

EMERALD CITY #71

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Introduction

This issue is a little light on the book reviews, but there is plenty of other stuff that I hope you will find interesting. I did have one other book ready to review, but this issue is a big one anyway and I would like to get a bit ahead of myself for next month.

Why would I want to do that? In theory I should be starting a job in California any day now. I have the work permit. It and my passport are currently at the US Embassy being turned into a visa. They are due back any day now. I'm trying to not worry.

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Bright New Dawn

It has been convention time again, but this con was a little different to the ones I usually report on. 2001: A Celebration of British SF was not run by fans, but rather by the Science Fiction Foundation, an academic institution. This is not to say, of course, that the academics involved were not fans of SF. You pretty much have to be a fan to put up with the marginalisation of SF studies that happens in British universities. But it did mean a somewhat different flavour to the convention. Also, with around 20 authors out of 100 attendees, there was a very good chance of getting to talk to interesting people.

Liverpool gets hot

First up though, the usual con-running stuff for the benefit of all you SMOFs out there. The convention was held at the Foresight Centre at the University of Liverpool. It is a purpose-adapted conference centre in one of the University's Victorian buildings. Generally speaking this was good. We had decent rooms, comfortable chairs, a good social area, and some interesting

architecture. Sadly Liverpool chose that particular weekend to have summer and it got very humid. There was air conditioning, but it looked almost as old as the building and it was loud. We coped, and you can't blame the con for a freak occurrence of warm weather in England. I look upon it as practice for Philadelphia, which as all fans of the musical *1776* know, is legendary for its humidity.

Accommodation was in the Gladstone Hotel, which is conveniently situated behind Lime Street Station. It was a short walk (about 5 minutes) from the hotel to the Foresight Centre, but it was uphill. Fortunately you could always find a cab - the taxi queue from Lime Street goes right past the hotel entrance - so less mobile members were not overly inconvenienced. I coped easily, apart from the day I walked up with China Miéville who is vastly more fit than I am. I can now tell everyone that China leaves me breathless.

The Gladstone itself is sadly shabby, but for a British city centre hotel it was remarkably good value for money and the rooms had all the facilities I could have asked for except Sky Sports. Not that I got to see the Lions game anyway, as I was chairing a panel at the time. The hotel is in line for a major refurbishment, which will probably double the prices, but in the meantime it is a bargain. It also has some of the friendliest concierges I have ever met.

High-powered programme

This was, without a doubt, the most heavily programmed convention I have ever attended. Four streams for a 100-person convention is way over the top by normal standards. However, we had to fit everything in. There were lots of people who wanted to give papers: so many that it filled two streams. Plus we had a

stream of discussion panels, and one of author readings.

The inevitable result of this was that one or two programme items were poorly attended. Farah Mendlesohn explained to me that she had tried hard to balance the attractiveness of competing sessions, and most of the time it worked well. Sometimes, however, things went wrong. For example, the fact that Mary Gentle was sick and could not attend killed the audience for the other two writers scheduled to read in the same session as her. I was very disappointed that hardly anyone came to the panel on the role of fanzines in criticism (huge thanks to Tom Arden for being the only non-fan to attend the whole thing). However, I later discovered that the session of papers on Iain Banks was also poorly attended - everyone was in the session on Arthur C. Clarke.

On reflection, I think it is wonderful that all this stuff went on. As at Wiscon, I generally found myself wishing that I could be in at least two places at once much of the time. The good news is that the University of Liverpool is hoping to publish a book containing the best papers from the conference so I should be able to catch up on a lot of what I missed.

Dining arrangements

An unusual aspect of the convention was that lunch and dinner were communal. The Foresight Centre did the catering, and it was for the most part excellent. I did miss the usual convention tradition of going out and finding good restaurants, but the arrangements had two definite advantages. Firstly I spent an awful lot less money on food than I would have done had I eaten out. And second, I got to talk to a lot more people. Would I have got to sit next to M. John Harrison at dinner at an ordinary con? Almost certainly not.

Talking of mixing, there was no set dinner on the Thursday night, but members were still encouraged to get to know each other. Each of the Foundation's staff had arranged to go to a specific local restaurant (one Indian, one Chinese, one Mexican, etc.). If you wanted a dinner group, you just had to find the right person and tag along. It worked very well, and if I ever run a convention of that size I may well steal the idea.

Critics panel

OK, so what about the actual panels? Did anyone have anything interesting to say? Is the sky blue?

The programme item I most wanted to attend was scheduled for first thing on Friday morning. Nothing like starting on a high note, huh? It was about the role of critics and reviewers, and it featured my two personal heroes amongst SF critics, John Clute and Gary K. Wolfe. I found this panel very encouraging, primarily because it shored up my own self-confidence in what I am doing. To explain why requires a short digression.

Last year Bruce Gillespie published an issue of SF Commentary that included much of the critical writing of the late George Turner. Right up the front was George's article, "On writing about science fiction". George was never one to mince words, and on the subject of reviewing he is very firm. "*Don't attempt criticism in the space of a review*", he says. "*You cannot say anything useful about ultimate values in the space of a few hundred words and still provide the information which is the purpose of your review.*"

That advice has haunted me ever since. I know that whatever criticism I offer about a book will be woefully inadequate. I am, after all, nowhere near as well read as Wolfe or Clute. But it worried me that Turner felt I was writing bad reviews and bad criticism. I was therefore much

cheered that both Wolfe and Clute felt that there was a cross-over between reviewing and criticism, and that this was a good thing.

Clute even provided a justification. It was essential, he said, that there be some criticism that engages with the "present tense" of a book rather than relying only on what comes out of "the contemplation crypt of academia". He is right too. Not only does a review provide a contemporary reaction to a book, but it may provide the only reaction. There are far more SF authors than SF academics, and inevitably attention focuses on writers such as Le Guin, who is easy to analyse, rather than, say, Aldiss, who has written many very different works (that example, I think by Wolfe, being carefully chosen because Brian was in the audience).

