

# EMERALD CITY #67

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## Introduction

OK, let's start with the good news. It appears that I have a job. I say "appears" because said job is in California and therefore I have to go through the process of getting a work visa. This is going to take about 3 months, during which time I have to stay out of the US. Assuming all goes well, however, I will be a California resident and employed some time in July. I can assure you that having a home and a steady income will be a great relief to me.

If you happen to pick up a copy of this 'zine at Eastercon you are of course very welcome to leap up and down with delight at the thought that I will be out of the UK for several years. However, in return you are expected to read the rest of the 'zine and buy me a drink. Guinness please.

Thanks are due to Kevin and Kristen Ruhle who provided two of the books reviewed in this issue. Hopefully in a few months time my finances will be back on track and I'll be able to buy lots of books again.

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## In This Issue

Books in The City - Potlatch returns to San Francisco

Journey's End - Gene Wolfe returns to the Whorl and to Nessus

Accidental Stupidity - Dan Simmons sharpens his knife on the dregs of the gene pool

Island in the Flood - Sean Stewart deals the cards of fate on Galveston

My Way Or Else - Sheri Tepper lays down the law to Mankind

Dangerous Critters - Jack McDevitt finds alien life is not always friendly

The Art of Anticipation - Joe Haldeman describes an expectant world

Best of the Web - ConJosé announces a special Hugo Award

Miscellany - All that other stuff

Footnote - The End

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## Books in The City

It has been a while since I have been to a Potlatch. I seem to have been out of the country when it happened for the past two years. Either that or too busy/bankrupt as a result of the ConJosé bid. This year, however, getting to Potlatch was easy. The convention rotates between the Bay Area, Portland and Seattle. This year it was being held in San Francisco.

The most obvious thing about this year's convention is that the organisers seem to have found an almost ideal hotel. Potlatch attracts around 200 people, so you don't need anywhere huge. You do, however, want somewhere that fits in with the relaxed air of the con. Something that is suitable for a convention aimed at people who are serious about reading books.

San Francisco's Ramada Plaza doesn't look very promising from the outside. It is across Market Street from the civic centre, which of course means that it is also on the edge of the Tenderloin, one of the least salubrious parts of The City. Inside, however, it is delightful Edwardian elegance.

The hotel was built during the great regeneration that followed the 1906 earthquake and it looks like no expense was spared. These days, of course, it is a little the worse for wear. It gives the distinct impression that it used to be owned by a company that didn't care about (or couldn't afford) maintenance, but that new owners are gradually putting it right. Or perhaps it is just new management. Whatever, it still boasts some beautiful interior decoration, particularly in the main function rooms.

It was cheap too. Kevin and I paid \$104 a night for our room, which for a place slap in the centre of San Francisco is very good. We would have liked a hot tub in the hotel, and our bathroom was a bit cramped, but otherwise we were very happy and would be delighted to go back. Kevin is already thinking about cons we could run there. Not until after ConJosé, of course.

Programming at Potlatch is very sparse. There is just one track, programme slots are 1:30 long, and the content is both literary and liberal. I was on a panel on Diversity in SF&F. There was another one on economic inequality, and another on authors who revise their early work later in life. It is serious stuff, and passing Libertarians are liable to blow a fuse at

some of what is said. But then how many passing Libertarians are you going to find in San Francisco?

The only other attractions (the only ones that Potlatch attendees really need) were the Dealers' Room and the Con Suite. The former only sold books, and I bought far too many of them. The latter was masterfully managed, as ever, by Karen Schaeffer and competed very well with the culinary attractions of San Francisco. There wasn't a costume or a film in sight, though I did spot people playing card games in the con suite and Kevin partook of the traditional Saturday night poker game. Oh, and I nearly forgot, there was a Toy Room. Just to prove that we might be serious but we are not fuddy-duddy.

There is, after all, a limit to seriousness, and the intellectual content of the panels was well balanced by silliness all weekend. For example, we had Ellen Klages doing her party piece as auctioneer in aid of the Clarion West writers' workshop. She and Tom Whitmore gelled together quite well, including the following splendid routine:

Tom: "This book is currently going at only two thirds of the cover price."

Ellen: "Can you work out the cover price?"

Audience member: "\$30."

Ellen: "We have a bid of \$30."

Audience member: "You tricked me!"

Needless to say, the unfortunate victim was not held to her bid, but we all roared with laughter.

My favourite moment, however, occurred during set-up on Friday. Janet Lafler wandered into the con suite, wearing a splendid Cat-in-the-Hat hat, and asked if we needed signage. Karen said it wasn't really necessary, but Janet could do one over by the elevators if she wanted. A little later Janet came back. "I drew the arrow the wrong way", she said, "so I put

the sign upside down. I don't think anyone will have any difficulty with that". Quite, and nor should they.

The only real foul-up that the convention managed was the Native Guide (that is the guide to the local area). In true fannish fashion the person who had volunteered to do it did not deliver and a bunch of folks had to scramble around at the last minute. This led to a number of mistakes. For example, a restaurant that Kevin and some friends went to on Saturday was listed as not needing reservations but did require them. More embarrassingly, Borderlands Books, the only specialist SF bookseller in the City, was omitted from the list of local bookstores. They were not happy.

