

# EMERALD CITY #86

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## Introduction

Apologies in advance: this issue will probably have rather more mentions of baseball than you might expect for a magazine devoted to speculative fiction. So the San Francisco Giants are in the World Series, and by the time I finish writing this they will hopefully have won it. Don't panic, this is not a sign of things to come. The last time this happened was in 1989. The Oakland Athletics were the other team in the finals and the Bay Area got so excited that there was an earthquake during one of the games. From our point of view, we are relieved that we are playing Anaheim instead this time; and from your point of view you can probably look forward to another 13 years before you have to suffer this again. Baseball will not become a regular feature of the magazine.

What will become a regular feature is that from this issue on I am going to try to feature one book per issue that is by a mainstream writer rather than a genre specialist. The books reviewed will still be speculative fiction – there's a lot of it about in the mainstream – but they will be by writers who may be new to you, or be very famous for things other than genre work. Hopefully you will find this a useful addition to *Emerald City*.

And in addition we have the usual selection of fine SF and fantasy books to cover, by no means the least of which is

a new novel from the very wonderful M. John Harrison. Enjoy.

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## In This Issue

Quantum Event – M. John Harrison plays with Light

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Empty Space - Adam Roberts finds little happening in the far future

Drones Behaving Badly – Neal Asher goes massively over the top on alien seas

Dead on Arrival - Jonathan Carroll returns from the grave

Celtic Symphony - Rob Holdstock continues his saga of Merlin

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## Quantum Event

*Come on with me cruising down the street  
Who knows what you'll see, who you might  
meet*

*This brave new world's not like yesterday –  
It can take you higher than the Milky Way*

Roxy Music

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*The lights had gone on in those ridiculous glass towers which spring up wherever the human male does business. The streets of the port below were filled with a warm pleasant smoky twilight, through which all intelligent life in Carmody was drifting, along Moneytown and the Corniche, towards the steam of the noodle bars on Free Key Avenue. Cultivars and high-end chimerae of every size and type--huge and tusked or dwarfed and tinted, with cocks the size of an elephant's, the wings of dragonflies or swans, bare chests patched according to fashion with live tattoos of treasure maps--swaggered the pavements, eyeing one another's smart piercings. Rickshaw girls, calves and quadriceps modified to have the long-twitch muscle fibre of a mare and the ATP transport protocols of a speeding cheetah, sprinted here and there between them, comforted by local opium, strung out on cafe electrique. Shadow boys were everywhere, of course, faster than you could see, flickering in corners, materialising in alleys, whispering their ceaseless invitation:*

We can get you what you want.

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In the depths of the galaxy there are things more ancient and more wonderful than a newly space faring race like mankind can imagine. In the millions of years it took us to drag ourselves up from the primeval slimes of Earth, galactic cultures have come, flowered, fallen and all but vanished. Behind them they leave only ruins, and nowhere more so than around the fabulous collection of spectacular fusion events and

gravitational anomalies that is known as the Kefahuchi Tract. Here therefore, gold diggers, venture capitalists and pirates rub shoulders in a desperate quest to be first to the next big discovery of ancient technology.

Here too mankind and the alien Nastic war ceaselessly for access to the treasure troves. And stalking the edge of this chaos is the most feared hunter of the spaceways, the K-ship, *White Cat*. Neurologically linked to her human pilot, Seria Mau Genlicher, the deadly K-ship fighter slinks in and out of normal space, here hiding in the quantum unpredictability of the sub-atomic flux, there pouncing on an unsuspecting convoy and ripping it to shreds with precisely timed blasts of its deadly ordinance. The *White Cat* hunts for whoever pays her pilot the most, and sometimes just for fun.

Planetary systems close to the Tract are home to the adventurous and to the lost. Ed Chianese is both. A one time famous practitioner of every adventure sport yet invented, including surfing solar envelopes in the fabulously fast and light, single-person dipships. Now, by his own admission, Ed has done everything worth doing, and has started on those things not worth doing. But his desire to simultaneously seek oblivion and new thrills in virtual reality porn is in danger. In his past life he ran up some substantial debts, and the title to that money has fallen into the hands of the notorious mobsters, the Cray Sisters.