Further justification was provided by Wolfe on the grounds that much academic attention to SF is inappropriate. Too much literary criticism of SF, he said, focused on how you can read SF as if it were ordinary fiction because it discusses some of the same themes. That's a bit like asking a coffee expert to comment on the quality of a beer on the grounds that they both have a bitter taste. Proper criticism of SF needs to discuss the genre in its own right, not in reference to something else that it is not. And if academia doesn't provide the appropriate analysis, others have to do it for them. Fortunately, as the convention progressed, it became clear that much good academic criticism was being done but, as Clute pointed out, it is nowhere near enough to cover the whole field.

Feminism panel

As I explained last issue, this panel was entirely my own fault. I'm pleased to say that it went very well, for which I have to thank my panellists: Gwyneth Jones, Nicola Griffith, Jenny Wolmark and

Jennifer Swift, not to mention the (mainly female) audience. Overall the panel was quite downbeat, and this I think was a result of the current state of confusion in which feminism finds itself. These days the issues, at least here in the West, are much less clear cut. Sex discrimination is at least nominally illegal, and separatism has for the most part been rejected as a solution. We no longer need books that shout out, "look, see how bad things are". But exactly what sort of books we need is another matter. I think that Caroline Mullan was right when she said that we need more fiction like Maureen McHugh's that deals with personal issues rather than globally political ones, but you have to wonder how such stuff will sell.

I also wish I had known a bit more beforehand about Gwyneth and Nicola's views on the current state of fiction and of SF in particular. Both of them believe in the need to tell a good story first, and this leads them to dislike much feminist SF as unduly polemical. They have a point, and Nicola in particular was still smarting from having had her latest book rejected by a literary publisher on the grounds that it was "a rattling good read". Under such circumstances, I too would be railing against message-centred fiction.

I'd like to make brief mention here too of the radicalism panel. This one was packed, I suspect in part because it had China, Ken MacLeod and Jon Courtenay Grimwood on it and all us girls were there to ogle. It didn't, I think, raise quite so many interesting points, but Paul McAuley did offer a very useful idea.

A problem with any political fiction, be it feminist, Socialist or whatever, is writing about how things will be after the Revolution. Whatever vision you come up with, it is likely that many people will feel that it is no better, or even worse, than what we have now. Personally I don't believe in Utopias, but for those who do think that politics can make a

substantial improvement McAuley offered the idea of the Utopian Singularity. The idea here is that the transition to Utopia involves a phase change in consciousness (such as, for example, that resulting from symbiosis with the fungus in Sheri Tepper's *Raising the Stones*). Being stuck in our current mode of thought, we are unable to see beyond that event horizon to how things will be after the Revolution. OK, so it might seem a bit daft, but it is a nice SF idea.

Academic papers

I attended two sessions at which academic papers were given, and I must admit that beforehand I was rather worried that I would not understand a word of them. I am pleased to say that my fears were unfounded. I have to confess that in the heat and humidity it was quite hard to concentrate on a single speaker for 20 minutes or so, especially if the delivery was rather monotonic. Yes, I did nod off briefly on a few occasions. But by and large the content was interesting and informative.

The first session I saw got me wanting to buy books. Andy Butler introduced us to *The Continuous Katherine Mortenhoe*, by D.G. Compton, an SF novel from the late sixties that predicted the advent of things like docusoaps, Big Brother and EdTV. That is a book I think I need to read. I do wish, however, that Andy would leave Freud out of his analysis. I really don't believe that everything can be explained in terms of sex (and in fact I think he missed something important about the book because of this narrow focus).

Maureen Kincaid Speller (yes, there were fans giving academic papers) introduced us to the Corlay trilogy by Richard Cowper, another late 60s-early 70s product that has some interesting mythological content. What is more, the dealers' room had two of the three books,

so I'm well on the way to being able to review these. Roger Luckhurst's panel on M. John Harrison was a bit of a disappointment. It is rather facile to describe Harrison's work as "post-imperial melancholy". Any reader would notice that. Besides, as Mike pointed out, he's post-imperial, melancholic, and proud of it, which is rather different than wallowing in it. However, as a Welsh person, I did rather like Luckhurst's comment that, "to be English is to be a member of a cult of the dead". Perhaps they should all become Goths.

The other academic session I attended was about Ken MacLeod and all three panellists had an interesting take on his work. John Arnold, an historian, talked about historical causality in MacLeod's work. Joan Gordon discussed the battle between rival Utopias in *The Cassini Division*. And James Brown provided a fascinating discussion of how MacLeod and Banks redeem the concept of plot in fiction.

It was all good stuff, but I guess the thing that came out of it most strongly is how good a writer MacLeod is. It is easy to see his work simply as political adventure stories, but it would not be possible to write three excellent academic papers on different aspects of his work if there were not vast depths to be explored. I confidently expect MacLeod to be as well studied as Le Guin in ten years time. He is very smart, and the nature of his work lends itself very easily to critical analysis.

MacLeod confesses CIA link

The Guest of Honour talks were all given in the evening along with dinner. The idea was to have them as after-dinner speeches, but some of them were given before dinner as Nicola Griffith was suffering a bit from jet lag and wasn't sure that she could make it to after dinner.

These sessions were the scene of the one major embarrassment of the convention. Brian Aldiss had brought a few photographic slides with him, and the Foresight Centre had only provided an overhead transparency projector. Fortunately Nicola's jet lag had led us to discover the problem before dinner, and we therefore had eating time to rectify the problem. It all turned out right in the end, and as I heard someone comment later, Brian has done so many public speaking engagements that he is probably used to such things. However, there is an important con-running point here. Even if the site is providing all of your tech needs, you need someone on the team who is on top of all of the tech requirements.

