

EMERALD CITY

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Introduction

Oh my Goddess, I have been doing this for five years. Monthly schedule too, and not missed one yet. Not bad, huh? When I first started this thing I had no idea how long it was going to last, and not a clue whether I would be able to keep it up. That is why the masthead still cautiously calls it an "occasional" 'zine. And will continue to do so, just in case.

How do I do it? Well, to start with I really enjoy writing. I even seem to have managed to land a bit of work as a journalist, which is helping keep the wolf from the door. I am also, of course, encouraged by the continuing flow of kind missives from you, the readers. Especial thanks go to Lloyd Penney and Eric Lindsay who seem to find something to say most issues. And most of all, I am buoyed up by the constant help and encouragement of Kevin Standlee, who is the best friend that anyone could ask for.

Talking of Kevin, it appears that we will be attending the Worldcon in Chicago after all. Miracles do occasionally happen. Copies of this issue will be available in the fanzine lounge, and possibly from the ConJosé table as well. I'll be around somewhere or other. I look forward to meeting some of you.

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Dreaming Spires

Like Madison, Oxford is an ideal place for a convention. It is a small, friendly town with wonderful shops, plenty of restaurants, and more books than anyone could possibly take home with them. And unlike Madison it is just teeming with literary history. Here I am in Exeter College, a community that was once

home to William Morris, J.R.R. Tolkien and Richard Burton. What more could one ask for, especially for a bookish convention?

The 20th Unicon

Lexicon ("It's about books") is the latest in the UK's 20 year tradition of Unicons, that is conventions held on university campuses. This type of con makes a lot of sense in the UK. Most hotels here are ridiculously over-expensive and of very poor quality compared to what I am used to in the USA. Universities, on the other hand, have large quantities of accommodation which they are happy to rent out relatively cheaply during the vacations.

The downside is that the quality of the accommodation is not great. My room is quite spacious compared to a modern university or a British hotel, but the furniture all looks second hand. An "en suite" room apparently means having a wash basin. Fortunately I have a toilet next door, but the shower is up two flights of stairs. And there's no phone so I'm going to have to go find an Internet café tomorrow. But hey, you get what you pay for, and the economics of UK conventions are such that this is often what we are stuck with. We cope.

As usual with British accommodation, "breakfast" is inclusive. I say "breakfast" because what they actually offer is a small bowl of cereal and some bad toast. I gather that on Sunday they did offer diners a scrawny piece of bacon and what one con member described as a piece of meat about the size and shape of the vital organ of a male weasel. But I headed off instead for the excellent nearby covered market and some coffee and cholesterol. Somehow this involved getting caught up with a small party of fans including Maureen Kinkaid Speller and John Richards, both of whom wanted to just wander around Oxford and see how it

had changed since they last lived there. The highlight of the trip was undoubtedly finding a pair of cats' bum earrings, which of course Maureen promptly bought.

Er, yes, that was a fannish in-joke. Even I succumb occasionally.

A literary programme

This being a bookish convention there was rather a lot of programme items that I wanted to go to. Friday night, for example, had a panel on the role of elves in fantasy. I think we decided that we didn't need them in which case we will probably be auctioning them off to Sue Mason in a job lot.

At one point we got on to discussing different types of story in which elves could appear. Jo Walton commented that she uses the term Realist Magicism to describe the type of book which purports to be fantasy but in which all of the magic is neatly explained in a rational way. It sounds like a useful term. I think I might start using it.

Saturday morning saw a panel on the teaching of SF in universities. This was depressing in just about every way. The panel consisted of three academics who, much against the odds, had managed to smuggle a small amount of SF into their courses in the face of massive hostility from their fellow lecturers. SF, we were told, is regarded as the lowest of the low, even in Popular Studies departments. Pornography is considered a much more serious and artistically valid subject. What can one say about an academic establishment that regards "the literature of ideas" as not worth studying?

The local author

Guest of Honour at the convention was Philip Pullman whose final volume of the *His Dark Materials* series has now been

delivered to the publisher and is due out on November 1st. Regardless of any rumours you might have heard on the net, there appear to have been no major problems with the book other than Pullman's determination not to deliver it until it was just the way he wanted it.

This was something of a relief to me. I have always been somewhat surprised that the self-appointed guardians of public morality have not tried to get Pullman's books banned. They are certainly not easy reading for kids. Pullman, however, is unrepentant. He says that if children are frightened or disturbed by reading them that is the fault of parents and teachers for giving the book to them. He says he just writes the stories that need to be written, without a thought of who might read them. Personally I think that is a cop-out on his part. He could stop the publishers marketing the books to children if he wanted to. Then again, maybe I'm just getting old and over-protective.

On the other hand, I guess that if the book really were being prosecuted for blasphemy it would sell an awful lot more copies. It might even out-sell Harry Potter, which would be a very good thing because Pullman is an immeasurably better writer than Rowling.

Yet more good stuff

Sunday morning saw a very lively panel on the subject of SF Awards. There was the usual whinging about the Hugos being unfair because they are dominated by Americans but we got past that fairly quickly and started educating people about the whys and wherefores of awards, and what was out there worth looking at. I was pleasantly surprised at how good the Locus Poll is, especially their First Novel category. This year's Poll is just out and quite a few of the entries under First Novel are books I have been raving about here (e.g. Jan Sigel's

Prospero's Children and Justina Robson's *Silver Screen*). The Poll is not one of the features accessible from Locus's web site, so you all need to go out and buy the August issue. That should make Charlie Brown happy.