Meanwhile, a few hundred years ago back on Earth, Michael Kearney and Brian Tate are working on the development of quantum computers and the associated mathematics that will one day allow mankind to travel between the stars and form the core of the *White Cat's* awesome navigational systems. They too find themselves at the bleeding edge of a treasure hunt, with venture capitalists

and multinational corporations circling like sharks around their discoveries. If only that were the least of their problems, for the realities of the quantum world are still a mystery to mankind, and in the tightly curled additional dimensions of what we see merely as space and time, something is lurking; something that frightens Kearney and Tate as much as fire must have frightened their Neolithic ancestors.

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*In a time like that, who needed a circus? The halo was a circus in itself. Circus was in the streets. It was inside people's heads. Eat fire? Everyone was a fire-eater. Everyone had geek genes and a story to tell. Sentient tattoos made everyone the Illustrated Man. Everyone was high on some flying trapeze issue of their own. It was the flight into the grotesque.*

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Those of you who are regular readers of *Emerald City* will know that there is no more significant event in this little pocket universe than the arrival of a new M. John Harrison novel. To start with, such things happen very rarely. And secondly, with the possible exception of Gene Wolfe, Harrison is the best writer of speculative fiction living today. Well, in my humble opinion anyway. The new novel, *Light*, is exceptionally significant. It may not be an innovative shock to the genre in the way of *The Centauri Device* or *The Pastel City*. Nor does it have the tight, bittersweet emotional intensity of *The Course of the Heart*. But it does mark the return of Harrison, after almost three decades, to space opera; it is beautifully written; it is, to quote Stephen Baxter from the cover blurb, “viscerally intelligent”, and it marks a sea change in Harrison’s view of the world. For that latter point alone, and for what he has to say in the book about science fiction and the role of mankind in the universe, it is

probably the most important book that Harrison has written.

I could go on for pages about this novel. There is so much in there to talk about. Unfortunately there is a severe danger that I would end up boring you all senseless with my enthusiasm, and in any case it would require giving away rather more of the plot than I like to do in *Emerald City*. For those of you who are interested, I’ll be examining the book in rather more depth for the December issue of *Foundation*.

In the meantime I hope that the above extracts, plot elements and hopelessly devoted fangirl raving will encourage you to try this book. It is, of course, going straight onto my Hugo list. I don’t think it will win. In fact given the bored thumbs down it got from Hartwell, Dozois and Brown at a panel at ConJosé, it may not even make the shortlist. Sometimes the tastes of American SF readers are a complete mystery to me. But *Light* has taken on a ludicrously strong field for next year’s Clarke Award and blown it apart.

Besides, who else do you know who can describe the opening of a space battle like this?

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*The Krishna Moire pod, realising what had happened, swept in, fanned out into the parking orbit with a kind of idle bravado, the way shadow boys in one-shot cultivars occupy a doorway so they can spit, gamble and clean their nails with replicas of priceless antique flick-knives. They could afford to wait.*

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*Light* – M. John Harrison – Gollancz – publisher’s proof

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## Twilight of the Witch

Word of warning first: the book that is published in the US as *The Witch Queen* is the same book that is published in the UK as *Witch's Honour*. I'm assuming that there are no major differences (except that maybe the UK edition won't have mis-spelled "whisky" throughout).

So what is it? The third and final book in Jan Siegel's tales of modern-day witch, Fern Capel. Yes, it is fantasy; no, it isn't really a trilogy as the three stories are relatively independent; and no, it isn't a Tol-clone book. I mean, how many fantasy series do you know in which the heroine is a yuppy senior PR exec in London? And how many fantasy series contain passages like this?

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*In the city, you cannot see the night sky. Traffic pollution thickens the air, and the reflected glare of a million streetlamps fades out the stars. The constellations are numberless and stretch into infinity, yet a tiny cluster of man-made lights can dim their far-flung fires out of existence. And the moon is paled, and hides its concave profile behind the hunched shoulders of buildings and the jagged crests of walls, and in the blur of unclean fogs. For the city is an unreal place, where nature and magic are diminished, set at a distance, and Man reigns supreme in the jungle of his own creation, controlling, manipulating, lost, and alone.*

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Which just goes to show that it is still possible to do fantasy well, despite all of the cookie-cutter bug-cushers that publishers keep trying to foist upon us.

Sadly, while Jan Siegel's prose has become more confident and eloquent throughout this short series, it is also clear that she has become bored with the whole exercise. The writing is lovely, but the plot is rather thin in comparison with the previous two volumes. We get an old

villain brought back from the dead, she does some rotten things, and she gets her comeuppance. It is all very straightforward.