The GoH talks were each very different. John Clute had given his as the opening session on Thursday afternoon, and I'll come back to that later. That still left five to come. Nicola, for reasons explained above, gave an impassioned plea for stories to be entertaining. Stephen Baxter, revelling in being a GoH in his native Liverpool, gave an entertaining talk on football in science fiction. He even managed to find a former Liverpool star who was an SF fan. Brian Aldiss talked about acupuncture, complete with the famous slides that, as it turned out, featured Chinese doctors performing major surgery with only a few well-placed needles for anaesthetic. Fortunately for our dinner, this was only a small part of the talk, and for the rest of the time Brian generalised onto a theme that the impossible might be just around the corner.

Saturday night was the turn of Gwyneth Jones and Ken MacLeod. Gwyneth treated us to a re-telling of her own cyber-odyssey, starting, as mine did, with a Commodore PET. She made some interesting points about how a computer is a writer-friendly machine whereas a typewriter was always the enemy (yes, I

too remember carbon paper, and I bet you never had to cut stencils, Gwyneth).

Towards the end she moved onto computer games and the future of fiction, wondering whether writers would one day be out of work because readers were all creating their own stories online. A year ago I would have taken her on, explaining how over 10 or so years in role-playing I had lamentably failed to encourage the creation of good drama. Most games players, after all, are only interested in learning and exploiting the rules. And the only fiction to come out of D&D was stuff like the Weiss & Hickman fantasy books.

In the past year, however, I have discovered Juliet McKenna who does D&D-based fiction rather well. Jo Walton, who began her career writing gaming material, has had her first novel published by Tor and is a Campbell nominee. And a couple of months ago I interviewed a young man who was passionate about role-playing in his teens and who still buys game material to help him think about world building. He had just produced his second fantasy novel, and his name was China Miéville. So maybe Gwyneth is right after all.

And so to Ken MacLeod, who opted not to talk about books at all, but rather to deliver a classic after-dinner speech, complete with self-deprecatory joke. It was a long and rambling tale about how the young MacLeod, in his student days, had been persuaded to help smuggle contraband literature into Czechoslovakia. Ken, after all, was a Trot and therefore disapproved of Communist states as much as he disapproved of Margaret Thatcher.

As can be imagined, it was all something of a comedy of errors. It had all the usual student stuff except Fat Freddie's Cat. But it was an actual, genuine piece of political espionage, albeit involving only mild contraband like copies of *Time* magazine and letters home from dissidents who

had fled to the West. The joke came much later, after the fall of the Soviet Empire, when the truth of such activities could be made known. Watching a TV documentary, Ken saw footage of some of the people he had worked with, and discovered to his chagrin that the CIA had funded the entire operation. So there you have it: Ken MacLeod, agent of American Imperialism.

Future of Criticism

The closing plenary session of the convention, which somehow I got invited onto, was about the future of criticism and it was, by and large, very positive. Brian Aldiss exercised his right to play elder curmudgeon and neatly topped all of Clute's eloquent analogies with a frightening vision of us all having spent the weekend sitting naked in a Jacuzzi gazing at our collective sfnal navel. All of the rest of the comment, however, was enthusiastic, particularly about the mix of fans, authors and academics. There was talk about the trade-off between engagement with the subject and respectability in academia. Everyone present seemed to agree that we should not care who looks down their noses at us, and if that meant reading fanzine reviews of books because it was the only critical material available, why then it should be done.

There is an important point that comes out of this, which is that of finding and cataloguing material. Several of the academics pointed out that they would love to read more fannish material, but that they had no idea how to find it (they might also have pointed out that most supposed SF fanzines contain little or no mention of SF, making the job even more difficult). Obviously this has been a problem in the past, because the material had very limited circulation. Fanzine libraries do now exist, but cataloguing them and providing access is likely to be a major problem.

The web, however, provides for much easier access. There is an awful lot of material out there, and while much of it is what Paul McAuley (referring to Amazon reviews), described as mere opinion, much of it is also quite good. What it lacks is an index. The *Emerald City* web site does have a review index, but it is only a small part of a much larger corpus of fannish criticism that needs cataloguing. I am talking to a few people about what might be done. Further announcements may follow.

Workshop

The prize for the best panel session goes to a piece of guerrilla programming. Mike Harrison, Paul McAuley, John Clute and Pat Cadigan had been doing a reading, and afterwards it had segued into a discussion of just why British SF is doing so well these days. This got cut short by the need to make way for the next panel, but Mike was very enthused by what had happened and explained it all to Farah over dinner. Entirely fortuitously I was sat between them. Mike said he would very much like to try such an impromptu discussion again sometime. Farah, being her usual ferociously organised self, pointed out that there was a room free for the first session the next morning. Potlatch regulars will recognise this as a classic Algonquin session, and it worked brilliantly.

As is the nature of such things, the discussion rambled somewhat, or at least wavered back and fore between two axes. The first discussed whether the renaissance of British SF was making us more acceptable to the mainstream. The second asked why British SF was on the up whereas the American product seemed to be in a tailspin.

Axis one is, I think, something of a futile argument. Brian Aldiss said that he had heard it discussed so many times before that he had ceased to care, and Justina

Robson pointed out that it is really a question of money and power, not of literary quality. I agree with China, we should just go out and write what we write, and not care what others think of us. Mike Harrison, however, takes it more seriously. You only have to read his *In Viriconium* to see how much he cares about it, and when you are head and shoulders above most mainstream authors in ability (which Harrison undoubtedly is) it must be very frustrating to be consigned to a literary ghetto. Besides, if something does happen, it could be very good indeed.

A very positive sign comes from this year's Edinburgh Book Festival. For the first time ever their programme will include an SF stream. All the usual suspects, from Aldiss and Clute to MacLeod and Miéville, will be involved. The festival dates are August 11th - 27th and you can find more information at <http://www.edbookfest.co.uk/>. Most of the action is on the weekend 11th/12th, but Terry Pratchett is appearing on the 14th and there's more on the 18th. Here's hoping it goes well and it gets repeated in future years. The timing should fit well with the 2005 Worldcon.

