

EMERALD CITY

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Introduction

As usual for the December issue we start off with the very best of holiday greetings for whichever type of Holy Day you happen to be celebrating. For reasons that will shortly become obvious I won't be sending out many cards this year. However, I am sending out this issue of *Emerald City* so you can all consider yourselves appropriately greeted.

Now, dirty word, money: my financial situation has recently deteriorated from worrying to potentially fatal. My first reaction to this was to decide that I simply could not afford to run this magazine any more. However, Kevin talked me out of it, and we are now instituting a programme of actions to try to reduce the financial strain. This will involve things like getting books from libraries rather than buying them, looking at cheaper web hosting options and so on. It may involve accepting review copies of books from publishers, but you have my assurance that this will not affect the independence of the reviews. If publishers demand favourable comment in return for books I will turn them down.

Of course one of the benefits of not having any work is that I have lots of time to work on improving the web site. Hopefully this will help to attract more readers and thus perhaps mean allow the 'zine to start paying for itself. This does not mean that the site will immediately get covered in advertising. I don't have enough readers right now to make it

worth while. But, if things go well, that might change. Once again my apologies to those of you who are offended by crass commercialism but I'm afraid I have no choice.

Still with the web site, I have introduced a bit of silliness with this issue. There is an online poll asking you which of the reviewed books you would be most likely to buy. This isn't likely to change the sort of books I review, but I thought it might provide some entertainment and the poll code was free. The intention is that the poll exists for the current issue only. I'll publish the results of this month's poll next month.

Meanwhile, onward with books. This month we have two excellent novels from some of Britain's finest new SF authors, Ken MacLeod and John Meaney. One thing I can certainly say is that I am not lacking for good SF just because I'm not in the USA. And there is more to come next issue. This is really encouraging.

In This Issue

Trots and Tentacles - Ken MacLeod takes the Revolution to the stars, courtesy of some fishy friends

Contradiction and Balance - John Meaney creates a highly philosophical future

Truth and Claw - Gabriel King's mythic fantasy of cats

Dreams and Wishes - Caroline Stevermer on what happens when wishes come true

Visions and Visitations - Brian Stableford saves the world from UFOs, mad scientists, tentacled beings from the dawn of time, and the legions of Hell

Prayers and Profits - James Stevens-Acre saves Christianity from Televangelism

Journeys and Reflections - More on Cheryl's travel writing

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Trots and Tentacles

Well, Ken has been having fun with this one, hasn't he?

The eagerly awaited new Ken MacLeod novel, *Cosmonaut Keep*, takes a step away from the author's previous work. The future history of Jon Wilde and Dave Reid has been abandoned. In its place is a brand new universe with some seriously weird underpinnings. I can just imagine this coming out of a drunken evening in the pub. "You won't believe some of the crazy stuff I'm finding on American web sites", says Ken, "UFOs, black helicopters, Lovecraft, they believe it all". "Well", replies Iain, "perhaps they are right. Wouldn't we look daft if it was all true". Ken gazes thoughtfully into his pint of heavy. "You know", he says, "it wouldn't take a lot of work to make it all hang together..."

Welcome, then, to the planet Mingulay, one of the many worlds in the galaxy populated by humans. Well look, all those people that the little grey reptiles in flying saucers have abducted had to go somewhere you know. Down through the centuries there have been thousands of them. The great tentacled creatures who

navigate between stars don't want those jumped up monkeys left to run riot. They have to go somewhere safe so that civilised beings can keep an eye on them.

Except Mingulay is different. Mingulay is the only planet in the galaxy that humans have reached under their own steam. That makes it a fascinating destination for the human traders who tag along with the kraken and saurs in their starships. There is the possibility of news from home, perhaps even new technology, and the secrets of inter-stellar navigation previously known only to the kraken. The only trouble is, these human spacefarers are a bunch of Trotskyist revolutionaries.

Cut back to a near future Earth in which the Russian-dominated European Union and the USA are following very different paths of social development. Matt Cairns is a freelance software project manager living in the Socialist Republic of Scotland. He co-ordinates the work of groups of AIs, and the occasional real, live legacy system specialist. It would be a safe enough life, were it not for the fact that Matt has this relationship with Jadey, a pretty American spy who goes on dangerous missions into Fascist-controlled England. When an announcement is made about contact with alien life out in the asteroid belt, and Jadey turns up with plans for a flying saucer, Matt's life gets way more exciting.