So what did we do of the weekend? I did my panel; we bought books; we slept in; we chatted with friends; and we ate very well. It was all very comfortable, and blessedly free of the rush and bustle of big conventions. Not that I would give up Worldcons for things like Potlatch, but it is wonderful not to have to worry about anything except which restaurant to go to for a whole con.

I would not recommend Potlatch to a first-time convention goer unless said person happens to be heavily into books and full of self-confidence. It is a convention where very little is done for you and it helps enormously if you have a lot of friends there. If you can fit in with that environment and you fancy a relaxing but intellectually stimulating weekend, Potlatch is for you. Now if only we could have it in the Ramada every year...

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## Journey's End

*"Gene Wolfe is the greatest writer in the English language alive today."*

Michael Swanwick

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Hey, who am I to argue with professionals? I mean, there's a whole load of mainstream fiction, and fiction from other genres, that I don't read. There is also a lot I don't know about the craft of writing. But if you were to ask me who was the best writer active in the SF&F field today I would say "Gene Wolfe" without hesitation. I can't say for certain whether Swanwick is right, but I would not be in the least bit surprised if he was.

Such praise, of course, is somewhat meaningless without evidence to back it up, but what am I supposed to say about a book that is the final part of an 11 book series that has been over 20 years in the making? Especially when that book is written by an author whose work is so subtle and intricate that you feel that you can't possibly understand everything he meant to say without reading each book four or five times. And you can't comment on one book in the series without re-reading all of the others to remind yourself of all the little details you might have forgotten along the way. *Return to the Whorl* ties up several loose ends from the *Book of the Short Sun* series, but also closes a few questions from the *Long Sun* and *New Sun* series. And, Wolfe being Wolfe, it leaves much to the reader to unravel.

OK, let's do the plot thing. *Return to the Whorl* is two stories in one. The tale of Horn's return to New Viron is interwoven with that of his adventures on The Whorl which take place between *On Blue's Waters* and *In Green's Jungles*. As we learned in the latter book, both stories take place after Horn's death on Green and the transportation of his soul by the Vanished People into a body that may or may not be Silk's. Along the way, of course, we get a lot of thought about the nature of God and morality and good government and personal responsibility

and all the other things you usually get from Wolfe.

I should say that as a pure story the *Book of the Short Sun* is a bit of a let-down. Both of its predecessors have a clear climax. In the *Book of the New Sun* Severian climbs from being an apprentice torturer to being Autarch. In the *Book of the Long Sun* Silk becomes Caldé of Viron and instigates the migration from The Whorl to Blue and Green. Nevertheless, for anyone who has been following Wolfe's tale down the years, there is nothing to complain about. We don't expect him to explain: he hardly ever does. And dramatic finales are simply sugaring required by publishers. One of the things that Horn/Silk learns while on The Whorl is that the people and places that Horn and Nettle wrote about in the *Book of the Long Sun* don't just stop when the book ends. They carry on, they change, and they take part in new stories. After such an insight, it would be highly inappropriate for the *Book of the Short Sun* to end, and so of course it does not. Well, not in the traditional way anyway.

What it does do, as I have said, is tie up a few loose ends, and perhaps raise a few questions. In particular, Horn/Silk develops his ability to travel through dreams and once again visits the great city of Nessus and the Matachin Tower. Here, of course, there is a problem. If Severian had met Horn/Silk, surely he would have written about the meeting in the *Book of the New Sun*. I wondered for a while whether Wolfe had planned the whole thing all those years ago. Should I re-read *Shadow of the Torturer* looking for clues about Horn/Silk's visits? Thankfully this is one occasion where Wolfe took pity on his readers. Horn/Silk asks Severian about the book he is planning to write. "Oh, I'll get round to it one day", says the young torturer, "but I won't put you in it, no one would believe me."

Such games, however, are peripheral, and are probably there as a gesture of thanks to loyal readers. The true message of the book, as ever, is moral. Several of the books reviewed in this issue of *Emerald City* bemoan the current state of the human condition. Some of them give a message of hope. One — Sheri Tepper's — teaches that we must do what its author says or be punished. Only Wolfe says that the solution lies not with simple platitudes, or adherence to political doctrine, but within ourselves. Only Wolfe sets out to encourage each and every one of us to be better people, and to help us along the road to that goal.

Wolfe, I know, is a Catholic, but apart from the black robes that his clergy wear, and the Sign of Addition that is the symbol of the Great God Pas, there is little that is overtly Christian in his teaching. Yes, he holds that belief in God is a necessary spur to moral behaviour, but he doesn't make the common Christian mistake of placing non-belief at the head of the list of sins. Wolfe's religion is something that I think anyone, from any faith (or non-faith) could relate to. Above all, he makes us question the things we do, and our motives for doing them.

Towards the end of the book, Hoof, Horn's son, comments that Horn/Silk is the scariest person he ever met, not because he was bad or dangerous, but because he understood people so well. You were always afraid that he would suddenly tell you just how bad a person you really were, and he would be right. But at the same time you knew that, no matter how bad you were, he loved you anyway.