The next panel was on the Internet and publishing. This was my cue to hijack a panel. The con committee would not let me on to it so I persuaded the panellists to let me have a short slot to talk about the things I covered in the eBook article last issue. Hopefully the audience will have found that useful. Quite what I will do at Chicon I don't know. The mad fools have actually put me on a panel so I have no excuse for hijacking one.

Something I did not cover last issue but the panel did is Print on Demand publishing. This isn't strictly an Internet industry because you don't have to do it over the Web, but doing so does keep the costs down. The idea of Print on Demand is that, thanks to smart software, printing technology is now at a stage where you can do very small print runs and still be economic. Obviously this has implications for minority interest works and mid-list authors.

Big Engine is a UK company that hopes to use Print on Demand technology to publish SF and Fantasy. Their summer 2000 catalogue includes works by Tom Arden and Brian Stableford plus Dave Langford's seriously funny *The Leaky Establishment*. More details are available from their web site (<http://www.bigengine.co.uk>). And yes, their logo does look just like Gordon.

Face stuffing

A con would not be a con without a few trips to local eateries and Oxford is very well blessed with such things. Over the weekend I managed to sample the cuisines of Mongolia, the Lebanon and north-west India, all of it very pleasant.

The Mongolian Barbecue was interesting. It is the first time I have seen one of those restaurants provide the diners with raw spices rather than just pre-mixed sauces. There seems to be more room for creativity there. As for the Lebanese place, I think we would have had to eat there even if the food had not been good (and it was good) because of the sign over the door. I mean, what would you make of a notice that said, "Chartered Accountants, Lebanese Restaurant, Live Belly Dancing"?

Fortunately we managed to miss the belly dancing, but a small word of warning to readers. If you are going to eat out in Oxford at the weekend do it early. There are a lot of clubs around and things can get a little bit rowdy later on. The Mongolian Barbecue place had karaoke starting at 10.30pm and there was a hen night group in the restaurant. I bet you didn't know that traditional Mongolian music includes songs by Shirley Bassey and Tom Jones. Us Welsh get everywhere, you know.

Conrunning neepery

The convention proceeded very smoothly, thanks largely to a sensible decision on behalf of the organisers to restrict themselves to fairly minimal activities. There were two streams of programming, and sessions were 75 minutes long with a 15-minute break between each one. That is Wiscon style, and it worked very well here too. If you are going to have serious panel topics, make sure that you have time to do them justice.

One rather strange thing about the program was the lack of evening breaks. Saturday's programme went straight through from 2.30pm to 10.30pm, as a result of which large numbers of us blew off an interesting sounding panel on the evolutionary future of the human race.

Food breaks are important, guys. Give us time to eat, huh?

Other than that, and the awful college breakfasts, I have no real complaints. The panels were good, the company was good, and the setting was stunning. And the only person on the con committee who looked to be working hard was John Richards because it was his job to introduce and close down all the panels in the main programming stream. Small conventions like this should be easy, and it is good to see that sometimes they are.

Divining Fundamentals

OK, what have we here? This is a science fiction fanzine and Cheryl is reviewing a theology book? Well, yeah, I am. It is my 'zine, and Karen Armstrong has been one of my favourite writers ever since I read her excellent *A History of God (Emerald City #6)*. Beside which, reading her new book did set me thinking about the nature of SF and Fantasy. There is a connection, honest. Just bear with me here.

The Battle for God is a history of Fundamentalism; something that Armstrong argues (very convincingly) is a peculiarly modern trend in religion. It looks at all three of the major Middle Eastern faiths: Christianity, Islam and Judaism. In each case the origins of fundamentalist belief are examined and the history of major movements is chronicled. It is a major undertaking, and not designed for moments of light reading.

Mythos and Logos

In *A History of God* Armstrong highlighted the mythic origins of Christian doctrine. She showed why the

early Christians developed their religion in the way that they did, and how modern believers have in many ways lost touch with those original attitudes. In particular we now ask for rational explanations of things that our distant forebears would have cheerfully accepted as symbolic. *The Battle for God* develops that theme. Indeed, it is central to Armstrong's theory of the origins of Fundamentalism.

The essence of the argument revolves around two different ways of looking at the world. Armstrong calls them *Mythos* and *Logos*. Mythos is a more intuitive, symbolic way of viewing things. It has connections with music, poetry and other art forms as well as religion. It also lies behind the gut reaction responses to political issues that populist rabble rousers like to call a "common sense" approach. Logos, on the other hand, is a purely rational world view. In ancient times it was used primarily for politics and commerce. More latterly it is what drove The Enlightenment, it drives investigative science, and it drove Hugo Gernsback's vision of science fiction.

Origins of Fundamentalism

Fundamentalism, Armstrong maintains, is religion for a world dominated by the Logos. Just because our society has supposedly become scientific and rational does not mean that human beings have abandoned Mythos; it is just suppressed, and often ridiculed. People thus have a need for some sort of spiritual outlet, but because they have been taught to expect rational argument, traditional religion is on the decline. Instead we have Fundamentalism, a type of belief that purports to have a logical basis for its beliefs, even if that basis is rooted in deeply flawed assumptions such as the literal truth of the Bible. A thousand years ago no churchman would have blanched at a description of the Trinity as symbolic, now it has to be a fact.

Of course the theory was that once people became rational they would have no need for religion and Mythos would wither away. But that could only happen while science promised a certainty that was as solid and comforting as mediaeval religion. Those days are gone, and instead we have atom bombs, widespread pollution and genetic engineering. People are afraid, and when they are afraid they think with Mythos, not with Logos.