Then there is the twist. Some 50 pages out from the end, everything changes. I thought at that point that something exciting was going to happen. But in fact it was just a lead-in to Siegel signing off from the series with an air of significant finality. It isn't quite in the same class as Mary Gentle's ending of *Ancient Light*, but the message is the same. What is more (particularly with the M. John Harrison novel fresh in my mind), I don't think Siegel handled it very well. It had a definite feel of running away.

However, please don't let this put you off the book. Read the whole series (*Prospero's Children* and *The Dragon Charmer* are the other volumes). They are a fine example of what fantasy can be when it is done well. I'm hoping that Siegel will have something exciting and different for us in the near future.

*The Witch Queen* – Jan Siegel – Del Rey – hardcover

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## Empty Space

I was rather expecting Adam Roberts' new novel to have a single letter title. We have, after all, gone from *Salt* to *On*. It is hard, but not impossible, to get more minimalist. I figured that the new book would probably be called *I*. But I was surprised. We got the whole massive five letters of *Stone*. It is still one syllable, of course, but progress nonetheless. Perhaps Roberts is lightening up a bit. Let's see...

The central story of *Stone* concerns a character called Ae (ooh, close, only two letters there). This person lives in the far

future utopian culture of the t'T (do apostrophes count? Could both of those names be pronounced as a single letter?). Ae is unusual in this society, having been convicted of murder - several of them actually. Because the t'T is such a utopian society, this sort of nastiness has been almost eradicated, but Ae is an anomaly, a throwback, and has been duly punished by being incarcerated in a specially built prison inside a small star.

Now let's think about this; our lead character is stuck in solitary confinement inside an artificial world that has been carefully dropped into the body of a star. Not much story there, you might think. But someone wants Ae out. Someone with the ability to spring a criminal from such an awesome prison. Someone who needs a murderer, because who else can you hire when you want to exterminate the entire population of a planet?

The book, then, tells the story of how Ae escapes from prison, commits this terrible crime, and along the way tries to work out who it is that made all this possible. Is it some renegade faction within the t'T? Is it the barbarian Wheah from beyond t'T space? Before doing something so terrible, Ae would like to know who is ultimately responsible, and why.

Now that actually sounds like a pretty good plot. Unfortunately, Roberts simply treats it as an excuse to be childish. There is no real detective work involved. Instead Ae drifts aimlessly through various worlds of the t'T, all of which have a Swiftian air of absurdity and satire. Quite what Roberts is being satirical about isn't clear, and knowing that he's a committed postmodernist it is entirely likely that he just threw the book out there to see who his readers thought he was getting at. Let's look at a few possibilities.

Nick Gevers in *Locus* suggests that Roberts is satirizing Iain Banks' Culture novels. Certainly the t'T are wealthy and powerful beyond imagining. They no longer need money or politics, and their on-board nanotech medicines can resurrect them even after they have had their heads cut off. Consequently they spend all of their time playing silly or dangerous games and having sex. Well it sounds kind of Culture-like, except that Banks makes it clear that The Culture only works because of the AI Minds that look after it. There's no obvious sign of such things in the t'T. But let's assume that Gevers is right, in which case Roberts is saying that, given a society as rich and powerful as The Culture, human beings will become a bunch of moronic hedonists.

It is also possible that Roberts is trying to poke fun at a few modern obsessions such as economics and politics. Unfortunately there is no real debate here, unless you call sticking out your tongue and calling out rude names debate. Roberts doesn't make any points, he just draws absurd caricatures (much like his two warring political groups in *Salt*), and expects this to pass for rational discussion.

The same is true for other aspects of the book. For example, gender swapping is apparently easy and commonplace amongst the t'T. Ae began life as female, spends most of his murderous career as male, and is forced back to her original state as part of her prison sentence. There's no discussion of the effects and consequences of this. Roberts assumes that changing gender is as easy as swapping hats. And then there is all this immortality stuff. Presumably Roberts is trying to make a point, but he gets nowhere near the fascinating philosophical discourse of Brian Stableford's *Fountains of Youth*. You look for meaning, and you find nothing.

Then again it is entirely possible that Roberts is lampooning science fiction itself. He could perhaps be claiming that it is ridiculous to hold that SF can somehow investigate the human condition when in fact all it is is a collection of absurdly fantastical stories devoid of any intellectual rigor. Given that Roberts has written a book on SF criticism, I don't think he really meant *Stone* to be viewed in this way, but it is certainly possible to read it in this way.