That, of course, is a vision of Jesus, and it is a good one. But it is only A vision. There are others which Wolfe rejects. No where does Silk ever tell people that they are saved because they follow him. It is up to them to save themselves. Nor does he ever ask to be worshipped. Indeed, he is harder on himself than he is on anyone

else. He, like us, is human and fallible. If all Christians in the world were like Wolfe I would sign up tomorrow.

Of course they are not, and much of what happens in the *Book of the Short Sun* can be seen as a commentary on modern Christian thought. In particular Horn/Silk makes it very clear that religious teachings should adapt to circumstances and not cling blindly to something just because it was said or written by some great figure at some time in the past. Even the gods, he says, show different faces to different people at different times, depending on circumstances.

I could go on like this for ages, but I should not. There are other books to read and review, and in any case this is not a theology magazine. Suffice it to say that if you want to see the writer's craft at its very best, and if you want to read books that will leave you pondering over their message for weeks on end afterwards, you too should be reading Gene Wolfe.

*Return to the Whorl* - Gene Wolfe - Tor - hardcover

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## Accidental Stupidity

The new novel from Dan Simmons is one of the most manufactured books I have read in a long time. That, of course, is because it is a thriller, not SF. Bookstores, of course, will list thrillers as serious mainstream literature as written by highbrow authors such as Geoffrey Archer. In practice, however, they are as mindlessly formulaic as any Mills & Boon. This one is a classic of the genre.

The most important element, of course, is the hardware. There should be lots of guns, ammunition, cars (the faster the better), aircraft and consumer electronics. All of these should be described in loving

detail, complete with a bewildering array of serial numbers and technical specifications. The hero should have fought bravely and honourably in Vietnam, because we all need our negative feelings about that particular conflict soothed. There should be a girl, and she should have big tits. These days she has to be comfortable around guns and cars herself (she's even called Sydney to show that she is really one of the boys at heart). But that means that she can be the sort who gets turned on by talk about guns and killing people which means you can combine the hardware scenes with the sex scenes: very useful.

There must also be bad guys. They should be unremittingly bad, and preferably Russians. These days, as we are no longer at (cold) war with Russia, they have to be Russian mafia men, all ex-KGB, of course. The climax of the book has to be a big shoot out in which the Russians try to kill the hero and the girl but get killed themselves, the more horribly the better. The more types of hardware used in the final battle the better. The police, FBI or whoever should always turn up just too late.

So far we have something that makes the Spice Girls look positively spontaneous and innovative, but *Darwin's Blade* doesn't stop there. The hero is an accident investigator, and much of the book is built around the Darwin Awards and all the other sick joke material that does the rounds of the Internet (for example the classic list of excuses after traffic accidents). All Simmons has to do is file off the serial numbers, give the stories a quick paint job, and he has half the novel written. This is almost like buying your novel from IKEA and assembling it yourself at home.

I have to admit that the book has a nice premise. Occam's razor, you will remember, says that mysteries generally have simple solutions. *Darwin's Blade*, named after the hero of the book, Darwin

Minor, states that the simplest, and therefore most likely possible solution to any mystery is to assume that the people involved behaved stupidly. Can't argue with that, and Simmons goes on to prove the point by having his characters behave with all the necessary stupidity required to produce the plot of a formula thriller.

A particular problem with the book is that it stands and falls on its own obsession with accuracy. In any thriller the hardware has to be described exactly right, otherwise the readers will quickly deluge the author with mail pointing out that it was only the 1986 ZQL version of the MXF-6483B.1 JPD assault rifle that had a 35 cartridge magazine of 0.984782684 calibre shells; the version that the hero used...

This book, however, has it much worse, because Simmons sets out to get not only the technical detail but also all of the physics of the incidents involved correct. Thus, for no apparent reason, we suddenly find ourselves in the middle of a detailed discussion of the probably causes of Princess Diana's death. This is great geek stuff. We are right because we know the physics and everyone else is wrong. Hey, at one point we even get a bunch of equations. This is almost hard SF.

But, as I said, the book has to be right. And when you find that a bunch of supposed car nuts have never heard of the Audi Quattro, or you see Macallan described as a whiskey [sic] with a smoky, peaty flavour, you do start to lose faith. Also Simmons really shouldn't insert barbed comments about Americans making verbs from nouns and splitting infinitives if he is then going to describe a gun as having been "accurized".

Of course I suspect that Simmons will earn a lot more money from this book than he ever got for Hyperion. After all, this is serious mainstream literature, not some mindless science fiction crap. I should also point out that, while the book

is for the most part relentlessly juvenile, this shouldn't be taken to mean that the quality of the writing is any the less. Simmons is very good with words. There is also the small saving grace that right at the end of the book he makes a subtle comment about just how stupid the people who read this sort of stuff are.

None of this, however, can take away the fact that I sped through the book in a few hours, partly because it was all so predictable, and partly because vast swathes of it were there only to satisfy the hardware fanatics. What a shame to see a writer of Simmons' undoubted skill wasting his time on such vacuous nonsense.