In addition Fundamentalism is a religion for a democratic society. In the past few people were in a position to argue theology. They had no education, and the Bible was in Latin so they could not read it. Nowadays no one will put up with an educated elite that tells other people what to think. Everyone assumes that they have the right to decide for themselves. And if what they are deciding on is a complex mythic metaphor developed by mediaeval university professors, well, they might just miss a nuance or two. In many ways Fundamentalism is lowest common denominator religion. It is religion made so simple that any TV audience can understand the message with no thought. And it is religion with the black and white morality of a tabloid newspaper. Quite often this results in this selective subset of Mythos invading the domain of Logos. Running politics by Mythos is almost invariably disastrous and often very bloody.

Armstrong, of course, is anything but lowest common denominator. Her book provides food for thought in many ways. One interesting point that she makes is that without formalised religion there is little discipline in mystical behaviour, hence the proliferation of whacko cults. In addition the book gives the reader a far deeper understanding of Middle Eastern politics. Just last week a Fundamentalist Rabbi came out with a crackpot remark about the Holocaust victims having been punished for their sins. But having read Armstrong's book I knew immediately

where the guy stood in Israeli politics, and why he made such an apparently offensive remark.

Back with books

But I promised you a literary angle. You should, I hope, have it sussed by now. Science Fiction, as I alluded to earlier, is the literature of Logos. And Fantasy, of course, is the literature of Mythos. Gernsback's vision of SF as a purely rational form of fiction in which everything must be explainable arises from a time when rationalism was thought to be triumphant.

The fact that SF has become less scientific in recent times can therefore be seen as a product of our weakening faith, both in science's ability to explain, and its ability to make the world a better place. The prevalence of UFO cults and the popularity of the X-Files are both evidence of a desire for some sort of spiritual presence in SF. Justina Robson, in her latest *World's End* column, quotes Isaac Asimov as saying dismissively, "Inspect every piece of pseudoscience and you will find a security blanket, a thumb to suck, a skirt to hold". Well he's right, but the truth is that most people, when faced by the rapid pace of change of the modern world, are desperately in need of a security blanket.

The opposite effect can be seen in fantasy. Much of what passes for fantasy fiction these days is the literary equivalent of Fundamentalism. It is myth devoid of all intelligence, morality and balance. Indeed in some cases it is devoid of all mythic elements and becomes, as I have said before in these pages, SF with swords and dragons instead of ray guns and space ships. The only major difference is that Fundamentalism is primarily focused on hatred and revenge whereas fantasy fiction is all sugary sweet and comforting. It is a Disneyfication of myth.

Summing up

Armstrong's book is not entirely without flaws. For example, she is a theologian, not an historian, and in places it shows. A musket and a rifle are not the same thing, and no one is going to have been reading much Dickens in 1826. I suspect also that anyone with any sort of emotional involvement with Fundamentalism, particularly with respect to the Arab-Israeli conflict, is going to accuse her of bias. When I saw her speak at the Brighton Festival the first question she got was something along the lines of, "how can you possibly say nice things about Islam, everyone knows that the Muslims are utterly evil and the spawn of the Devil, etc." I'm not in a position to judge whether her treatment was fair or not, but I'm inclined to give her the benefit of the doubt.

Incidentally, Karen coped brilliantly with that question. She talked about the basic messages of Islam, and got on to her favourite theme about how the defining characteristic of every great religion is a sense of compassion. She then noted that the last time she had talked about compassion to an audience of Christians they all glowered at her sullenly as if to say, "what is the point of being religious if you don't get to hate people". Sadly it is all too true, and she could have got the same reaction from any other group of devout religious folk.

But the big question, of course, is where do we go from here? Fundamentalism is undoubtedly dangerous. Throughout her book Armstrong uses words like "paranoia", "hatred" and "rage" to describe the Fundamentalist mind-set. And yet, if her analysis of the origins of this type of belief are correct, it isn't something that is likely to go away.

Armstrong talks frequently about modern society being divided into two worlds that cannot understand each other. The division is perhaps most stark in Israel where the Fundamentalists are

almost at war with the secular government, but it can be seen also in Islamic terrorist attacks in Egypt, or Pat Buchanan running for President. We can see it also in day-to-day political discussion. Ask anyone what their views are on paedophiles, genetic engineering, or economics, and it will be quickly obvious whether their responses have come from a Mythos or a Logos analysis of the issue.

At her Brighton talk Armstrong said her next book would be entitled *The Future of God* and would look at where she believes religion should go in the future. With any luck she will put forward some constructive suggestions as to how the heal the rift between Mythos and Logos and allow us to accept both into our lives, in their proper places, once more. We need something that will both restore spirituality to the world where it is needed, and allow us to run our society with our minds rather than our hearts. Here's a small contribution to the debate, courtesy of Octavia Butler.

*All that you touch
You Change.*

*All that you Change
Changes you.*

*The only lasting truth
Is Change.*

*God
is Change.*

Earthseed: The Books of the Living

The Battle for God - Karen Armstrong - Harper
Collins - softcover

Psychic Storm

The above analysis notwithstanding, there are, of course, quite a few fantasy authors who do understand myth. One of the best is Storm Constantine. Indeed, she has co-written some non-fiction books on myth, which I must get round to reading at some point. She also has a very clear understanding of the emotional problems that Karen Armstrong says have given rise to Fundamentalism. Listen.