Axis two is of more interest to me, particularly as I am about to leave Britain for America. I have said before in these pages, particularly with reference to the Hugo lists, how surprised I am at the lack of good SF being published in the US right now. And yet Britain seems to be overflowing with promising young authors even if some (such as Mary Gentle) have actually been around for ages. There must, I think, be something in the air.

Stephen Baxter and John Clute were keen to give credit to enablers. Baxter heaped praise on Malcolm Edwards as a publisher, and Clute did the same for David Pringle and *Interzone*. Clearly these are important factors, but then the USA has more SF publishers and more

magazines. My own view is that the answer is cultural.

We talked a bit about the end of the Cold War, the failure of the technocratic vision and the changed world environment in which America finds itself. You only have to read Kathleen Ann Goonan's nanotech series to feel the crisis of confidence afflicting American SF. Clute added that the British seem to have got over mourning their empire at last, or at least have confined it to a small group of political extremists who go around muttering about saving the pound. British writers therefore feel OK about writing positive, forward-looking fiction such as space opera. I'm not convinced myself. I suspect that Imperialism is more deep-seated than Clute thinks, and the idea of Britain attaining cultural confidence under New Labour is a bit hard to swallow. Besides, as Justina pointed out, we are living in an era of massive social anxiety about science. We should expect SF to be hated and feared, not loved.

On a slightly different tack, Richard McKinney (who is an American academic currently living in Sweden so he is allowed to say such things) opined that much of US science fiction is sound bite oriented. It limits itself to single issues, and doesn't like to engage in a wider context. Clute (who is Canadian and therefore honour-bound to insult Americans at every opportunity) added that the American public doesn't want books that will threaten the reader. Great art, he added, has a rage for disorder.

Here I think we might have something. In the past, British SF has had a reputation for being depressing and focusing on disaster stories. We have subjected ourselves to invasion from Mars; we have been almost wiped out by intelligent plants; and we ended up eating our dead in *Stand on Zanzibar*. But the truth is that we are now living in the world that John Brunner envisioned in *The Sheep Look Up*.

That very impression of powerlessness, of society being out of control in an ever-quickenning spiral of technological advance, pollution and dehumanisation is exactly the source of cultural anxiety that Justina identified.

In his GoH speech to open the convention Clute talked about the differences between British and American SF (whilst striving heroically not to say "England" when he meant "Britain"). He claimed that American SF has an essentially engineering paradigm: it is about fixing things with a smart piece of scientific thinking. British SF, in contrast, he identified as having a theatrical paradigm. It is about coping with the world as it is, not necessarily about changing it.

I would like to add to that a comment on the new wave of British space opera. At first sight it might seem that by adopting space opera British writers are expressing cultural confidence. In fact, however, their product is very different from that produced by Americans in decades past. It may share many of the same tropes, but it doesn't share the same cultural assumptions. American space opera was always very much a "we can do it" type of story. It was brash and it was glorious and in the end the hero won and put the world to rights. British space opera, in contrast, is a vast, tongue-in-cheek, Baroque edifice that has far more in common with stage operas than Flash Gordon ever did.

My thesis, then, is that British SF is on the rise because it is temperamentally better suited to the cultural conditions in which we find ourselves. No one believes any more in a technological fix, so no one wants books in which Beowulf Schaeffer will solve everything by a sharp bit of scientific thinking. They want books in which the hero copes rather than triumphs, and in which science is as much a threat as an ally. That is something that the British do rather well.

Now if only I could have thought of all that during the workshop. Still, Paul McAuley wants to try doing this again at Worldcon. I don't know whether we would be able to get ourselves on the programme, and in any case it may work better as a guerrilla event. Anyone have a suite we can borrow for the afternoon? Any American authors want to turn up and give their views? (Sorry Pat, you don't count, you've been living here too long.)

Summary

You should be able to tell from the fact that this report has reached Worldcon proportions that I very much enjoyed the weekend. It was, I have to admit, exhausting. It was also a fabulous experience. The con itself ran very smoothly, and everyone seemed delighted with how it had gone. No small thanks are due to the students from the SF course at Liverpool University who did all of the gopher work. Farah says she wants to run another one in two years time. I guess I need to plan on getting back here for it. Failing that, I shall have to run something along the same lines in San Francisco.

Interlude: In Liverpool

Given that I was planning to review the Fantasy Masterworks collected *Viriconium* volume it seemed appropriate to read it on the train to and from Liverpool. I'm glad I did, because if you are going to do post-imperial melancholia, Liverpool is the place to do it. Once it was a city at the heart of the thriving global economy. Now the freighters and liners have gone, and with them the money and the beautiful people. Liverpool's wealth is at the bottom of the

ocean with the Titanic. All that is left is music and football.

Take the civic buildings, for example, in imposing grandeur they rival most that London has to offer. Wellington, who was MP here, has his own column. He has no lions, but I'd be prepared to bet that he's a foot or two higher than that navy guy is. Britannia gazes down from the roof of the Town Hall, but the building is sadly in need of sandblasting. Only the Liver Birds are still pristine and regal, but they are securely tied down for fear that, like the ravens in London, they might fly away.

In amongst all the faded grandeur it is easy to imagine Ansel Verdigris slumped over a bourbon and Budweiser in the American Bar at the Adelphi Hotel. Paulinus Rack is organising an exhibition at the Tate entitled "Think of England". Lord tegeus-Chromis offers his poems to bands in the Cavern Club, but they stick safely to lyrics by some dead guy called Lennon. There are no aristocratic duelling clubs, but every night in the Low City the men with the badge of a Red Bird go hunting for supporters of the Blue Toffs, intent on mayhem.