*Darwin's Blade* - Dan Simmons - Morrow - hardcover

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## Island in the Flood

I got hold of this book because several people have been mentioning it as a possible Hugo nomination. I was impressed with the one book by Sean Stewart that I have read (*Resurrection Man*, *Emerald City* #60) so I figured that this was a lead I should follow up.

*Galveston* is set in the same world as *Resurrection Man* (and, I believe, several other Stewart novels). It is a world in which wild magic has been gradually seeping back into the world. By the time of *Galveston* whatever breach existed in the dike of rationality has been blown wide apart. An event known as The Flood saw magic sweep through our world, tearing civilisation away like so much flotsam. On the small island of Galveston, Texas, however, two determined women, a lawyer and a witch, have managed to hold back the tide. Galveston's magic has been confined to Mardi Gras - a world that exists alongside the real town. In that magic land, Momus, the mad god of the

Moon, waits patiently for his adversaries to die, as they must, so that his kingdom can reach out and swallow reality.

Thus far *Galveston* sounds very much like a rather bad fantasy novel. It is, however, anything but that. Stewart's handle on magic is fey, scary, and 100% mythic. There are no rules save the one that Momus has posted at the entrance to his kingdom: "It doesn't get any better than this".

Momus never lies, but nothing he says ever has a single possible interpretation. Never forget that when dealing with him, or you will find that you have agreed to something entirely different to what you had assumed. *Galveston* is on a knife-edge; its safety hanging by the thread of two fragile lives. And it really doesn't get any better than this.

The other seemingly constant feature of a Sean Stewart offering is that, regardless of the outward plot, the book is actually a coming of age novel. In this particular case Stewart showcases two characters: Sloane Gardener, the meek dutiful daughter of *Galveston*'s effective ruler, and Josh Cane, a young man whose family has fallen on hard times.

As character studies, both young people are very well done. Sloane is transfixed by the knowledge that she has neither the strength of character nor the cunning to take over running the town when her mother, Jane, dies. She has tried very hard, but has only succeeded in suppressing her natural exuberance and flirtatiousness. Sooner or later the dam has to break, and the more scared she becomes the more tempting it is to run.

Josh is a very different character. Smart, and encouraged to develop his wits by his parents, he is thrown into a different world when his father loses their house in a poker game. His mother refuses to accept that they are now poor, and young Josh grows up unable to relate to the society he is now part of. His boyhood

crush on Sloane, who is now unlikely to deign to speak to him, further exacerbates his sense of injustice and desire to work his way back into polite society.

As an attack on the selfishness and hypocrisy of Texan society the book is also very successful. Stewart is a Canadian now living in Texas and I can quite imagine that he finds some of his new neighbours rather repulsive. I know very little about Texas, but the picture Stewart paints of the arrogance and insensitivity of rich people in a small town is instantly familiar to people from any culture. Stewart even has the sense to realise that these people have political power, and that sometimes you have to deal with them, regardless of how nauseating they are.

But what of the story? Sadly it is rather limp and predictable. It is pretty obvious from the start that certain things have to happen. There is no point in having a coming of age novel if the characters in question don't grow up. It is also very quickly obvious that Stewart is not so gauche as to have a happy ending. From that point on there are few surprises. The writing is excellent, but the plot is dull.

I have this awful feeling that Stewart is caught in the same sort of rut as Rob Holdstock. He has one book that he can write, and he produces innumerable variations of it, each more depressing than the last. This is a real shame, because his talent as a writer, and in particular his evocation of magic, mark him out as an author to watch. He ought to be able to produce a Hugo-worthy book, but this isn't it.

*Galveston* - Sean Stewart - Ace - softcover

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## My Way Or Else

This is the work of a sick and hate-filled mind.

Sheri Tepper's novels have become increasingly didactic and intolerant down the years. They have, on occasions, suggested various interesting schemes for wiping out civilisation, mankind, or even the entire universe. Mostly, however, they have had some redeeming features. Some of Tepper's earlier work, such as *Grass*, *Beauty* and *The Gate to Women's Country* still count amongst my favourite books. With *The Fresco*, however, Tepper has finally achieved a level of bigotry and intolerance that ought to put her beyond the pale in any civilised society.

Ostensibly *The Fresco* is a first contact novel. A couple of alien diplomats from a species called the Pistach arrive on Earth with an invitation for us to join a galactic federation. Their mission is urgent, because some less scrupulous members of the federation are known to prey upon newly discovered civilisations and, unless Earth can obtain membership quickly, the Pistach and their allies will have no legal right to protect Earth from predation.

This plot, however, is simply a thin excuse for Tepper to indulge in an extended rant against anyone and anything of which she disapproves. The fact that many of her targets are pretty unpleasant people (corrupt politicians, wife-beaters, the Taliban) doesn't excuse her methods. The Pistach simply move in, establish a set of rules for moral behaviour, and then proceed to enforce them by means of superior technology. The whole book is, in effect, a giant revenge fantasy in which Tepper gets to have her "heroic" Pistach do awful things to anyone she disapproves of.