"They tell of the anguish of being abandoned to our own choices, of having no god who can give succour, purpose and answers and who can take responsibility for our life and all the choices and mistakes that we might make. And that anguish of responsibility, of being responsible for everything in our world, is the only misery of life."

Crown of Silence is the sequel to *Sea Dragon Heir*, but it is not, perhaps, the sequel that you would have expected. We see nothing of Pharinet, see little of Valraven, and dwell instead on the unfortunate death of Khaster Leckery and those who were affected by it. This being Storm there is, of course, a star-crossed homosexual love affair at the heart of the story, but other than that the book is very different from its predecessor. It is about characters who yearn for justice rather than power; it is about mystic knowledge rather than chthonic deities; and it is much more Dion Fortune than H.P. Lovecraft.

From a plot point of view *Sea Dragon Heir* tells the story of the noble Valraven's rise to become the war leader of the Magravandian Empire. *Crown of Silence*, in contrast, picks up on a young peasant lad whose village is destroyed and family slaughtered by Magravandian soldiers on a terror sweep. Shan is rescued from the ruins by an enemy of the Empire and trained to be a rival to the great warlord.

The central dialectic of the book is the tension between the need for justice, which is the whole point of opposing Magravandias, and the desire for revenge for what the Empire has done.

The final third of the book is given over primarily to the major characters undertaking a mystical quest. I suspect that this may come over a little boring for some readers, but Storm is clearly very serious about it. She has always liked working with myth, and now that she has stopped playing with Ishtar I feel a lot more comfortable about it. Besides which her previous series had a rather naff millennial-fever tone to it. This series, being set entirely in a fantasy world, is a lot less jarring, and a lot more meaningful as a result.

I haven't had time to root out my books on magic and comment in detail on the approach to spiritual growth that Storm lays out, but she certainly knows what she is talking about. She dwells a little too much on the concept of divine kingship for my liking, even if, unlike the Stuart kings, she knows what it means. In any case, it is refreshing to see somebody writing this sort of stuff. As Karen Armstrong has so forcibly pointed out, we need it. More writers should be this brave.

Crown of Silence - Storm Constantine - Gollancz - softcover

Blind Among the Flowers

At Chicon 2000 there is to be a panel entitled "Nanotechnology and Clarke's Law". Masquerade duties permitting (it is on Sunday afternoon) I would like to make that one. I suspect it will be full of nerdish people complaining that nanotech novels contain no real science: that their writers just assume that nanotechnology can do anything, and

then proceed to write fantasy novels in disguise. Maybe they do, but I don't care because nanotech (and virtual reality) are marvellous tools for exploring the human condition.

Previously in these pages I have reviewed Ian McDonald's *Kirinya* novels which primarily explore the political impacts of nanotechnology. McDonald asks what would happen to the world's power structures if third world countries, in particular Africa, got hold of nanotechnology. He keeps it out of the hands of developed nations by making it so frightening that they don't want anything to do with it. But the Africans have no choice, so they learn to adapt, and they grow powerful.

A very different approach is taken by Kathleen Ann Goonan in her novel, *Queen City Jazz*. She assumes that nanotechnology is developed in the West, but that it gets out of control. Civilisation is devastated, and those American citizens who survive live in fear of new nanoplagues, or dreadful, terrain transforming surges of assembler activity, emerging from the now shunned Flower Cities.

Flower Cities? Oh yes. After all, what is the point of being able to do anything if you don't make it beautiful? I still contend that Moorcock's *Dancers at the End of Time* is the first ever nanotechnology story. He understood, and Goonan understands, that a nanotech novel can be about art, and about the human soul.

But let's begin with the flowers. Goonan's view of nanotech is a very organic one. She vaults past the piecemeal engineering application of assembler technology and leaps straight into a philosophy of transformation. Her nanotech is deployed on a city-wide scale, touching buildings, the way we live, our very bodies. The assembler factories are in the form of giant flowers, kicking out pollen full of tiny machines that is distributed

throughout the city by giant, intelligent bees. Like I said, if you can do anything, make it beautiful.

So what happens when this fabulous system gets out of control? Goonan seems to have been tapping into the same muse as Karen Armstrong, for without quite articulating it she has hit upon exactly the same fearful response: Fundamentalism. Nanotechnology has the potential to be scientific progress run riot. It is the ultimate in breakneck speed change. And so Goonan begins the novel in a Fundamentalist community in country Ohio. Cities which have been "Enlivened", such as the great "Queen City" of Cincinnati, are looked upon as evil and must be shunned.

But Goonan goes further than Armstrong. Firstly she identifies another form of response to the modern world: retreat into fantasy. What I have called Disneyfication. Whereas Fundamenatalism is born out fear and becomes hatred, Disneyfication is born out of fear and becomes denial. Everything that is scary and challenging in the modern world is simply removed. And faced with these two forms of retreat, Goonan then has to produce an answer. A novel needs an ending after all. She finds it in another part of the American psyche, one ideally suited to the concept of change. I'm not saying any more than that.

That theme on its own would be a perfectly acceptable novel, but Goonan doesn't stop there. She also has a literary argument to make. Nanotech is about the ability to take anything and change it. Jazz, yes that title is not there by accident, is about taking themes and changing them. Disneyfication is also about recycling, but whereas jazz looks for ideas in the existing theme and adds creativity to make something new and vital, Disneyfication removes content and meaning. I think you can follow the argument from there.