Finally we get to the end, at which point we discover that the entire book is a heavily padded novella about quantum reality with a cute twist. It is rather disappointing, but if you think about it carefully it is possible to concoct an argument along the lines that Nick Gevers was right. The Weah are a good clue, but the denouement clinches it.

I'm not going to dignify *Stone* by insisting that it is a satire on *The Culture*. It is more akin to mooning out of a car window and driving away at great speed. If Banks is at all worried, the most fitting response would probably be to pour a pint of (bad) beer over Roberts next time the two meet. It would keep the (lack of) debate on the same level. Roberts does have one point to make, but it is hardly enough to hang an entire book on and he doesn't really make it very well. There should be more to SF than this empty posturing.

*Stone* - Adam Roberts - Gollancz - hardcover

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## Drones Behaving Badly

Aaarr, me hearties, a right ripping nautical yarn we have here. But beware, for in *The Skinner* Neal Asher has swapped the seas of Earth for those of planet Spatterjay, an environment in

which your average homicidal white whale would barely last a few seconds before being ripped to shreds by the ravenous denizens of those briny deeps.

The dominant life form on Spatterjay is a form of leech. It doesn't exactly suck blood. Coring out large lumps of flesh is more its style. And this is not good for the prey. So in the interests of evolutionary survival the leech has developed a virus that helps its victims ignore pain and heal their wounds quickly. The virus also makes the victims stronger, and increases their lifespan. Now being bitten by leeches is not much fun, but being very long lived and more or less invulnerable to several classes of weapons does have its advantages. At least, that was the conclusion that 'Spatter' Jay Hoop and his pirate crew came to when they discovered the planet and elected to make it their base of operations.

The Human Polity setting, also used for Asher's debut novel, *Gridlinked*, isn't exactly a comfortable place for pirates. Like Iain Banks' *Culture*, the Polity is ruled by super-powerful AIs and is generally a very safe and well-policed place. Hoop and his crew, however, happened to rise to prominence during the war with the Prador, a particularly unpleasant alien species that had developed a fondness for humans – as slaves and food. Hoop's crew set out to supply this burgeoning market, and by the end of the war, when the Polity forces finally managed to catch up with them, they had shipped some 10 million items to the hungry Prador.

Thanks to their virus-given powers, Hoop and his crew proved rather difficult to apprehend. Polity law enforcement officers, however, can be relentless. Sable Keech dedicated his life to bringing the Hoop gang to justice, and when he died he had his body artificially reanimated so that he could carry on the

work. 700 years later, only Hoop himself has evaded capture. Keech has heard a rumor that the pirate captain has returned to the planet that bears his name, and has traveled there to seek him out.

As you might guess, the use of the Spatterjay virus allows Asher to indulge in all sorts of ferociously over the top violence. The characters in the story merrily tear each others' limbs off, pump each other full of lead, and burn laser holes in each others' bodies, all to no great effect. And this, of course, is when they are not being eaten alive by the various unpleasant life forms that are native to Spatterjay. If that were all that there was to the story it would be pretty dull indeed (except perhaps as a video game). Thankfully, however, Asher also adds a number of interesting plot twists, some well-rounded characters, and a tale of personal redemption that, while not as ambitious as Al Reynolds' *Chasm City*, is perhaps somewhat better done.

The stars of the show, however, as with Culture novels, are the droids. Polity worlds are ruled by Wardens, giant AIs whose primary job is to operate the "runcible" hyperspace transport system, but who are also responsible for planetary policing and defense. Generally they are pretty boring folks. But for reasons not well explained, Wardens do a lot of their work through semi-independent "sub-minds", and these are just as prone to misbehavior as the humans that they look after. In addition the Warden of Spatterjay has hired the services of an independent drone, a veteran of the Prador war called Sniper, who most certainly has a mind of his own. It is the drones who provide the essential comic relief to this excessively bloodthirsty tale.

It would perhaps be interesting to see this story done by someone who does the dark stuff really well, but Asher has

opted for balance and done a good job. As well as the obvious Banksian references, he also has nods to Dan Simmons and Robert Heinlein, which show that he has excellent taste in influences. Asher's books are currently only available in the UK, but I think they will appeal very well to an American audience and I'll be following Asher's career with interest from now on.

*The Skinner* - Neal Asher - Macmillan - softcover

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## Dead on Arrival

The SF reviewer in the *San Francisco Chronicle* said that all Jonathan Carroll books are about coming back from the dead. As this is the first book of Carroll's that I have read, I can't comment on the general applicability of this maxim, but it is certainly true in the case of *White Apples*.