Nor are all of Tepper's targets obviously deserving. She reserves some of her most venomous bile for the American Civil Liberties Union. This is an organisation that has occasionally offended the general

public by defending the right of free speech for all, even the likes of neo-Nazis. However, Tepper paints them as a group that exists solely to prevent the police from doing their job, in particular from harassing young black and Hispanic males whom Tepper seems to believe are all drug dealers and rapists.

Even more objectionable is the picture that Tepper paints of Pistach society, and holds up as an ideal of how humans should organise as well. The Pistach believe that all people are destined, pretty much from birth, for a particular type of life. When they reach adolescence they are formally examined and assigned to a type of work that suits them best. It is part of their philosophy that certain types of people are irredeemably stupid and lazy, and there is no point in trying to educate them. They should also be prevented from breeding.

There is a name for this sort of belief. It is "eugenics". Theories like this were very popular in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and they provided the basis for many racist political platforms culminating, of course, in Nazism. Tepper would doubtless claim that the superior technology of the Pistach would allow them to correctly assess every human for suitability without any racial bias. But of course the Pistach are a myth of her devising. In reality the person doing the choosing is her.

Tepper's extremism aside, there is an important issue hiding here. One of the differences I have noticed between Britain and the US is in the treatment of immigrants. In the UK immigrant communities are pretty much left to get on with their lives. They become British Pakistanis, British Jamaicans, British Chinese or whatever. In America there is much more of an expectation that immigrants should become Americans and adopt American culture.

This issue surfaced in the Potlatch debate on diversity. At the time we (the panel)



steered the audience away from it because the point of the panel was to talk about books, not politics. However, it is an interesting question. Cory Doctorow pointed out that in Toronto some immigrant communities (I think he mentioned Somalis) are demanding the right to practice their culture in full, including so-called "female circumcision". Lyn Paleo countered that multiculturalism was all very well, but that people shouldn't be allowed to get government funding for such objectionable practices - that presumably would entail no access to government health services for performing the operation.

Now I happen to agree with Lyn that clitoridectomy is an offensive practice, particular when forced upon girls who are too young to know what is being done to them. But there is an open question here. As Cory put it, Lyn's view smacks of "a la carte multiculturalism". You can't pick and choose. To say "you can practice your own culture provided that what you do is not offensive to white, middle-class, liberal Americans" is simply the first step on the road to thinking like Sheri Tepper. Diversity requires acceptance of other forms of behaviour, even if you might find them distasteful. Once you start trying to define forms of cultural behaviour as immoral you get into very deep water.

Returning to *The Fresco*, I am finding it difficult to complete my comments on the book without a small spoiler. If you object to such things, don't read the next paragraph.

While much of the book is simply an opportunity for Tepper to be rude in print about people she dislikes, the message of the book is even more pernicious. Tepper has always stood out against those groups who believe unquestioningly in some religious cult. Her previous books have encouraged freedom of thought and the rejection of beliefs that are held solely

because they are written in some holy text. In *The Fresco*, however, she makes it clear that this applies only to unquestioning beliefs with which she disagrees. In contrast, she says, having unquestioning belief in the rightness of Sheri Tepper's political and moral views is a fine and admirable thing that people should do, even if they have to be tricked into it. That, ladies and gentlemen, is a complete betrayal of much that Tepper has stood for throughout her career, and is on its own deserving of *The Fresco* being consigned to the garbage bin.

I note that along the way Tepper has her Pistach hero comment that one career for which his people are never selected is that of literary critic. Amongst the Pistach expressing views on the quality of other people's artistic endeavours is deemed highly impolite. Well I'm being rude, very rude. *The Fresco* is an offensive book written by someone whose bitterness and despair about the state of the world has driven her to a position of complete contempt for humanity. In doing so she has become the very sort of person that she has always railed against. It is very sad.

*The Fresco* - Sheri Tepper - Eos - hardcover

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## Dangerous Critters

Continuing with the first contact theme we come to *Infinity Beach* by Jack McDevitt. I have not read any of his work before, but a couple of people recommended this book for a Hugo nomination, and it has made the final ballot for the Nebulas. It seemed to me that this was a book I should investigate.

*Infinity Beach* is a sort of mystery-SF crossover. Although it is a first contact story, the plot of the book revolves around the mysterious disappearance of

the heroine's sister, 27 years ago, shortly after her return from a search for extraterrestrial life. The prologue to the book makes it clear that ETs were found, and that they were hostile. The reader is then left to watch as the naïve and romantic heroine, Kim Brandywine, goes off in search of the ETs herself.

There is a lot to admire in this book. McDevitt's science is good, the pacing is generally enticing, and best of all Jack is not afraid to toss the reader the occasional vicious curveball. Not until right at the very end are you quite sure that you have got the full story of what really happened. After the first few chapters I was expecting to thoroughly dislike this book, but McDevitt was just playing dumb. The reality was a lot better than the veneer he presented at the start.

Unfortunately I also came away with the view that this was a book whose plot logic was driven primarily by what the author wanted to write about and not any sort of rational behaviour on the part of the characters. I could not for the life of me see why the deeply suspicious disappearance of Kim's sister and her colleagues was not more fully investigated at the time, nor why the police were unable to uncover the clues that Kim found so easily. Also I do not understand how Kim managed to get away with some of the stunts she pulls in the book. It is all a bit far fetched, and that is a shame.