Hey, all that and virtually no mention of the plot. Of course the book has one, and actually I have talked quite a bit about it in an oblique sort of way. I was particularly impressed with the way Goonan took all that philosophy and wove it into a simple family drama. Or is that telling you too much? Dare I mention that besides all the above it also touches on trains and baseball? Or that it had enough literary references in it to leave me feeling as ill-educated as I do after reading a Kim Newman novel?

All of which is tended to say that this is a darn good book. Goonan has written two others, and I'm going to buy them as soon as I can find copies. Reviews will appear here in due course.

Queen City Jazz - Kathleen Ann Goonan - Voyager - softcover

Creature Comforts

This one is another of Roz Kaveney's recommendations from Wiscon. Like Jan Siegel's *Prospero's Children* from last issue, it shows a lot of promise. However, where Siegel clearly has oodles of talent and only needs to harness it a little better, Anne Harris appears to be more in the wait and see category. She could be very good, but she has a bit of a way to go. [Roz tells me that Sigel has a successful career in other areas of fiction under another name, which explains a lot.]

The plot of *Accidental Creatures* is pretty heavy on the clichés. It is no surprise that a scientist working for a genetic engineering company called GeneSys invents a new form of life. There's a lot of us-and-them stuff: Creatures v Humans, Workers v Management. Justina Robson did all this much better in *Silver Screen* (she was working with AIs rather than biological organisms but the plot is pretty much the same).

The science is a bit shaky too. There are occasional attempts to justify what happens, but it is all a bit surreal and far-fetched. Hard SF fans would hate it. Harris tries to give the book a mythic, and therefore fantasy dimension, but it doesn't work that well. She uses the right words, but it doesn't have the feel. There is a brave attempt to give the new species a subtly different world-view based on their social structure, but that doesn't work too well either and has to get dropped in favour of a happy ending.

What is interesting is how visual the writing is. And that doesn't mean lots of heavy description. It means that as I was reading it I got the strong impression that it was designed for TV or movies, not for the printed page. The action scenes in particular are just crying out to be filmed. I think that maybe Harris has missed her vocation and should be writing and directing movies, not writing novels. She has an eye for a good picture, and you can't easily indulge a passion for architecture in words.

The pacing of the action is also good. Once the plot picks up around half way through characters are all over the place and confusion reigns. This is good. Real life is disorderly and plans are always going awry. Too many novels assume that plans will always work unless they are defeated by better plans. In *Accidental Creatures* plans just go wrong.

But what I really like was how normality just fell apart at the end. Harris understands how big companies work, and watching her drop a little insanity into the process was great fun. There was a chapter where you could have believed that you had stumbled into a William Browning Spencer novel by mistake.

In summary, then, one to watch. This isn't a great book, but I think Harris has it in her to write one. What she does need to do is make up her mind whether she is writing fantasy, in which case she has to work on the mythic invocation, or SF, in

which case she needs to tighten up on her science. And I still think she would be better off in movies.

Accidental Creatures - Anne Harris - Tor - hardcover

Digital Crimes

Those of you patient enough to wade through my long ramble on the subject of e-Books last issue will remember that Sheldon Pacotti is the one non-established author whose on-line novel I decided would be worth reading. Actually that's not strictly fair because he has had other stuff published and his day job is as a script writer for the computer games company, Ion Storm. Any of you out there who are playing *Deus Ex* are in fact reading one of Sheldon's stories. And maybe that's why his stuff is good. He might not be a big name author, but he is a professional writer.

Another thing I liked about Sheldon is that, when I told him I was going to review the book, he immediately started going on about how he wrote it years ago and he thinks it could be a lot better. That is in marked contrast to the shameless self-promotion that I get from most e-Book authors who contact me. Of course he is right, it could be better, but it also stands out when compared against most of what is available on-line.

The plot of *Demiurge* uses several of the same ideas as Sean Williams' *The Resurrected Man*. It also briefly touches on some of themes covered in Tad Williams' *Otherland*. And I'm not saying "inspired by" here: as I said above, the book was written several years ago. What I'm saying is that Sheldon is in good company.

The basic idea is a world in which anything can be scanned, digitised, and therefore copied, including people. Sean gets to the copyable people concept right at the end of his book, but Sheldon takes it as his starting point. The hero, Paul Cramer, is a detective who spends much of his time investigating digital crimes, in particular the illegal replication of human beings. The Demiurge of the title is a machine like the Star Trek replicator. It takes in digital information about an item and uses nanotech assemblers to create an exact copy of that item. That creates massive wealth, but it does so in a world already populated beyond breaking point. The possibility of people making multiple copies of themselves just doesn't bear thinking about.

The concepts, on the other hand, are well worth thinking about. Sheldon touches on a wide range of philosophical topics, including the right to life, the right to bear children, and freedom of expression. In short the book is full of exactly the sort of thoughtful analysis of society that makes for really good SF.

On the downside it is a bit of a boys' action adventure in places. You know the stuff: lots of sex with impossibly beautiful women. And it degenerates into a sort of James Bond like farce towards the end before pulling itself around again. But, as I said with Anne Harris, not everyone comes out of the stocks firing on all cylinders. Sheldon clearly has the ambition and breadth of vision to make a great SF writer. I look forward to seeing some of his newer stuff.

Demiurge - Sheldon Pacotti -
<http://www.booklocker.com> - PDF

New Life

A few issues ago I mentioned an edition of *Nova Express* that concentrated on what

Bruce Sterling calls "slipstream" fiction. I'm still not convinced of the value of slipstream as a concept, but there is no doubt that the authors listed as being part of the movement included a very large number of people whose work I like. One of those featured strongly, but with whom I was unfamiliar, was Sean Stewart. I figured this was probably a good recommendation, and it was.