As you can probably tell from the description of near-future politics, Ken is enjoying himself here. I particularly liked his new trade union, the Information Workers of the World Wide Web, also known as the Webblies. The workers should control the means of production: write your own code! It is silly, but it is also serious, both on a scientific level, and a political level. Sure there are none of the threats of global nuclear war or mass extinctions of rogue AIs that we have become used to, but Ken has done a good job of using his skills in software and biology to make it all sound plausible.

Personally I found the near-future sections of the book richer and more involving. Ken is always at his best describing real world politics through the lenses of his special Trotskyist-red shades. The far future stuff relies more on character interaction and on finding out more about the created world for its depth. As of the end of *Cosmonaut Keep* we still don't know an awful lot. The book is merely the first volume in a series entitled *Engines of Light*. Although there is a satisfactory end point to the book, there is clearly a lot more to come. It seems likely that subsequent books in the series will be set primarily in the far future, and that means that Ken will have to put his political talents to work on alien societies. I for one am looking forward to it.

Cosmonaut Keep - Ken MacLeod - Orbit - hardcover

Contradiction and Balance

When I reviewed John Meaney's first novel, *To Hold Infinity*, I said that the writer seemed to have a fine career ahead of him. Little did I suspect how quickly he would develop. Reading *To Hold Infinity* you find it hard to believe that it is a first novel. Reading *Paradox* you find it hard to believe that Meaney doesn't have a long and illustrious career behind him. There is a very apt comment from *Vector's* review of *To Hold Infinity* on the back cover. It reads, "*does my heart good to see a new writer prepared to take as many risks and play with as many ideas as Meaney does*". Amen to that, and I should also point out that Meaney does as much with his writing as with his SF ideas.

The setting for *Paradox* is a far-future human colony world known as Nulapeiron. It is a vast city, reminiscent of the one in Elizabeth Hand's *Aestival Tide*, in which the nobility live in the

upper levels and the poor are confined to the depths. Tom Corcorigan, the son of a lowly market trader, has a talent for poetry and mathematics. This talent is discovered by a mysterious stranger. She leaves him a powerful computer program as a gift shortly before she is murdered by security guards.

The world of Nulapeiron is refreshingly strange. The nobility rule through the agency of Oracles who are able to see into future timelines and predict events. Transport is by bizarre multi-limbed vehicles called arachnargoi. Nanotech and biotech are commonplace, and the walls of the nobles' palaces are able to reconfigure themselves to aid movement through the building. You want to go there? Certainly, I'll just make a passage. There is imagination here to spare.

Tom's story gets going when his mother is taken away by an Oracle. This action is excused by the revelation that Tom's previously healthy father is about to die, which he duly does in mysterious circumstances. Tom is deeply suspicious, but also a penniless orphan. From this inauspicious beginning a successful career is born. The young trader's son will go far.

Interspersed with Tom's tale is a story that is revealed to him through the software program given to him at the start of the book. His dead benefactor, it turns out, was a Pilot, a human engineered to guide ships through the bizarre multi-dimensional pathways of mu-space. Official Nulapeiron doctrine has it that Pilots are dangerous and have all been destroyed, but no one now remembers why.

Much of the book is quite hard going. It has a choppy structure full of oblique references. In many ways it is highly reminiscent of Gene Wolfe, but in style only rather than slavish imitation as was the case with Paul McAuley's *Confluence* series. There are lots of references to logical theory, strategic analysis (Sun Tzu

and Game Theory) and theoretical physics. Quite a bit of it, I suspect, is cunningly crafted illusion, but much also is based on research of current theories. Meaney also puts his black belt in karate to good use in describing fighting techniques.

Unfortunately there is so much in the book that it is never quite clear where it is going. Is it supposed to be about the Oracles and their strange powers, or about the mysterious Pilots, or about Tom's quest to avenge the injustice done to his family? In the end it turns out to be all of these things in part, but also a major thesis on the futility of political revolution. There were so many strands that needed to be resolved that the resolution of each of them seemed somehow unsatisfying.