I should also add that there is very little new in this book. All of the serious detail of first contact has been well-covered in books such as Niven & Pournelle's *The Mote in God's Eye*. The only thing that McDevitt brings to the topic is the mystery structure of the book and that, as I explained, is the one thing that doesn't work well.

None of which is to say that this is a bad book. It is for the most part well written. It is engaging and entertaining. The way in which the alien spacecraft is hidden in

particularly neat. But it is not, by any stretch of the imagination, an award winner. Given that this book and *Galveston* are among the strong recommendations for this year's Hugos, I wonder what has happened to SF over the past year.

*Infinity Beach* - Jack McDevitt - Eos - softcover

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## The Art of Anticipation

The final stop on our brief tour of first contact novels belongs to Joe Haldeman. His latest work, *The Coming*, deals not with actual contact itself, but rather with how the world would react if we knew that They were Coming. The book is set in a small, sleepy town in Florida made briefly famous by the fact that an astronomy professor at the local university happened to be the first person on Earth to notice the calling card from the aliens. "*We're Coming*", they said, and with the application of a little simple math to the signal data Dr. Aurora Bell deduced that Earth had just three months to prepare.

The drama plays out in the expected way with politicians, media men and academic politics getting in the way of developing a sensible strategy. Even the local gangsters trying to get in on the act by blackmailing Dr. Bell's closet gay husband. It is a depressing, if probably rather accurate view of human nature. In Haldeman's world, both politicians and the media are completely divorced from reality, caring only about how things might seem today and not what is true or what might happen tomorrow. I would be prepared to dismiss it as an old man's whingeing had I not had the misfortune to watch the California energy crisis unfold before my eyes, driven by exactly the sort of stupidity and wilful ignorance of the facts that Haldeman describes.

I should also point out that, whilst Joe complains loudly about many of the same issues of social disintegration that so rile Sheri Tepper, he has Tepper's motivation down pat. Dan Jordan, a local journalist is out and about in Gainesville searching for newsworthy man-in-the-street comment. At last he finds a fruitcake who thinks that the alien visitation is all a big hoax.

*"And what will the government or conglomerates gain?" Dan asks.*

*"More and better control over us. Thought control! [...] These aliens will be presented to us as unassailably superior savants. What they say is true, we will have to accept as truth. Who could argue with creatures who came umpty-ump light-years to save us?"*

Given that the two books were published quite close to each other it seems unlikely that Haldeman was commenting directly on Tepper's work, but it seems so appropriate to imagine him peering over her shoulder as she wrote and grinning to himself as he penned that wonderful put-down.

I should say that not much about *The Coming* is science fiction. Yes, the book does have a bit of astrophysics in it. Yes, it is sort of about the arrival of aliens. But really it is about people. Joe has some good things to say about the state of human society (and in particular America), but what he is really doing is writing a lovely little collection of characters.

From Sara the fire-scarred restaurant owner to Gabrielle, the med student who does porn movies to supplement her income, to Willy Joe the mafia hood, to Suzy Q, the local bag lady, the whole of Gainesville is laid out before us as an elegant patchwork. Haldeman moves effortlessly from one viewpoint character to another, handing off the plot like a relay baton as his actors enter and leave the stage. Each one is delightfully described; each one brings a new angle to the story, and a new story of their own.

Look, there are some people getting published in SF who can't write one character well. Haldeman has a whole town full, and they are all wonderful.

I was a bit nervous about this book because I had been so disappointed by *Forever Free*. But, I said at the time that I felt it was a book that Joe had been badgered into writing and that he had just done the job and turned it out. *The Coming* is very different. It is a book by an excellent writer who has set out to stretch himself in one particular area of his craft, and has done a superb job of it. Should I ever have the courage to write fiction myself I know I will need to learn how to write characters. The first thing I will do is re-read this book to see how that should be done.

*The Coming* - Joe Haldeman - Ace - hardcover

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## Best of the Web

One of the good things about being on a Worldcon committee is that you occasionally get to be on the inside of making big decisions. Both Kevin with the bid and Tom Whitmore with the con committee have been very open in allowing the troops to have a say in things. Of course this then leaves you itching to be able to talk about it, but mercifully we bashed this one around very quickly and I'm now free to tell the world. ConJosé will be awarding a special Hugo.

For those of you not familiar with the Hugo rules, each Worldcon is required to award a defined list of Hugos, but is also allowed to make one additional award of its own choosing. Intersection, the 1995 Glasgow Worldcon, tried the idea of a Best Music award. That one failed to generate much interest from the voters and was dropped after the nomination

stage. Our special Hugo, we hope, will be rather better received. It will be for Best Web Site.

Any proposal for a new Hugo category is always greeted with a high degree of scepticism from fandom at large, and by the time this issue gets out I suspect that the rasff and SMOFs mailing lists will have been buzzing with debate. But for those of you who haven't seen the issues aired, here first is the official definition of the award, followed by a short FAQ written by ConJosé's Hugo Administrator, John Lorentz.