I suspect that I probably missed something in this book because I disliked the central characters so much. The hero, Vincent Ettrich, is a very successful philanderer. Well I guess that the majority of men are at least wannabe philanderers, but it is the successful ones, those who can charm their way into any woman's bed at the drop of a smile, and do so purely for the thrill of the chase, who are dangerous. Ettrich is apparently a master at this. Carroll attempts to excuse him by saying that Ettrich is so successful because he likes and understands women, and consequently gets on with them well, but I'm afraid it doesn't wash. Now of course the whole point of a coming-back-from-the-dead novel is that the hero is supposed to reform. And it is true that Ettrich becomes the hero of the book

because he finally falls in love. But it is by no means clear that he loses his passion for chasing anything in a skirt, regardless of the consequences.

The heroine, Isabelle Neukor, is no better. A spoiled rich girl, she has always had the money to be able to run away from difficult situations. When Ettrich finally leaves his wife for her, she immediately dumps him because she can't face being partly responsible for the break-up of his marriage. She, at least, does seem to grow emotionally as a result of the events of the book (even though she doesn't die), but it is hard for the reader to want to cheer for her.

The book itself is a sort of riff on Order v Chaos - the sort of thing that Michael Moorcock was doing 30 years ago. It is undeniably weird, and Carroll deserves a lot of credit for creating such a strange story. The man has heaps of imagination, and changes direction wonderfully abruptly, keeping the reader forever off balance.

None of this, however, explains why God (or whatever force moves the Universe) should choose a couple of characters who belong in an American soap opera to be the parents of the new messiah. I mean, I appreciate messages about True Love conquering all, even death. But I fail to see why you should illustrate this message with two characters who are probably incapable of understanding what it means, even after it has got them through saving the Universe from the Forces of Death and Destruction. There is, I think, somewhat of an excess of weirdness here.

*White Apples* - Jonathan Carroll - Tor - hardcover

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## Celtic Symphony

The trouble with Celtic legends is that they really don't do happy endings. The best that a Celtic hero can hope for is to die honorably in battle against insurmountable odds. More likely he will be killed in single combat with his best friend, whom for various complex reasons he either doesn't recognize or is forced to fight, or he'll commit suicide after accidentally killing his wife and children. If there is any Happy Ever After in Celtic myths is in the Afterlife.

All this, of course, is well suited to Rob Holdstock, who also doesn't do happy endings very often. He and the Celtic doomed hero go well together. And if you remember my review of *Celtika*, the first part of his *Merlin Codex*, you'll know that it was a book full of angst and despair. What I wasn't aware of at the time was that it was only the first part of the story.

The *Merlin Codex* looks like being a very complex edifice. *Celtika* and the new book, *The Iron Grail*, tell the tale of the resurrection of Jason and of Merlin's discovery of Britain. The new book is set back at Taurovinda where Jason searches for the second of his missing sons, and we do finally discover what the raid of the Otherworld warriors on King Urtha's fortress was all about. Jason hates the cold, damp weather of Urtha's home, but Merlin comes to love the British and decides to settle there. Future volumes will presumably tell stories that are more familiar to us. Indeed, during *The Iron Grail* Merlin makes the acquaintance of an unborn hero called Pendragon, leading to one absolutely classic fantasy encounter late in the book.

The question I ended up asking myself was, "why does *The Iron Grail* work when *Celtika* didn't?" Part of it is clearly because it has a few happy bits. Partly also is because it resolves a lot of plot

elements that were annoyingly confusing and distracting in the first book. But mainly I think it is because Merlin is back where he belongs. It was an interesting idea to set Merlin up as a near-immortal, already thousands of years old when Arthur comes on the scene. Certainly it has given Holdstock a new angle on the two witches, M and N, who will cause him and Arthur such trouble. And Jason is certainly a fascinating character – I can't blame Holdstock for wanting to use him. But Merlin is a Celtic hero, and he belongs in the mists and apple orchards of Britain, not in the sun and olive groves of Greece. *The Iron Grail* brings him home, and puts the magic back in the tale.

So the question is, where now? The raid on Delphi that forms the backdrop to *Celtika* is clearly dated at 279 BC. Arthur, we can assume, is some 800 years in Merlin's future. Will Holdstock simply fast-forward, or will he find a new myth to weave into Merlin's tale? If he chooses the latter course, he will have to deal with a distinctly un-magical interlude in British history. The Romans are coming, and Merlin cannot stand against them.