Another problem I had with the book was the lightweight treatment of personal relationships. Without wanting to give too much away, the ending of the book depends heavily on a classic emotional tangle, yet the substance of the relationships involved is hardly explored at all during the book. It was almost as if, having created a book all about logic problems, Meaney was reluctant to delve too deeply into emotional ones.

Please don't let these minor niggles put you off, however. *Paradox* is a very fine book. Again reminiscent of Wolfe, it is a book that I found myself wanting to read again immediately because I was sure that I had missed lots of subtle clues first time through. Meaney is a wonderful writer who deserves world-wide recognition. He is also an extremely nice bloke and a regular at conventions. The sooner the American market discovers him in a big way the better. In the meantime, US readers, be the first fan on your block to be an expert on a hot new British writer. He will be a star, I promise.

Paradox - John Meaney - Bantam - hardcover

Truth and Claw

Come closer, dear reader, for I wish to tell you of a secret from the world of British fantasy. The name of the secret is Gabriel King, and the nature of the secret is that books under that name are not at all what you might expect.

To start with Gabriel King is not a real person. It is a construct: half male, half female; half writer, half editor. Also you may well have ignored King's books because they are all about cats and might therefore reasonably be assumed to be soppy, anthropomorphic twaddle. But to make such an assumption would be misguided, because hiding behind the Gabriel King name is a man who, in my humble opinion, is Britain's finest writer of speculative fiction.

No, I am not going to tell you who he is. If you have been paying attention when reading previous issues you will be able to work it out. And for those of you who have not, or who are new to *Emerald City*, it will make an entertaining puzzle. What I am going to do is tell you that books about cats are not always just populist trash. Sometimes they are treasures.

The first Gabriel King book is called *The Wild Road*. It is pure mythic fantasy, dealing with an ages long battle (you can live a long time with nine lives) for control of the secrets of Egyptian cat magic. The wizard cat, Majicou, is on his last life and is desperate to inflict a major defeat on his ancient human enemy, The Alchemist, before he dies for the last time. To do so he must train up an apprentice, a young cat with the courage, talent and strength of character to carry on the ancient battle. Enter Tag, classic fantasy farm-boy (well, house-cat) hero, for whom until now life has been nothing but chasing bubbles and tins of chicken and game casserole.

Yes, it is predictable, formulaic stuff. But it comes alive through the quality of the writing. To start with the characters are every bit as vibrant and entertaining as those in Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats (or the musical, if you prefer). Alongside Majicou and Tag we have the brave, thoughtful if occasionally rather pompous Ragnar. There is the timid ethereal beauty, Pertelot, and poor, mad vivisected Cy. Not forgetting Sealink, the calico queen from New Orleans who oozes confidence and cheeky charm, and Marsebref ("he said 'Mousebreath', hon, he always talks funny like that") her sulky but determined and ferocious cockney beau.

It may not be true, as some cat lovers claim, that cats have more personality than people, but it is certainly true that the cats in a Gabriel King book have far more personality than the people in any number of blockbuster fantasy trilogies. You can always tell when the characterisation in a book is really good, because you start casting the movie as you read. You will do that with *The Wild Road*, no question.

The mythic side too is very well done. King knows precisely how to invoke the right atmosphere, and also has a talent for amusing twists of history. Threaded throughout the book are excerpts from the history of cats, including the truth about the Great Fire of London. The revelation of the true identity of The Alchemist is particularly cheeky, not to mention apposite for a mythic fantasy book.

And then of course the book is about cats, not people. They think differently, and they have different standards. King knows this, and presents the felines as convincingly alien whilst still cute enough to satisfy the mass market.

All in all, *The Wild Road* is a thoroughly wonderful book, and I would have been stunned had I not known who had written it. I have the second book in the

series, *The Golden Cat*, and a third novel is due out this month. You can expect to hear me purring contentedly over King's writing for some time to come.

The Wild Road - Gabriel King - Arrow - softcover

Dreams and Wishes

Having very much enjoyed *A College of Magics* (Emerald City #47) I have kept an eye out for new books by Caroline Stevermer. I have had to wait quite a while, but when I spotted *When the King Comes Home* on bookshelves in California I figured that we were in for something special. It was a fantasy book, and it was small.