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**Best Web Site.** Any generally accessible world wide web site whose subject is primarily related to the fields of science fiction, fantasy, or fandom, and which had content generally available during the previous calendar year.

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**Q: How can we judge web sites when the content changes over time?**

A: Just as artists often produce a continuous flow of artwork, web sites quite often change over time. Just as in the Best Artist category, our basic assumption is that Hugo voters will be making their decisions based on what they saw appear during the previous calendar year. (And just like the Best Artist category, we won't quiz the voters on the specifics they're using.) Luckily, many web sites provide archives or "issues" so that visitors can examine past content.

**Q: Does this affect any other Hugo Awards? What about fanzines that also have web sites?**

A: This category does not preclude any entity from being eligible in any permanent category. If a fanzine or semiprozine sponsors a web site, then the magazine will be judged against other magazines, and the web site itself will be judged against other web sites.

Periodicals and hyperlinked web pages are usually quite different, even if produced by the same person. There is no more a conflict than someone being up for both Best Fanzine and Best Fan Writer category.

**Q: Will there be "Best Professional Web Site" and "Best Fan Web Site" awards?**

A: No, there is only one web site Hugo award-all web sites will be judged against other web sites. (I've seen "amateur" web sites that are much nicer than any "professional" sites I've seen.) With the universal access capabilities of web sites, there's no real divide in visibility as there is with the large differences in press runs of various printed publications, and therefore no need to have a similar split in web site categories.

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OK, that's the official view, now here's my two cents worth.

Firstly, why are we doing this? Well, as those of you sad puppies who, like me, regularly attend Worldcon Business Meetings will know, there have been several attempts of late to introduce a Best Web Site Hugo. Some of these have been small-minded attempts to exclude electronically-distributed fanzines from the Best Fanzine category, but many have recognised that the Web is a new, very different, and widely accessible publication medium that deserves its own award.

Now, just because a category sounds like a good idea, it doesn't mean that it will work in practice. Adding a new Hugo at the Business Meeting is a slow process (the motion has to pass in two consecutive years) and is fairly permanent - if the category doesn't work it will take at least two more years to get rid of it. The Special Hugo provision, on the other hand, allows the idea to be tried out without it becoming a burden on future Worldcons. The Best Music category was the subject of fierce debate

at the ConAdian Business Meeting in 1994. By trying it out as a Special Hugo, Intersection was able to show that it was a bad idea without amending the WSFS Constitution. Best Artwork, on the other hand, was put through the Business Meeting first and was something of an embarrassment for several years before it could be voted away again. Special Hugos are a very good way to trial new ideas for Hugos. Best Web Site is a popular suggestion, and a Worldcon in Silicon Valley seems to be an ideal place to make that trial.

So if the idea does work, what happens next? Well, if the nomination list looks good, and ConJosé's Hugo committee isn't going round with red faces, I suspect that there may well be a motion before ConJosé's Business Meeting to make the web site Hugo permanent. Of course it will need to pass in Toronto as well, but the Toronto committee may decide to continue the experiment (unless they have any better ideas of their own).

Do I think it will work? Yes, I do. I have three main criteria that I consider when considering a change to the Hugos:

- Will there be sufficient competition?
- Will the Award be easy to administer? And
- Will the Award add to the prestige of the Hugos.

I think in all cases the answer is yes. There are hundreds of sites out there that qualify for the award, including some, such as scifi.com and sfsite.com, that are very high profile.

John Lorentz (supported by Kevin) has already said that he foresees no major problems in administering the award. There may be a few issues to do with sub-sites. For example, sfsite.com provides web space to a number of SF magazines. Those sub-sites are clearly independently maintained entities and should presumably be considered as separate

sites. A slightly greyer area exists around things such as Ellen Datlow's *SciFiction* magazine which might be viewed as a separate sub-site but might be viewed as a "column" within scifi.com in the same way that say, Gary Wolfe writes a column for *Locus*. Here it will depend to some extent on what voters do, but it is clearly in the interests of scifi.com to have everyone vote for the site as a whole, and if they encourage people to do so most people probably will.

Which brings us to the final point. I expect that the major commercial sites will campaign for the Hugo. I also think this is a good thing, because it will bring the Hugos to the attention of a much wider audience during the nomination process. It will mean more publicity for ConJosé, and Worldcons in general. It might even recruit people into fandom. I'm expecting Best Web Site to get almost as much attention from voters as Best Novel and Best Dramatic Presentation.

The question about amateur and professional sites is a good one. Clearly an operation like scifi.com has a lot more resources than a fan site, or an author site. On the other hand that doesn't necessarily make it a better web site. Most company web sites are very badly designed. Some commercial sites try to get too clever with their programming and crash under anything other than the latest release of Internet Explorer. Others are so graphics-intensive that they are unusable on anything less than DSL. Voters should bear that sort of thing in mind. Commercial site content can also be very poor, especially when they don't pay contributors. A non-profit magazine that pays decent rates, such as *Strange Horizons*, will have better content than a commercial site that pays contributors only in egoboo.