Across the river, Birkenhead gives every impression of a wasted industrial landscape. The Mersey mud has a distinct whiff of having been in close contact with the refinery at Ellsmere Port. Further away, Tomb the Dwarf excavates in the elephants' graveyard of the Crewe rail sidings where the behemoths of a bygone age have come to die. Under Tomb's ministrations, the ancient boilers wheeze, cough and, more often than not, explode, casting rusted metal to the four winds.

But Liverpool is far from dead. It has music, it has football, and it has people who believe in it. It lives on in memories of Keegan and Dalglish. It lives on at Penny Lane and Strawberry Field. And now it has new gods. Michael Owen and Robbie Fowler don their scarlet armour and stride like colossi across the city. As

long as one person remembers the music of Gerry Marsden, Liverpool will always be with us.

Ahem. With apologies to Mike Harrison, to all those non-British readers and non-*Viriconium* fans who won't have a clue what I'm talking about, and above all to the people of Liverpool. Sorry, I couldn't resist it.

Still Wondrous

...after all these years.

The fashion in publishing today is for big, fat fantasy books. M. John Harrison is the best writer of fantasy in Britain today, but he doesn't write big, fat books. Thus, when the Fantasy Masterworks series chose to reissue his *Viriconium* stories they did it in one big volume. It is still only just over 560 pages long, just over half the size of *Ash*. But it is more than worth every page. The fabled city, and the dying world it inhabits, have provided us with some of the finest fantasy ever written.

An anti-Shire

One of the interesting things about reading the whole sweep of *Viriconium* (minus, I think a short story or two which did not make it into the re-issue) is that you get to see the development of the concept (and indeed Harrison's development as a writer). It starts off in 1971 with *The Pastel City*. At this time Tolkien isn't even big news, but Harrison has already seen what Middle Earth could do to fantasy and has set about attacking it. In particular, *Viriconium* is set in what you could easily describe as an anti-Shire. Instead of being set in a dreamy past time when life was simple

and technology was evil stuff that orcs did, *Viriconium* is set in the far future. It exists in the evening of the Earth, and the sad remnants of once-great technological cultures are all-around. What seems magical is what ancient technology can do. Where Middle Earth is plush, green, and untainted, *Viriconium* is electric blue, copper and gold. And yet it is strangely beautiful.

Fifty yards from the road, the heather failed, and the terrain became brown, faintly iridescent bog streaked with slicks of purple and oily yellow. Beyond that rose thickets of strangely shaped trees. The river meandered through it, slow and broad, flanked by dense reedbeds of a bright ochre colour. The wind blew from the North, carrying a bitter, metallic smell.

'The Metal-salt Marshes', muttered Grif. He pointed to the reedbeds by the Minfolin. 'Even in Winter the colours are weird. In Summer, they bemuse the brain. The birds and insects there are peculiar, too.'

'Some might find it beautiful', said Chromis; and he did.

Note, however, that *Viriconium*'s world is not a wasteland. There are plants, birds and insects. There is an episode in the second novel, *A Storm of Wings*, in which Tomb the Dwarf finds a deserted village in a heavily wooded valley. It is a beautiful scene, and when I asked Mike about it he confirmed that the valley does exist and that he has climbed the cliff there just as Tomb did in the book. I was not surprised. There are some things that are so real that not even an author of Harrison's vast talent can make them up. But the important point here is that Harrison has not lost faith in nature. Sure technology has changed it, and sure lots of things will be lost. But other new things will evolve, and in the end, unless we manage to blow it up, the planet will survive us and new forms of life will take

over. Whereas Tolkien is in love with nature and wants it to stay as it is, Harrison is in love with nature because of its boundless invention.

Reluctant heroes

Tolkien goes a little way towards the concept of reluctant heroes with his Hobbits, who are comfort-loving and self-effacing. Harrison takes the process several steps further. Lord tegeus-Chromis, the hero of *The Pastel City*, is a retired warrior who likes to think of himself as a better poet than a swordsman. He takes up arms again because it is his duty to the young Queen to do so, but he is reluctant, and once the tide of war has turned he absents himself from the fight.

Come *A Storm of Wings* (1980) we have Galen Hornwrack, a fully formed anti-hero. Having lost his wealth and military career in the wars described in *The Pastel City*, Hornwrack has become a professional assassin. He fights for money, and because it amuses him to do so. Offered tegeus-Chromis's sword and armour in return for lending his fighting skills to the service of the city, he turns them down. In the end he goes along with things because he is bored and has nothing better to do, and because he finds Tomb the Dwarf good company. This doesn't stop him from being utterly cynical, and from pointing out the stupidity of heroic quests.

'Hornwrack', he whispered, 'she knew her way. Don't you see? This "bloated ghost" you describe is Benedict Paucemanly returned to us. He has been a hundred years in the Moon!'

Hornwrack stirred the embers with his boot.

'That is all very well', he said a little cruelly (for he envied the dwarf those memories, with which he had nothing to compare): 'But what

has he brought with him past the gates of Earth? And why is he a gibbering idiot?'

Viriconium, then, is a story that punctures all of the pretensions of heroic fantasy, and yet is better written than most of it. It has more style, and more sense of wonder than any modern Tol-clone bugbuster trilogy. But that isn't enough for Harrison. As well as writing fantasy, and critiquing fantasy, he has to write about reality and art as well.

A shifting city

If I were to write an academic paper about *Viriconium* it would not be about post-imperial melancholy, it would be about Harrison's treatment of reality in the novels. We should remember, of course, that Harrison was a major contributor to *New Worlds* back in the 70s and knows Michael Moorcock well. But *Viriconium* is not Tanelorn. Moorcock's multiverse is a concrete thing, mapable if mutable. *Viriconium* is something altogether more slippery.