One of our patron saints of scientific rationalism, Larry Niven, once wrote a story entitled *The Magic Goes Away*. And so, as the Karen Armstrong review in this issue explains, it has done. But what if it was only bluffing? What if it was real, and it started to come back?

That, of course, is not a new idea. It has been done to death by *Shadowrun* and in various novels. Urban elves are a common feature of fantasy fiction these days. But this culture clash idea is pretty far fetched. Sean Stewart's *Resurrection Man* is far more subtle.

In fact it isn't really until you get quite a few chapters into the book that you discover that you are not in Kansas any more. The book is set in the real world with ordinary characters having ordinary jobs and ordinary family problems. Except for Dante, because he is an Angel, one of those cursed with magical abilities that he doesn't want, and which scare everyone else. No two Angel talents appear to be quite the same. Some are useful, like the Seekers who get good jobs with the police. Dante's talent disturbs him so much that he refuses to use it. Until, that is, he finds his own corpse lying on the dresser in his bedroom.

Resurrection Man is very reminiscent of Neil Gaiman's *Sandman*. It is dark, up close, personal and imbued with mythic atmosphere. Whatever it is Dante's corpse portends, it is going to be very nasty, and that nastiness is not going to be able to be avoided. And yet, things that we endure do indeed make us stronger.

In the end, *Resurrection Man* is a story of personal growth. That is a simple enough theme for a novel. But it gets there through a marvellous invocation of modern dark fantasy. Some of the language is very beautiful, especially the asides by Dante's photographer brother, Jet. Sean Stewart is clearly a writer of enormous talent, which is pretty much what William Gibson and Neal Stephenson say on the jacket blurb. I'm not going to disagree with them. Stewart has written a bunch of other novels. I think I need to seek them out.

Resurrection Man - Sean Stewart - Ace - softcover

Serious Stuff

One of the reasons that many fanzine fans look down their noses at *Emerald City* is because it actually talks about SF. Fanzines, you should know, are supposed to talk about fandom, and forget the embarrassing connection with genre fiction. On the other hand, people from the literary world also look down on me because I am not academic or literary enough. I can't quote Brontë, Dickens or Proust from memory, and I laugh when people start talking about postmodernism. I am, I am proud to say, a scummy journalist who is interested in talking to ordinary people, not just an educated elite.

Some time ago I was persuaded to try *Foundation*, a serious critical SF journal. I figured I might learn something, but I found much of it incomprehensible because the feature articles were written almost entirely in lit-crit jargon. I had no idea whether the writers were making valid points or just spouting meaningless twaddle. Then I came across an article on role-playing games that was full of jargon but was at least about a subject on which

I am an expert. It was clear that the author knew rather more about the use of jargon than about role-playing, so I cancelled my subscription.

But there is room in the world for something a bit more serious and scholarly than *Emerald City*. Here is a brief look at some of the options available.

New York Review of SF

First up is the now rather venerable *New York Review of Science Fiction*. It is coming to the end of its twelfth year of production on a monthly schedule, which rather puts *Emerald City's* five years to shame. It is also a regular nominee in the Hugo semi-prozine category. The primary editorial team is Kathryn Cramer, David Hartwell and Kevin Maroney, but there appears to be an extensive staff including Sam Delany. Like I said, semi-prozine. One rung up the evolutionary ladder from here.

Oh, and you have to pay for it as well. \$32 for a year within the US but if you can catch David at a convention you can probably get a special deal. It is \$37 in Canada, and \$45 for overseas subscriptions.

As the title suggests what you mainly get is book reviews. These tend to be rather more academic, or at least better researched, than what you will find here. In particular the writers' guidelines state that any review should not only discuss the book in question, but should also place it within the context of the author's other work, and in the context of the genre or sub-genre in which it is written. This means that the reviewers have to be very well read, and it is no surprise therefore to find that Brian Stableford is a regular contributor. I try to do that sort of thing here, but if I don't know the author well I don't have the time to do the research. The reviews are mainly by guest writers rather than the staff so the quality

will inevitably be a little patchy, but the standard is high and given that the current issue includes contributions from Stableford and John Clute you can judge the sort of level that the magazine aims at.

Each issue also includes a few feature articles the quality of which can vary wildly. The current issue is a case in point. There is a fabulous article by Fiona Kelleghan about the short fiction of Paul Di Filippo. Now, as I've said many times before, I'm not a great fan of short stories. But Di Filippo is a satirist and this article not only had me laughing out loud but also wanting to go and find everything he had ever written.

It is a serious article too. The concluding paragraph of the first section includes the comment, "*the comedy of incongruity is a neurological theory rather than a psychological or sociological theory, and states that when unexpected images or ideas collide in the brain, the collision results in the physical reaction of laughter*". But that is a perfectly understandable comment, and is jargon free. So far so good.

The other feature article, by Joan Gordon and Madeline Scheckter, is about Debbie Notkin's recent Tiptree anthology, *Flying Cups and Saucers*. It is crammed full of gobbledegook, for example: "*Judith Butler exhorts us to consider the conflicts which arise in this zone where the mass and the individual meet, 'not as a permanent constellation of social norms condemned to the pathos of perpetual failure, but rather as a critical resource in the struggle to rearticulate the very terms of symbolic legitimacy and intelligibility'*". Worse still the article is centred around the sort of naïve and dangerous nonsense that arises when navel-gazing art critics start to think that their intellectual games have some bearing on real world politics. To put it politely, it was crap.