*The Iron Grail* - Robert Holdstock - Earthlight  
- hardcover

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## Something Fishy

Once upon a time there was a man called William Buelow Gould. He was, perhaps, not the best of men. Born in Liverpool, he was sentenced to transportation to the colonies for stealing some clothes. When in Van Diemen's Land (now known as Tasmania), he made his reputation as a painter of plants and wildlife. He suffered several more convictions for theft, but in life he

could never have envisaged the horrible fate that awaited him. Gould, it seems, was merely a petty criminal, but a century and a half after his death he fell foul with a much more odious villain, someone so underhand and devious that he would steal an entire life: to be precise, a novelist.

Aside, of course, from Cascade lager, cricketer David Boon and *Plokta's* Giulia de Cesare, Richard Flanagan is Tasmania's most famous export. His latest novel, *Gould's Book of Fish: a novel in 12 fish*, is a total reinvention of the life of poor Gould, not to mention the entire history of Sarah Island, a remote and fearsome penal colony on the west coast of that most southerly state of Australia. It is a wild and desolate part of the world, not far from a town named Strahan, which may or may not be significant. The book is, at least in part, a fiction about science, and while perhaps not a fantasy, is most definitely fantastical.

Flanagan's narrator, Sid Hammet, is a forger. To be precise, he forges antique furniture for sale to gullible American tourists in Salamanca market. This is significant. It also has a certain amount of synchronicity, for I'm rather fond of that market. It was one of the highlights of the Thylacon 2 trip, along with eating sushi (that's fish) with Neil Gaiman, and accompanying a crowd of con-goers to the local museum where the real Gould's Book of Fish is kept, where we read with despair of the abominable treatment of Tasmania's aboriginal people at the hands of white settlers, and I where overheard a man from Sydney say, "gee, it's terrible what the British did here, isn't it".

Keep all of that in mind. It is a useful reference.

Somewhere along the way, Hammet discovers a very different version of the

Book of Fish to that held in the museum; one containing what purports to be Gould's biography, written in the margins in a series of bizarre inks by its incarcerated author as he awaits execution. Thanks to the intervention of a weedy seadragon, and perhaps a small amount of authorial fairy dust, we too are able to read the fabulous life of Billy Gould: forger, fornicator and fish.

In fantasy life, Sarah Island is a bizarre place full of strange miracles and imaginings, not to mention crazed, depraved madmen. It is perhaps what Bellis Coldwine would have found had she completed her journey to Nova Esperium and witnessed a penal colony run by New Crobuzon. Well, OK, minus the beetle-headed women, cactus men, mosquito people and remade; but the Sarah Island that Gould describes is by no means short on the grotesque.

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*'TOBIAS ACHILLES LEMPRIERE - MISTER', the pudding said, SETTLEMENT SURGEON - DEMANDING - AS AM I, 'hot-breakfast breath pouring turbid clouds of mist into my cell. Even if his mode of speaking was largely incomprehensible, his tone was portentous, which is perhaps why he inevitably spoke in capital letters. Words existed in his speech as currants in a badly made bread-and-butter pudding - clusters of stodgy darkness.*

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Thus did Gould meet the man who was to become his patron, and who, in search of an elusive membership of the Royal Society, would encourage Gould to paint fish in the service of science.

But the surgeon is not the most bizarre character in the book, merely the one with the most pathetic end. In ambition and insanity he is far outreached by The Commandant, a would-be Napoleon whose dreams of turning Sarah Island into a wealthy and dominant mercantile

nation result in such grandiose schemes as the National Railway and the Great Mah-Jong Hall.

No, this is not the commonly accepted history of Sarah Island. It is, as many academics pointed out at great length to Hammet, a forgery. But what exactly is a true history anyway? Is history a science? Can you categorize the past in the same way as Lempriere sought to categorize fish? Or is it, as The Commandant believed rather literally in his laudanum-inspired dreams, always with us?

Flanagan rails against many things in the book. He rails against science, which he characterizes as imprisoning life in the same way that the transportation system imprisoned Gould. He rails against European civilization, which is both scientific and imperialist and therefore doubly oppressive. And most of all he rails against the extermination of Tasmania's aborigines. As Gould says, "Why [is] murdering the Pudding or Jorgensen deemed a crime, while murdering a people is at best a question & at worst a scientific imperative." If Gould's Book of Fish is a fantastical fiction, Flanagan maintains, so to is the "history" that allows John Howard to smugly say that Australia has nothing to apologize for.