It all begins in *A Storm of Wings*. The story involves Earth being invaded by a race of insect-like creatures from outer space. Wisely they pick a fairly deserted place to make their beachhead. But mankind gets to learn about them because the invaders have a different means of perceiving reality to that of humans. The Earth cannot continue to exist in both their reality and ours. As their culture is on the up, and mankind's is waning, slowly the people of *Viriconium* start to see the world through insect eyes. The Cult of the Locust becomes widespread. Just think about that for a minute people. Aliens try to conquer the earth by changing the nature of reality. Is that weird or what?

Things are taken a step further in the final novel, *In Viriconium* (1982). This is a story about art. In it, the city of *Viriconium* is slowly fading out of existence because the

creativity and vitality that sustains it is also fading. This is apparently the fault of the rich patrons of the High City who, egged on by the impresario, Paulinus Rack, want only comfortable art: flattering portraits, unthreatening plays and poetry, and doubtless Tol-clone fantasy trilogies. Harrison clearly isn't happy about the way art is treated in Britain, and quite right too.

But even though Viriconium is perhaps saved in the end, it carries on becoming less distinct. It is already strange, because it seems to have lost contact with the timestream. The poet, Ansel Verdigris, who dies in *A Storm of Wings*, is back alive again in *In Viriconium*, even though that story apparently takes place after the insect invasion. Perhaps he is an archetypal character, a poetic Jerry Cornelius. Perhaps some young poet took his name and trademark scarlet cockscomb hairdo. Perhaps.

The short stories from the book, *Viriconium Knights*, make things even more confusing. The city of Viriconium, it seems, has two Queens: the regal and delicate Methvet Nian, and the selfish hag, Mammy Vooley. Or maybe there are two Viriconiums, each with a different Queen. Sometimes the city is called Uroconium instead, and in *The Luck in the Head*, Ansel Verdigris foils a plot to prevent Mammy Vooley from changing the name of the city from Uroconium to Vira Con. It is all very strange.

Moving on

At last we come to the final short story in the book. In *A Young Man's Journey to Viriconium* the city has, at last, faded from existence. Now it is just a dream of a better place, a fantastic world that sorcerers believe in and search for. Dr. Petromax claims to have got there, by climbing through a mirror in the toilet of a Halifax café. The city he found was nothing like his dreams.

This final story can be seen as a link between the *Viriconium* series and Harrison's masterpiece, the magnificent novel, *The Course of the Heart* (1992). Viriconium has become the template from which Pam and Lucas built The Coeur. It isn't real, but it is everyone's dream, and you can find it by being just a tiny bit mad.

In *The Course of the Heart* the dream is unattainable. Perhaps at the time Harrison thought it was. But at the Liverpool convention there was something in Mike's eyes that said the dream is still alive. That perhaps because of *Perdido Street Station* and *Ash* and all the other wonderful fantastical fiction being published in Britain today, Viriconium had drifted back into existence. I hope so. I shall be looking for it.

Viriconium - M. John Harrison - Millennium Fantasy Masterworks - softcover

Thief of the Heart

In the heart of the multiverse, totally surrounded by ice, lies Karadur, City of The Metal. It has been ruled throughout recorded history by the four great clans of Iron, Copper, Gold and Silver, for the clear and precise reason that those ruling clans have expunged all historical record of those times when they did not rule. Metal is firm, metal is unyielding. It does not tolerate softness or deviance. It enforces stasis, and forbids change.

Yet change does not die, for all that it is forbidden, and metal rusts. And all the more so for the fact that there is a cancer buried deep underground. Shriltsasi, sister-city to Karadur, is home to nature. It grows: it evolves: it changes. Most of all, it is home to magic.

By themselves, neither city can survive. Karadur is slowly eaten away by decay, Shriltsasi succumbs to chaos. As all mystics in the multiverse know, there must be balance between Law and Chaos. To bring Karadur and Shriltsasi together again there must be a catalyst, a hero, a champion. Naturally he is foretold, and his name is Max Silverskin.

Can such things be? Is this not all just fancy? Of course not. All you need to prove it to yourself are the right tools.

Many will inform you, most forcefully, that Karadur-Shriltsasi does not and cannot exist. But I know that it does. I have travelled the moonbeam roads of the multiverse. I have been to the city, seen her splendours, and I can take you there. Words will be our vessel of light to this far off destination.

Well blow me down with a feather! There I was saying that I would be looking for Viriconium, and there it is, or at least something very like it. This, of course, should not surprise me, for *Silverheart*, the book that tells this tale, is by Michael Moorcock, the leading light of the original *New Worlds* collective, and Storm Constantine, of one of the few people who has kept the flame burning through the dark times to the current rebirth. That's a good enough pedigree for any book.

Then again, collaborations are dangerous things. How well will Mike and Storm work together? Can you see the join? Well, to be honest it is so long since I read once of Mike's books that I can't really recognise his work in there. Storm's stuff, however, is very clear. All the pleas for more understanding of the role of magic in the world are very Storm-like. The collection of well-drawn, strong female characters probably owes a lot to her as well. I'm sure Mike is in there somewhere, but I'm just not recognising

him. Still, there is no obvious join, which is good.

Max Silverskin is certainly not the sort of Moorcock hero that I remember from years ago. He's a thief rather than a warrior, a sort of Robin Hood figure who robs from the rich to give the poor of Karadur hope in their expression. He has his own Sheriff of Nottingham in the ruthless and dogged captain of police, Cornelius Coffin. And of course the two men are rivals for the heart of the heroine, Rose Iron. Coffin is an interesting character, because he's clearly quite smart, and certainly more willing to try things than his rigid boss, Lord Prometheus Iron. He has more depth than most of the characters.

Depth, however, is something that is a bit lacking in the rest of the book. *Silverheart* is essentially a simple fantasy quest for magical artefacts. There is something of a question as to who the real villain is, but it is all fairly easy to sort out. The back story, such as it is, has primarily to do with the need for magic in our lives, which is a worthy cause, but perhaps one that doesn't need selling to readers of fantasy novels. I'd like to say that this is all compensated for by the beauty of the writing, and certainly there are some excellent sections, but I also felt that there was far too much exposition in the book. Max is forever needing to have things explained to him. Of course doing things a different way would have made the book somewhat longer, but that might have been worth it.