Yes, I know I have complained in recent issues about a couple of fantasy books that were too short. But this was something different. This looked like a book that was deliberately short, and therefore, especially given the time taken to write it, one that had been exquisitely crafted. I also noted that it is edited by Delia Sherman and has a rave cover blurb from Ellen Kushner. A Wiscon book, then, and probably one with excellent characterisation.

As you can see, I approached this book with high expectations. I suppose that, as a result, it was inevitable that I should be a bit disappointed, but there is much about the book that is very good indeed. To start with, it deals with an excellent fantasy issue: the promised return of a legendary king.

When Good King Julian was alive the people of Lidia were well pleased with his rule. When he died in far away Vienna things went bad, and people started to talk about how much better life would be when the Austrians finally returned his body. Now, 200 years later,

"when the King comes home" has taken on more of an air of the unreasonably expected miracle. When the King comes home, rivers will flow with milk, and small boys will willingly wash behind their ears. And as we all know, one of the world's great curses is, "may all your wishes come true".

Of course, he does come back, not through the agency of the divine, but through necromancy. And the second really good thing about the book is how well it captures the horror that the revenant feels for his situation. It isn't just being brought back from the dead, and not knowing what it means to be both dead and alive. There is also the question of what lies posterity has made of your life and works, and having to live with being a legend.

To begin with I found the book rather disjointed. I kept wondering why the characters were not doing what I would regard as the normal, sensible thing given the situation. Then I realised that this was not some supposedly realistic fantasy that I was reading, it was a dream. In fact it was one of those dreams in which you take a step back from the action and ponder about the strangeness of it all. It made for a very unusual atmosphere which, I think, must have taken quite a bit of effort to achieve.

That was all of the good stuff. The bad point, for me, was the heroine, Hail Rosamer. I found her insufferably arrogant, totally devoid of manners or common sense, and quite the least likeable heroine I have found in a novel in a long time. Which is very sad, because it spoiled what was otherwise a very beautiful book, and a masterful demonstration of what fantasy should be like. With any luck, you won't take so badly to Hail as I did. Give it a try, and let me know how it turned out.

When the King Comes Home - Caroline Stevermer - Tor - hardcover

Visions and Visitations

OK, now I am going to do something very bad. I am going to review a book that I don't think you will be able to buy. Parts of it were published as short stories in *Interzone*, but the whole thing is available only from a small press company in Wales and my copy says on it that the print run was limited to 300 copies. If you really want to get hold of it, ask me, and I will see what I can do for you.

The premise of *Year Zero* is quite simple. It being that year between the media-inspired False Millennium and the actual one, the year which all computers think is 00 rather than 2000, strange things will happen. Elvis will be seen in Sainsburys supermarket. UFOs will step up their campaign of abductions and scientific tests on mankind. Tentacled beings from the dawn of time will finally get round to checking out whether their little experiment of putting intelligent life on Earth actually worked. And the Hierarchy of Hell will move into a tower block in London. Armageddon, it seems, is just around the corner. The only question is who will get us first?

Now that might sound a bit Pratchett-esque, but it isn't the sainted Terry. It is, in fact, Brian Stableford, and consequently the humour is much more dry and black. It is funny, but it is also serious in places.

One of my favourite incidents occurs shortly after the heroine, Molly, learns that her eldest daughter has absconded from the home of her cloyingly straight-laced and protective foster parents, the Jarvises. Molly has just moved into a tower block in London and has discovered that her neighbours have a distinctly demonic cast to them. Whilst

chatting over a cup of coffee, they happen to mention to her that their master absconded from Heaven. Molly links the two cases, and understands totally why Satan had to get out.

Oh, and I should of course mention the famous Woking Incident of 1897. If only I had known about it during the Roswell Worldcon bid.

Now a book like this requires a very special kind of heroine. It requires someone who is capable of taking anything that life can throw at her and bouncing back. It requires someone who is capable of dealing with the British Social Security system and maintaining her sanity. Molly is just that sort of person. An ex-prostitute, ex-drug addict, ex-prisoner and mental hospital inmate, she is perfectly suited to being abducted by Greys, Men-in-Black, mad scientists, the Queen of Faerie and Satan, and coming away relatively unscathed. The Jarvises would have lost it the moment that they discovered that Elvis really was still alive, but Molly can take anything and survive. Truly, she is a heroine of our times.