So, some good stuff and some bad stuff. On balance it is just the place to go if you are looking for material that is more

rigorous and better researched than you will find here, but remaining comprehensible and entertaining. For more information write to Dragon Press, PO Box 78, Pleasantville, NY, 10570, USA; or check out the web site at <http://www.nyrsf.com>.

Steam Engine Time

Of course fans can do serious stuff as well. *Steam Engine Time* is a new venture from the inestimable Bruce Gillespie and the two of the UK's most literary fans, Maureen Kincaid Speller and Paul Kincaid. The objective, and it is a laudable one, is to provide a forum for serious critical articles about SF. I suspect also that it is a way of getting Bruce into print more often by relieving him of some of the effort and expense of turning fine words into a fine magazine. That is something that is unquestionably worth doing.

The thing that struck me most about issue #1 was how backward-looking it was. There are articles about Cordwainer Smith, Olaf Stapledon and R.A. Lafferty. In addition Paul contributes a long piece about British SF which only arrives at Iain Banks in the last paragraph of seven and a half pages. Bruce reviews the SF Masterworks series and Maureen talks about Banks' first novel, *The Wasp Factory*.

The impression of dwelling on the past was further heightened by a rant by Paul (or as he prefers to call it a polemic) in which basically he complains that things ain't what they used to be. Modern SF is apparently a load of rubbish because it doesn't come out with any new ideas but simply recycles old themes. "In my day", he appears to be saying, "before us could go on t' next chapter us 'ad to come up with entirely new theory of space ship propulsion and prove it t' boot".

Justina Robson had a mild go at this in her *Worlds End* column, but I don't think she went far enough. To my mind Paul's

complaint is like decrying the state of Fantasy because there are no new mythologies to plunder, or of historical fiction because tales have been set in every civilisation of every time period. We should count ourselves lucky that science keeps throwing up new ideas such as cyberspace and nanotechnology for us to play with, rather than whinging because someone has written yet another time travel story.

I suspect also that Paul is ignoring the changing nature of SF that results from the sort of social dynamics I was discussing in the Karen Armstrong review. But he's a smart boy and I'm sure he's aware of these things. After all, the purpose of a rant is to put forward some ridiculous, exaggerated position and encourage people to comment upon it, and he's got Justina and I to do just that so he's probably feeling quite smug.

The 'zine is intended to be published twice a year and is presumably available for "the usual" (letters, contributions, ego-burnishing and so on). The next issue is due out in November. Future issues, Paul tells me, will focus more on what is happening in the genre today. For more information write to Bruce at 59 Keele Street, Collingwood, VIC 3066, Australia (gandc@mira.net) or Maureen at 60 Bournemouth Road, Folkestone, Kent, CT19 5AZ, UK (set@acnestis.demon.co.uk).

Niekas

Another fannish critical publication that I have recently acquired is issue #45 of *Niekas*. I should point out that the 'zine does not always feature critical material, but this particular issue is a dark fantasy special and it is seriously impressive.

Well, I say that, but I confess to not having managed to read all of it yet. My excuse is that it is 120 pages long with type as small as *Ansible*. That must be one heck of a lot of words. But what I have

dipped into seems to be very good. Much of what it focuses on seems to be what I would call "horror" rather than "dark fantasy", but who cares if the writing is entertaining and informative?

I used to think that it would be impossible to be a bigger perfectionist in the art of fanzine production than Bruce Gillespie. But Ed Mesky's and his crew of helpers have proved me wrong. *Niekas* is the most professionally produced fanzine I have ever seen. For more information write to Niekas Publications, RR#2, Box 63, 322 Whittier Hwy., Center Harbor, NH 03226-9708, or email Ed on edmeskys@worldpath.net.

Foundation Conference

For those of you who are interested in getting a more in depth understanding of literary criticism, there is an interesting conference scheduled for next June. It is being run by the Science Fiction Foundation, the people who publish *Foundation*, the magazine. The theme of the con will be "2001: A Celebration of British Science Fiction". And it is a good time to have such a con. Next year sees the 100th anniversary of H.G. Wells' *The First Men in the Moon* and the 50th anniversary of John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids*, as well as being the 50th anniversary of a short story called *The Sentinel* that later caught the eye of Stanley Kubrick.

The con is being held at Liverpool University from 28th June to 1st July and will cost £285 (\$428) inclusive of meals and accommodation. The Guests of Honour are Brian Aldiss, Stephen Baxter, Nicola Griffith, Gwynneth Jones and Ken MacLeod.

This being the Foundation, much of the programming will have an academic feel to it. However, Farah Mendlesohn, one of the organisers, assures me that they do want fans there as well and that the idea is to get cross-fertilisation going. In other

words, we might learn something, and hopefully a few academics might work out how to express themselves in words of less than five syllables. Sounds like a good deal to me. For more information write to Andy Sawyer (asawyer@liverpool.ac.uk) or check out the convention web site (<http://www.liv.ac.uk/~asawyer/2001.html>). And if you have an idea for a programme item, please contact Farah (farah@fjm3.demon.co.uk). Please restrict ideas to British SF, and work published after 1945.