All in all then, an entertaining book, for the most part well crafted, but not one that is going to set the world on fire. I enjoyed reading it, and would certainly recommend it, but it won't make it to my list of this year's best books, which, given who was responsible, is a bit of a shame. Maybe I expected too much of Mike and Storm.

Silverheart - Michael Moorcock & Storm Constantine - Simon & Schuster - hardcover

King of the Jungle

One of the authors whose absence from these pages pains me most is John Crowley. I know he is widely admired. The little I had read of him in the past told me that was no accident. Unfortunately Crowley is in the middle of one of those very long series of books where you really have to start at the beginning. I need to catch up. But in the meantime Gollancz has re-issued one of Crowley's early novels, *Beasts*, in their SF Collectors' Edition Series. This, I figured, was an opportunity to redress the balance.

The first thing to note here is that Crowley is every bit as good as I had remembered, even though it is an early book. The words flow elegantly off the page. It is no wonder that his fellow writers admire his work. So far so good.

It is interesting, however, that science can catch up with SF very quickly. I believe that at the time (and we are talking 1976 here) Crowley was not very familiar with SF as a genre. He had probably read *Frankenstein*, and H.G. Wells' *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, and he has gone on to produce his own story about genetic engineering. As science it bears about as much relation to the reality of the practice as Wells' *First Men in the Moon* does to actual space travel. Crowley talks about somehow combining the cells of different types of animals to make hybrid creatures. Specifically the book features hybrid man-lions and a man-fox. It is all very Moreau-esque.

This, however, should not be held against Crowley. Genetic engineering wasn't commonplace in 1976, and in any case he is not writing about science, he is writing about ethics, and about man's relationship to nature.

The basic plot is as follows. The USA has broken up into a collection of feuding, independent territories. Within this environment, the Leos, man-lion hybrids created by curious scientists, seek to find a home free from persecution. They wish to live and hunt and eat and sleep as lions do. The old Federal government is attempting to re-establish control, and their most successful agency is the Union for Social Engineering, a quasi-scientific organisation that seeks to create a better world for men. "Men", of course, does not include Leos. They are not men, and were not created equal. They are dangerous vermin who should be hunted down.

Fortunately the Leos have some friends. Some of the human environmentalists who have established the Genesis Preserve, a wildlife sanctuary free from human interference, wish to help. But others of their number are opposed to the Leos because they are too intelligent, too human. They argue that no creature that hunts with guns should be allowed into the Preserve, even if it does only kill what it needs. With their human support divided, the Leos are forced to rely on Reynard, the man-fox, one of a kind, and the most skilful political manipulator ever to walk the earth.

From one angle this can simply be seen as a tale about human rights. The Leos are different, and ask only to be given space in which to live the way they want to live. The USE hates them simply because it hates everything that it does not control. That much is understandable. But the environmentalists hate them because they are ruthless carnivores, because Leo ethics don't align with theirs. That is a much more complex issue, and one I would have liked Crowley to explore more thoroughly.

But you have also have noticed that Crowley is dealing in themes of "nature" with a very different meaning. It is in Reynard's nature to be cunning and untrustworthy. It is in the nature of the

Leos to be lazy and to have difficulty thinking about tomorrow. They are what they are, and cannot be anything different.

Furthermore, Crowley argues, humans themselves are no better. For all that they claim to indulge in rational discussion, they cannot escape their animal nature, and that nature is of a pack animal. Just as any group of dogs will agree, by combat if necessary, who is the pack leader, so any group of humans will require a leader, a king.

Thus the story of the Leos is cut with the story of Sten Gregorious, an intelligent, handsome young man whose father led the Northern Autonomy until his assassination. The young country has to decide between re-joining the USA, or finding a new leader who can stand up against the resurgent Feds. In the process, and it is of course Reynard's process, Sten becomes a king-in-waiting, a pretender, a saviour who can return from exile to save his people. Sten, Crowley argues, is a natural leader, and men will follow him because it is in their nature to do so.

See how dangerous all this can become? From arguing that lions are lions, and foxes are foxes, Crowley is suddenly arguing that the natural state of human society is the monarchy. It is in our nature, we can do nothing about it. Extrapolation, my friends, is a dangerous thing.

Still, it was a beautifully written book, and it certainly got me thinking about the issues it raised. There will be more Crowley in these pages in the future. Hopefully future books won't be quite so politically abhorrent.

Beasts - John Crowley - Gollancz - softcover

On the Road with Neil

The *American Gods* signing tour paused briefly near me on its whirlwind passage through the UK. Having not seen Neil Gaiman for over two years, I decided to pop up to Bristol and say hello. It was also a good opportunity to catch up with Eugene Byrne who happens to live there.

For those of you not up on *Emerald City* background gossip, Eugene and I have known each other since we were teenagers. We met Neil in the early 80's, long before Sandman, global fame and productization. It immediately says a lot for Neil that he still remembers us and was pleased we turned up to say hello. But I'm getting ahead of myself already.

The signing was in Waterstones in Bristol on July 13th (yes, it was a Friday). Neil has been in the UK since the weekend and has been in a different city each day. The day in Bristol, which was not atypical, looked something like this: arrive at store and get hustled into back room be interviewed by local journalists; meet adoring public; get whisked off to next engagement. In between all this, Neil somehow has to have a life. He arrives looking a little shaggy and unkempt. Maybe it is part of the image, but I suspect he doesn't get much time for personal grooming. What spare time he has is spent catching up on email, writing his journal for his web site, and possibly a bit of sleeping. He has also forgotten I was going to be there, despite us having exchanged emails a few days ago. He's obviously tired, but he can't show it.