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*I like my fellow fish. They do not whinge about small matters of no import, do not express guilt for their actions, nor do they seek to convey the diseases of kneeling to others, or of getting ahead, or of owning things. They do not make me sick with the discussions about their duty to society or science or whatever God. Their violences toward one another - murder, cannibalism - are honest & without evil.*

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With Flanagan being a Big Name Writer, his publishers' have spared no expense

in production. Each chapter has a frontispiece illustration from the real Gould's book, each fish matching the title of its section. So too is each section printed in different colored ink, matching the fluid that Gould claims to be using for ink at the time (blood, squid ink, crushed shellfish, etc.). It is a rather beautiful book.

It is also, I have to say, rather hard going. Gould writes in an approximation of nineteenth century English, both stylistically and linguistically, and can be difficult to follow. He is also clearly mad and not at all reliable as a narrator. In addition Flanagan eschews all thought of plot as a driving force of the book. One has to keep reading to find out what the author has to say, not to see what happens next. And given that the book occasionally gives the reader the impression of living inside a rather depraved version of a Robert Crumb comic, the lure of the final page is not always what it might be.

Regardless of all this, however, *Gould's Book of Fish* is a very powerful and imaginative book: sometimes funny, regularly disgusting, and ultimately deeply sad and angry. Oh, and next time that someone sneers at you for reading books that contain spaceships or dragons, ask them why one of Australia's most internationally acclaimed authors has written a book in which people turn into fish.

*Gould's Book of Fish* - Richard Flanagan - Picador - hardcover

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## Still Going

This time last year I expressed some concern about the latest incarnation of the Bay Area's other local convention

(the one that isn't BayCon). However, somehow the organizers managed to scrape together the money for a sequel, and somehow they found enough people not burned out after ConJosé willing to run it with them. That alone is quite an achievement.

Silicon still has a number of rough edges. Some of it was very slick, and some of it clearly needs a lot of work if it is to attract bigger crowds. On the good side, the new hotel, a Crowne Plaza in Foster City, is a big plus. It is modern and comfortable, it has plenty of room, it has an excellent restaurant, and an even better sports bar (a vital component of a con when the Giants are in the middle of the baseball playoffs). There are computers with free Internet access in the rooms. (Yes, you did read that right.) And there are some good restaurants within walking distance for me, and a very short drive for those allergic to using their legs.

Also on the plus side, the dealer's room was surprisingly good. I counted five separate bookstalls, and that at a convention that has rather more of a media focus than a typical Worldcon. There were some good jewelry stalls too. The art show was quite good for a small con, and I very much like the Artists' Alley concept where you can see the artists actually working.

The program, on the other hand, was patchy. There was a science stream, but one of the panels was about thinking of new and exciting ways to kill Saddam Hussein. There was a stream for writers, but nothing for readers. And there was a costuming stream, but no media stream. Very odd. I didn't find anything that sounded interesting to me, and neither did Kevin.

The newsletter got one issue out on Saturday night, too late for the party announcements that were almost its only

useful content. It may have got one out later on Sunday, but we had to leave early. There was a masquerade, but it only had nine entries. (I'm delighted to say, however, that my friend Raven O'Neil won Best in Show!)

Many of the problems, I suspect, can be put down to difficulty in finding suitably qualified volunteers in the wake of ConJosé. That, I suspect, will change next year. The Bay Area needs more than one regular convention; so let's hope that Silicon happens again. Indeed, given that the convention organizers have announced that next year's writer GoH will be the very wonderful Tim Powers, let's hope it happens again soon.

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## Short Stuff

### Puppies and Puzzles

Al Reynolds is best known as the master of the massive, galaxy-spanning space opera. He has, however, written a fair amount of short fiction, much of it in the same universe as his novels. Some of these are relevant to the storyline, but *Diamond Dogs* is off at a tangent. It concerns a bunch of wealthy and talented individuals from Chasm City who try to solve the mystery of an alien artifact, the strange tower known as Blood Spire.

The basic plot of the book is rather like some of the soulless D&D adventures that consisted solely of endless rooms of problem solving, and where your characters had a habit of dying nastily if you made the slightest mistake. Thankfully Reynolds doesn't dwell too much on that aspect of the tale, but rather builds an increasingly claustrophobic tale of obsession. Ten

pages in, I was expecting not to enjoy it, but the story grabbed me and flowed through. That's a sign of good work.