Robert Sacks: R.I.P.

by Kevin Standlee

How do you write an obituary for someone who wasn't your friend, wasn't really your enemy, but whom you came to know in a somewhat adversarial relationship on the floor of the Worldcon Business Meetings of the past decade? Robert Sacks, who was, among many other things, perhaps the most persistent gadfly of the WSFS Business Meetings, was found dead on Friday, August 18, just two weeks before he was to finally get his wish to be a member of the head table staff of a Worldcon Business Meeting. According to e-mailed reports, the cause of death appears to be an Aortic Dissection, a tear in the aorta.

The WSFS Business Meeting is one of the defining events of a Worldcon for some hard-core fans. For the past twenty or so years, one of the standard elements of that meeting has been Robert Sacks, sitting in the front row, right side, on the aisle if there was a centre aisle. Robert was a tireless participant in the affairs of the WSFS Business Meeting. He was well known for his attention to details, and his tendency to bring up technicalities that perhaps nobody else had thought of.

I am notorious for attention to parliamentary detail, but even I lost patience with Robert on numerous occasions, when I felt he was concentrating so heavily on the letter of the law that he lost sight of its spirit. He and I were usually on opposing sides of procedural issues: on substantive ones, we often agreed. Our arguments, particularly over procedural matters, could be heated and, to those not steeped in the minutiae of meeting procedure, sometimes incomprehensible.

I cannot say that Robert was my friend. I didn't know him that well outside of our mutual involvement in the Business Meeting, and we really didn't get along that well. But he was usually a polite, dedicated person, who believed strongly in what he was promoting at the time. He always worked hard on whatever he was trying to accomplish. He was one of the main sources of news about the Business Meeting, reporting on it for the newsletter. While he generally needed extensive editing (otherwise entire issues of the newsletter would have been nothing but WSFS Business), he was careful to report objectively on issues, even those in which he had a personal stake. I respected Robert Sacks, even though he often exasperated me beyond belief.

This year, after many years of trying and being told no, (including at least once by me), Robert was going to be at the head table of the WSFS Business Meeting, filling in for Pat McMurray, who had to cancel out of going to Chicon 2000. I would have been on the same head table as him, as Business Meeting Chairman Don Eastlake III asked me to be his Parliamentarian. It was going to be interesting to force the two of us to cooperate up there, but I'm sure we would have pulled it off. Now, we'll never know how it would have happened.

Cheryl agreed to step in as Emergency Holographic Secretary at Chicon 2000, for

which Don Eastlake and I are grateful - more so me, because otherwise I probably would have had to do it, and I don't want the job. There will, I hope, be an empty chair with Robert's name in front of it at the head table this year, and I expect that the final session will adjourn in his memory. (This last is particularly appropriate, given that he generally moved the motion to adjourn sine die, ending the meetings for that year, at the end of the final session.)

During the past few days, someone suggested that the Business Meeting have a moment of silence in his honour, but others immediately came back and said that silence was not Robert's style. A few moments of objections to consideration, points of order, and appeals from the chair's rulings would be more like him.

The Business Meeting will be a quieter place without Robert Sacks, and, as much as he drove me crazy from time to time, I somehow find that I will miss his familiar presence there, front row, centre right, on the aisle.

Cheryl adds:

I have not known Robert for anywhere near the length of time that Kevin has done, but in the few years I have been attending Worldcons Robert quickly became a defining presence. Yes, he drove us to distraction at times, but I came to realise that he did so out of a genuine passion for fandom. There are some people who disrupt business meetings simply because it is fun to cause trouble. Robert might have been playful at times, but he genuinely believed that what he was doing was for the good of ordinary fans, and of fannish democracy. It was generally his methods rather than his intentions over which we disagreed. Yes, Worldcon will be a calmer place without him, but we should all remember that it is generally better to care too much than to not care at all. I like the empty

chair idea that Kevin mentioned, because for many of us there will be a big Robert-shaped hole at the centre of this year's Worldcon.

Footnote

I am delighted to note (somewhat tongue in cheek) that following my review in *Emerald City* #57 the SF Masterworks series has decided to re-issue M. John Harrison's *The Centauri Device*. Now you have no excuse for not reading it. Plus the related Fantasy Masterworks series has issued a collected *Viriconium* stories volume. More Harrison than you could possibly wish for. Go buy, now!

For those of you in the New Jersey area there is a very interesting-sounding seminar coming up on September 30th. It is entitled "The future of religion: humanism, religion and science fiction" and appears as if it will touch on some of the themes raised in this issue. It is an all day event at the Howard Johnson Inn, 680 Route 3 West, Clifton NJ 07014. Registration is \$35 and includes lunch. For more information check out <http://www.freespeech.org/freethought/cfie/html/events.html>

You may remember from last issue that a new George R.R. Martin book is due real soon now. Well at least one person has it. My Californian friend Cynthia Gonsalves received her copy by mail from Amazon.co.uk on August 5th. It did not arrive in UK shops until over a week later. I would be fascinated to know whether any UK customers have also been able to get advance copies from Amazon. Book shops are having a hard enough time as it is competing with on line retailers without the on line guys getting special treatment from the publishers. Sigh.

In the next issue, what we did on our holidays: Kevin and Cheryl go wild in Chicago. We'll visit all of the major sights: the hotel, the conference centre, the WSFS Business Meeting. Also I have at last obtained the UK edition of *Ash* which contains all four volumes in one enormous book. And then there are the new Banks and Martin novels. Plus the "to read" pile includes Pat Murphy, Gene Wolfe, Brian Stableford, Martha Wells, Julian May and Gabriel King. Wherever do I find the time?

Ciao,

Love 'n' hugs,

Cheryl