The important part of the day is, of course, meeting the public. By now Neil is a consummate professional at this. To start with he arrives at the signing with a handful of different pens. He never quite knows what he is going to be asked to sign. At the very least there will be some people with books containing black paper and thus necessitating the pen with silver ink. But it could be anything and it is

important to be prepared. Often he is asked for a drawing. He always points out that he didn't actually draw the Sandman comics, but he's got very adept at minimalist sketches of the Lord of Dreams.

Then there is the chat. Neil has a magnificent knack of making everyone he meets feel like they are important to him. He gets all sorts. Some people bring him artwork or stories that they have produced. Some ask for advice on getting into comics. Some bring him presents, most of which go home to his kids. Very many of them want a photo taken as a souvenir. All of them go away happy, and yet Neil has mastered the art of moving the queue along briskly so than even the most garrulous fan doesn't start to irritate the long line behind him.

Neil reckons that he's averaging about 60 for a daytime signing in the UK. Evening signings get a lot more, and US numbers were higher still. "Does your hand get sore?" Eugene asks. "Only after about 700 a day", says Neil, and you know he is speaking from experience.

The length of the line is, of course, a major potential spanner in the day's arrangements. Bristol turns out to be around 150, more than twice the usual for a daytime event. Neil is hoping to get a chance to see Diana Wynne Jones who lives locally. Chris Bell is on hand to handle arrangements for him and get him out to Diana's house before he has to rush back to London for an AOL online chat in the evening. Things are looking tight, and it gets worse. Lucy Ramsey, Neil's minder from his publisher, has to rush back to London early to solve some office emergency. That means Neil has to go too. Chris is looking up train timetables and sending a friend to collect Diana and bring her to Temple Meads station. Poor Lucy looks like Friday the 13th has just happened to her.

Meanwhile the line has gone, but Neil isn't finished. Waterstones has a large pile

of copies of *American Gods* for him to sign. However, the shop manager is a professional. When the line looked like thinning out he went through his stack of books, folding the jacket cover in to mark the page that Neil needed to sign. That's attention to detail and I'm sure it was appreciated.

Eugene and I get to catch up on old times while Neil is doing the shop copies. Neil apologises profusely for not having more time and promises to try to get back to the UK again soon. "When do you leave?" asks Eugene. "Tuesday. It was going to be Monday, but I managed to get it changed so that I'd have time to see my parents." Of course that means that Neil will hit the ground running in Canada with no time to recover from jet lag before he's off signing again.

And so a car comes to take Neil to the station. We wave goodbye, and Eugene and I head off to a pub to have a couple of pints and chat about old times. No one in the pub has any idea who we are. Sometimes it is kind of cool to not be rich and famous.

Miscellany

New Worlds

I made a few mentions in this issue about *New Worlds*, the SF magazine that Michael Moorcock edited back in the 60's and 70's. For those of you who are interested there is a *New Worlds* web site. You can find it at <http://www.newworldsmagazine.com/>. Right now it is desperately in need of a decent webmaster, but there is still some interesting stuff there, including a bunch of book reviews by Moorcock.

In addition there is a column on SF Site by Gabriel Chouinard that claims to be trying to identify new authors who have

the same experimental, risk-taking approach that typified the original *New Worlds* collective. Mostly I don't know a lot about the authors Gabe recommends, but where we have read the same books we seem to agree a lot. I was hoping I would put one or two in this issue, but finding their work in the UK is hard. Maybe in a couple of issues' time I'll be able to cover them. Those of you who can't wait should check out Gabe's column at <http://www.sfsite.com/gabe01.htm>

World travelling

My travel journal for this month on IgoUGo.com is, of course, all about Liverpool. I didn't have as much time as I wanted to look round the city, but I had a lot more time, and much better weather, than I did in 1999 when Kevin and I were there for Eastercon. I liked Liverpool a lot better this time round.

Virtual world

A press release about Tad Williams' Shadowmarch (the online novel reviewed last issue) flopped into my email box recently. It said that very shortly we will all be able to buy our first year's subscription at a special introductory rate of \$14.99. This offer will probably only be good until early August, so rush and sign up now at <http://www.shadowmarch.com>. After all, as Tad says, "if we don't begin selling our subscriptions my family has to go live in a cardboard box, and that would be a sad thing."

Meanwhile the story is developing nicely, and I'm spending far too much time on the Shadowmarch bulletin board. It is, as we say in those parts, thoroughly Taddictive.

World's End

Tom Arden has written a highly amusing article about the Liverpool convention in his Worlds' End column, which has recently moved to a new site. If you go to <http://www.thealienonline.com/current/sections/news/index.htm> and then click on "regular columnists" followed by Tom you should find it. If it isn't still the current article it will be in the archive. Tom comments that the title of the column, "Why Science Fiction should resist the lure of Academia", was coined by the site editor and should not be taken as indicative of the message of the article.

Also on that site, Adam Roberts' latest column is an interesting little piece on why he should have won the Clarke Award. I can quite see that from a post-modernist point of view the fact that *Perdido Street Station* was a better book than *Salt* by just about every objective criterion is in fact irrelevant (even if Roberts admits it is true). After all, post-modernists don't believe in objective criteria. But to then claim that the most important criterion for deciding the Award should be "was this book written by Adam Roberts", or even "are we worried about his threat to set his mum on us" does seem, well, just a little childish.

IMPORTANT - Hugo Votes Lost!

The Millennium Philcon has announced that some Hugo Award votes cast through its web site may have been lost. If you voted online you need to do so again. The voting deadline has been put back to midnight on July 25th.

Footnote

Forgot to say that there are photos of the Liverpool convention and Neil's signing on the web site.

Another one bites the dust. Next month, assuming that between starting a new job and preparing for a Worldcon I have any spare time at all to produce the 'zine, there should be reviews of books by Geoff Ryman, Jon Courtenay Grimwood, Paul Cornell, Tricia Sullivan and Adam Roberts. Until then,

Ciao.

Love 'n' hugs,

Cheryl