And let us not forget, dear people, that by the time you get this copy of *Emerald City* the end of Year Zero will be mere weeks away. All that fuss at the end of last year was merely a smokescreen put up by agents of the Antichrist to fool you into thinking that the moment of danger had passed. It hasn't. The End is nigh. Have you noticed anyone whistling *Heartbreak Hotel* in your local grocery store, or seen mysterious bright lights in the sky at night? Say thank you to kind Mr. Stableford for reminding you of how to count to 2000, and make sure you have plenty of supplies in for New Year. You might have to learn to be as resilient as Molly. Things may never be the same again.

Year Zero - Brian Stableford - Sarob - hardcover

Prayers and Profits

On the far side of the Atlantic Millennium fever takes a distinctly evangelical tone. In *Soulsaver* James Stevens-Acre has cheekily assumed that someone got their sums wrong by 100 years in order to be able to apply a little science fiction and create a world that truly deserves to be destroyed in apocalyptic flames.

By 2099 the tiny island of Puerto Rico has become the 52nd state of the USA and, thanks in a large part to continual exhortations to be fruitful and multiply, its population has expanded to Brunneresque proportions. Not that this worries anyone, for the people of Christian America are fed a constant diet of television shows reminding them of how lucky they are to be living under God's Rule and how essential it is to report the slightest sign of heresy to the authorities. They are even given the opportunity to obtain genuine authentic reproduction classic model Plastic Jesuses, free, for only a small donation to Church coffers. Stick one on the dashboard of your car and you Shall be Saved!

It is a wonderful world. WGod radio plays 24-hour gospel music, and Jimmy Divine performs miracles daily on his prime time TV show. Sadly some poor sinners just can't see when they are well off. They are seduced by Satan and wickedly attempt the mortal sin of suicide. Thank God for heroes like Juan Bautista Lorca and his colleagues in the Suicide Prevention Corps of America. If he can get to the sinners fast enough the bodies can be frozen, taken to appropriate medical facilities, and revived. No one should have to go to Hell, and besides, the miscreants should be tried for their crimes.

I suspect by now that you can see where this is going (and if not this is a spoiler warning). Sooner or later the grim reality of his job is going to teach Juan Bautista things that would never be mentioned in Sunday School. Besides, the Millennium approaches, and there is a rumour on the street that Jesus has returned to reiterate His message of love. Naturally the Church authorities will be doing everything in their power to stop Him. Juan Bautista's job is easy. He just has to decide who really is speaking for God.

And there, I am afraid, it all falls apart. Jim does a fine job of setting his hero up for a fall. He does an equally fine job of painting a world in which anyone with half a brain cell could work out which side has the moral high ground. But Juan is not allowed to make that decision. He decides against his masters, not on his own account, but on the basis of signs and miracles. In effect, he opts for the side with the more powerful Ju-Ju.

Because of the horrific nature of Juan's world it is easy to miss just how wrong Jim's resolution of the story is. After all, the good guys win, don't they? Well sure they do, but only by applying the same sort of tactics that made the bad guys possible in the first place. In the real world there are no miracles, there are just people like Jimmy Divine who pretend that there are, and who claim to speak for some old bearded guy on a cloud who will smite us with righteous anger unless we do as we are told. Expecting miracles to save us from that isn't the way.

Last issue I talked about Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* and his wish for a real revolution in theology. He wants to get rid of God, and replace the Kingdom of Heaven with a Republic. Jim's heart is in the right place. He can see that what we have now is bad. But he goes no further than replacing one ruler with another. His revolution is just Bonaparte for Bourbons. It doesn't work, and it never will. Unless we can stand on our own two

feet and work out what is right and wrong for ourselves we will always be vulnerable to people who claim to be in touch with some external source of righteousness.

End of sermon.

Sorry people. Getting back to the review, this is a highly entertaining book. It might even do some good. There are, after all, a lot of people in the world today, especially in the US, who are scarily like Juan was at the start of the book. For them Jim's message of reform within Christianity may be a valuable first step.