In any case, the question is moot. We are only allowed one Special Hugo. If it turns out that there is a problem, the Business Meeting can always vote to split the

category. However, that might prove problematical and lead to something as complex as the semiprozine definition. For example, most convention web sites are run by corporations, and sell memberships, but are quite clearly fan sites. The *Emerald City* web site sells books.

Another good thing about the web site Hugo is that it is truly international. A web site can be accessed anywhere in the world, no matter where it is published. This means that British sites such as *At the World's End* and *Infinity Plus* are in with a chance, as are Australian sites such as *Eidolon*. This does depend to some extent on voters knowing that sites exist, but you are all going to send me recommendations, aren't you.

Do I have any predictions? Well, I have already mentioned a few commercial sites that I think will do very well simply because they are so well known and have such great resources. The *Locus* site is actually pretty good and I think Charlie Brown will warm to the idea of getting two Hugos a year rather than one. For pure content I think that sites like *Strange Horizons* are hard to beat. I also think that some fan-run sites such as the *SF Resource Guide* are sufficiently useful that they stand a good chance against their more wealthy competitors. And I could be very tempted to give a nomination to *Brightweavings*, the Guy Gavriel Kay web site, because there is so much background material there. I am looking forward to a very interesting competition.

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## Miscellany

### BASFA Hugo nominations

The Hugo nomination deadline is now less than a week away. As usual, the Bay Area Science Fiction Association has held

its discussion meetings on the subject, and the members have been kind enough to allow me to add their recommendations to the *Emerald City* web site. If you have not yet voted, and you need something to jog your memory, check out [http://www.emcit.com/hugo\\_rec.shtml](http://www.emcit.com/hugo_rec.shtml) and you will find some fine recommendations.

As of next issue nominations will be closed and I will be opening the 2001 recommendation list. That, of course, will include recommendations for Best Web Site. Please note that the sooner you get your suggestions to me the sooner other people can check them out.

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### Nebula final ballot

The final nomination lists for this year's Nebula Awards are now out. The nominees for Best Novel are: *Darwin's Radio* (Greg Bear); *A Civil Campaign* (Lois McMaster Bujold); *Midnight Robber* (Nalo Hopkinson); *Crescent City Rhapsody* (Kathleen Ann Goonan); *Infinity Beach* (Jack McDevitt); and *Forests of the Heart* (Charles de Lint).

Note that the Nebulas operate on a different time scale than the Hugos. Both the Bear and the Bujold were 1999 publications and were nominated for the Hugo at Chicon 2000. I'm delighted to see *Midnight Robber* in the list as it is an excellent book and on my Hugo list for this year. *Infinity Beach* is reviewed in this issue. *Crescent City Rhapsody* is sitting in my "to read" pile, but I won't get to it quickly as I still have *Mississippi Blues* to read first.

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### Aurealis results

Marc Ortlieb reports in his SF Bullsheets that Sean McMullen's *The Miocene Arrow* won the Aurealis Award for Best SF Novel. Separate awards are given for Best Fantasy Novel and Best Horror Novel.

These were given to *Son of the Shadows* by Juliet Marillier and *The Resurrectionists* by Kim Wilkins respectively.

Marc also lists the nominees for this year's Ditmars, Australia's fan awards, but there has been so much nonsense going on over the past couple of years with changes in the rules, ridiculously short voting deadlines, and "corrected" results that I have completely lost faith in the validity of the Ditmars. Darwin's Blade suggests that all of this is probably a result of incompetence rather than malfeasance on the part of Natcon committees, but either way it doesn't look good.

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### **Last issue's poll**

For the record, the result of last issue's poll was a narrow victory for *Pavane*. However, the number of people participating has dropped so low that I really don't see any point in continuing running the polls. It was an interesting experiment, but not something I am going to waste any more time and effort on.

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### **This month on IGoUGo**

The travel journal I have contributed this month is mainly about a failed Worldcon site. It focuses on the area of San Francisco around Yerba Buena gardens, and thus includes many of the wonderful places that we would have been directing you to had the 2002 Worldcon been in San Francisco. As it is we will be in San José instead, but San Francisco is only an hour or two away so if you want to know what to do on a day trip to The City my journal may be of interest. As usual, go to <http://www.igougo.com> and search for Cheryl Morgan under Guide name.

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### **This month on Strange Horizons**

If you are reading this online you may have noticed that the *Emerald City* web site currently has a direct link through to *Strange Horizons* (and vice-versa). Yes, this is cross-marketing, but I'm hoping that some of you will be interested in the interview with Brian Stableford that I have on the *Strange Horizons* site.

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### **Footnote**

This issue of *Emerald City* is dedicated to Eric Larson, a very dear friend and long-time subscriber who is currently undergoing serious medical treatment. Eric, I know that everyone at BASFA and on the ConJosé committee will join me in wishing you the very best. We look forward to having the pleasure of your company for many years to come.

For next issue I am expecting to get hold of the new novels by Brian Stableford, Tad Williams (volume 4 in the *Otherland* series) and Ian McDonald (the third part of the *Chaga* series). Also news of Neil Gaiman's forthcoming novel, *American Gods*. Plus, of course, the Eastercon report and, if all goes well, a feature on print-on-demand publishing.

Ciao,

Love 'n' hugs,

Cheryl