviour and how to spend simply enormous sums of money at the best dress designers in Paris.

If that all makes it sound very trite, don't be misled. The book is easy reading, and thoroughly entertaining, but by no means lightweight. Most of the expected endings are twisted around in unexpected ways. There is some genuinely serious discussion on the role of the nobility. The characters are delightful, the portrayal of late Victorian (or possibly

Edwardian, hard to tell in France) society spot on and the whole thing hangs together much better than I would have expected if I'd been told what it was like in advance.

It isn't all schoolgirl pastiche either. The first third or so of the book takes place in the school. The second third tells of how the two girls travel across Europe to the heroine's homeland, pursued by assassins and aided by a couple of beefy lads who fancy themselves as security experts. The final third tells what happens when they get there, how the world is saved, the Wicked Uncle gets his comeuppance, the Bad King and the Anarchists are both foiled and love, of a sort, finally blossoms.

I'd not heard of Caroline Stevermer before. Obviously I should have done because there is a recommendation on the dust cover from Ellen Kushner and you can't ask for much better than that. I shall certainly seek out more of her work. If it is as much fun as this book I won't be disappointed.

A College of Magics - Caroline Stevermer - Tor - hardcover

A Far Cry

Oh dear, what can I say. When she is good she is very good, but when she is bad... And this, dear readers, is horrid. Patricia Kennealy, it appears, is getting more and more bitter as the years go by. Last time, you will recall, she decided that it was finally time to put the knife in to Pam Courson and get her revenge for Jim Morrison's death. She managed to save that one, partially because the actual revenge bit was a small part of the story, and partly because the sheer depth of emotion (by no means all of it negative) swept the story up. This time the target of her animosity is Christianity, and St. Patrick in particular. Now as you may know I'm not exactly fond of Christians myself, but I hope I never exhibit this amount of venom and shallow, blind hatred.

In theory, *The Deer's Cry* is the tale of St. Brendan the Astrogator and how he guided the Celts of Earth to a new life, free from persecution, in the far star system we now know as Keltia. In practice it is the story of how a dishonest, cowardly, poison-tongued man called Padraig somehow manages, against all common sense, to convert the Irish to Christianity and forces the few true believers to flee into space. Most literary villains have something going for them: power, cunning, style. Padraig is not only thoroughly dislikeable, but he has no excuse for being that way. It is hard to believe that anyone would follow him, and indeed the only rationale that Kennealy can find for the Irish is moral weakness on their part, an irresistible urge to believe the lies that Padraig spreads that gets greater with the enormity of his deceits. Is this believable: no sir.

Another fatal flaw with the book is that it is once again driven by Kennealy's belief in fate, Dan as she terms it. When something must happen because of Dan, it seems not to matter to her that there should be any other rational explanation. The fact that it must happen is enough, and so it does. Clearly this does not bode well for the old suspension of disbelief. I wish she would get back to writing books set in modern Keltia rather than in the past where she is forever bound by what we all know must happen.

It is all so sad. The first three books of the Keltiad were really good: strong characters, an innovative setting and a plot with some genuine moral conundrums. Since then things

have gone down hill steadily. We know Kennealy can produce good stuff. Here's hoping she has hit rock bottom and will turn the corner.

The Deer's Cry - Patricia Kennealy-Morrison - Harper Prism - hardcover

Footnote

And so we must leave them. Cheryl is kicking her heels in England and itching to get back to some serious sunshine. Kevin is planning frantically for the last two conventions of the Bay Area Worldcon bid. Both of them are looking forward to a bit of peace and quiet and a few lazy days touring around Australia. Cheryl, of course, will probably get herself talked into helping with the UK05 bid. Kevin is thinking of retiring to countryside Oregon where he will plant toy trains and watch to see if they grow into full size railroad cars. But first they have to survive the next two months, and in particular ten days of convention separated only by a flight across the Pacific.

Next issue, Jane Routley, Sean McMullen, Sara Douglass, Sean Williams and a host of other fabulous Australian authors, all of whom should be on hand to acquire an admiring public at Aussiecon Three. If you want to know who all these people are before you get to Melbourne, stay tuned.

Love 'n' hugs,

Cheryl