I should also point out that Jim did not intend the ending to be taken literally. He tells me that it is just a metaphor for Juan's growing awareness of moral issues. That should be fine. Myths are metaphors, after all. Unfortunately the type religion he is attacking is also one that demands that all its metaphors be regarded as literal truth. In that context what he has done simply doesn't work.

What we are left with is a neat SF story with echoes of John Brunner and Sheri Tepper but with a cop-out finale that approaches Tepper's *Shadow's End* for silliness. Good book, good message, shame about the ending.

Soulsaver - James Stevens-Acre - Harcourt - hardcover

Journeys and Reflections

Last month I made brief mention of the fact that I was moving all of my travel writing to a different web site. I thought it might be useful to tell you all a bit more about this. Not that travel and SF have much in common, unless you spend a lot of time going to conventions, but I'm hoping that a few of you might be interested.

IgoUGo.com is a collaborative exercise in travel writing. The idea is that people who love to travel sign up with the site and write Journals about their experiences. Other members then read those journals, both for information and to rate them. Members who publish lots of journals and get good ratings get freebies (most importantly for me, frequent flier points).

The weird thing about the site is that whilst anyone can look at it, only members can rate it. Now there's nothing to stop you just signing up so that you can rate stuff. It doesn't matter if you never write any journals. But the site makes it seem as if only people who write journals are supposed to rate them. It seems a bit strange. Not everyone who likes to travel would want to write, and the site gets the email address of everyone who signs up, so you would have thought that they would encourage everyone to participate. They don't, but you can anyway.

I'm aiming to put up one journal a month, probably equally spaced between *Emerald City* releases. So far I have done a piece about San José, including reviews of the Winchester Mystery House and the Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum. There's also a review of the Chicago Worldcon aimed at non-fannish folks. As you might expect, both contain quite a few restaurant reviews. Just go to the home page and search for my name to find them.

Forthcoming Journals will feature Brighton, Melbourne, various parts of Somerset and anywhere else I get the excuse to go. As and when I get back to California I am intending to do a journal about Yerba Buena Gardens (the place in San Francisco where we would have had the 2002 Worldcon if we could have got the right hotel space) and a "San Jose for Worldcon attendees" piece. I'll announce each Journal in *Emerald City* as they are released.

Footnote

I had a couple of questions from people about the Amazon links on the web site. One thing that isn't immediately obvious is that you don't have to buy the books I review in order to help *Emerald City*. I get more money for the specific items I recommend, especially if they are top-selling new releases, but I get paid for everything. So, if you need to buy a book from Amazon, any book, just go to the *Emerald City* site first and click through on one of the Amazon logos on the home page. Amazon will register that you have come from *Emerald City*, and any books that you buy will earn me commission. It won't cost you any more, and it will help keep the 'zine running. Right now, all help is gratefully received.

Another email that came in as a result of last issue reminded me that the Mormons do not believe in Original Sin. I'm not going to get into a debate about whether the Mormons are Christians or not, but they do have a lot in common and I'm pleased to give them credit where it is due.

Some of you have made kind comments about the new Hugo Award section of the web site. However, I note that only one person has offered recommendations beyond what was already there last issue (and that, sadly, was for something that is not eligible). This is a bit worrying. Does it mean that none of you actually read SF? Do you think that none of what is published is worthy of a Hugo? Do you think that the Hugos are a waste of time and should be scrapped? None of those are particularly encouraging ideas. Talk to me people! 2000 is almost over, so I need to put nomination suggestions together for next issue.

An article by me will be appearing in the December issue of LineOne's SF newsletter. It is now online so check out the web site (http://www.lineone.net/clubs/entertainment/sciencefiction/sciencefiction_from_t-d.html) and go to the 5th Column section. Please note that this is a column in which writers are supposed to let off steam. So I did. Many thanks to editor Anne Gay for taking my piece.

A couple of issues back I mentioned that I was expecting the Phantastes web site to be getting back under way again soon. Staci had written to me saying that she was working on getting an issue out for October. It is now mid December and there is still no sign of it. Sadly I think I'm going to have to give up on that one, which is a shame because it had some good stuff on it.

Next issue I should have the promised new book by Tom Arden and Jan Siegel, plus the long awaited *Perdido Street Station* by China Miéville. See you in the next Millennium (assuming the world is still here).

Ciao,

Love 'n' hugs,

Cheryl