While I reviewed the original PS Publishing version of the story, I note from Amazon UK that the story I now also available from Gollancz packaged with another novella, *Turquoise Days*.

*Diamond Dogs* – Al Reynolds – PS Publishing – softcover

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### Doctor in the Snow

The first book in the Telos series of *Dr. Who* novellas is by Kim Newman. *Time and Relative* purportedly features the William Hartnell version of the Doctor, but in fact is largely about his granddaughter, Susan. The story is set in 1963, a little while before the first official *Dr. Who* story. This gives Newman an excellent opportunity to wax lyrical on the evils of school life in 60's Britain. Having grown up in the same small down as Kim, I recognize a lot of the references. He's having fun, and a certain amount of revenge.

But Newman is also doing *The Doctor* very well. The bad guy is a sort of cold elemental that manifests as snowmen. As the BBC rep says in his afterword, only in *Dr. Who* could you have bad guys who were both snowmen and deeply scary at the same time. Newman does it perfectly. There are rumors of Telos having asked other luminaries of British SF to write *Dr. Who* novellas. I hope they do, but at the same time it will be a challenge as Kim Newman has set the bar very high.

*Time and Relative* – Kim Newman – Telos – hardcover

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## What a Shambles!

Our final short book this month is not a story, it is a travel guide. It gets in here for two very obvious reasons: firstly it is a fictional travel guide, and secondly it is by two of my favorite writers: Neil Gaiman and Gene Wolfe. I mean, what a pairing!

*A Walking Tour of The Shambles* is purportedly volume #16 in the *Little Walks for Sightseers* series. But the publishers' preface states that the volume is out of print in the original series, and is suspected of having been suppressed by the Chicago Tourist Commission and the International Brotherhood of Meatworkers. Furthermore, the publishers say, Mr. Gaiman and Mr. Wolfe, both of whom have wives and families that they are very fond of and would not wish to see come to harm, now deny all knowledge of the book.

The Shambles, it seems, is an ancient part of Chicago that was spared by the Great Fire and is now home to all sorts of strange people and is shunned by fearful members of the Chicago Police Department. It is, without doubt, the sort of place that tourists interested in living to see the next dawn should avoid, but it is a place that anyone with a taste for seriously black humor will love reading about.

*A Walking Tour of the Shambles* - Neil Gaiman and Gene Wolfe - American Fantasy - softcover

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## Miscellany

### EurekAlert

Many thanks to reader Fred Becker for pointing me at a very interesting web

site. If you want to keep up with new developments in science, try <http://www.eurekalert.org>.

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### ConJosé Hotel Problem Solved

I'm pleased to be able to report that the problem with the extra "carpet cleaning" charges levied by the Fairmont on ConJosé members has been solved. If you contested the charge you should now find it being removed from your bill; and if you paid it then the money will be credited back to your credit card bill.

Of course it was necessary for the convention to reach a settlement with the hotel to get this done. However, Kevin tells me that the money that we paid them is substantially less than what it would have cost us to contest the charges in court. And most importantly individual convention members are no longer being hassled. Well done, ConJosé's Facilities department.

Having said that, I should also remind everyone that, if you are going to run a party at a convention, particularly one as high-profile as a Worldcon, please be careful with the facilities. When doing ConJosé bid parties we always took along some carpet cleaner just in case.

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### New Simmons novel

Thanks to an interview *Locus* I am able to report that Dan Simmons will be publishing a new science fiction novel in 2003. It will be called *Illium* and it will be heavily influenced by, but not based on, a book by some Greek chap called Homer. Surprise, surprise: there will be a single sequel. Well, that's the 2004 Hugo decided, I suspect.

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## Here be Giants

Back in issue #13 I wrote about the first time that Kevin dragged me to a baseball game. Those of you who have been with *Emerald City* for that long will recall that I hated it. Since then, Kevin has taken me to a lot more games and I have come to understand what the sport is all about. Baseball is not about action; it is about the potential for action. Because of that, it is actually a very British game (as opposed to the quintessentially American basketball which is designed to have continual scoring). A good game of baseball has you on the edge of your seat for three hours even though nothing appears to be happening. Imagine a game of cricket played with the speed and emotional intensity of snooker: hours of grinding Cliff Thorburn boredom, but always the possibility that if he makes a mistake then Ronnie O'Sullivan will string together half a dozen frames in 30 minutes.

A good series of baseball (the sport is almost always played as a series of games, not just a single event) will of course keep you biting your nails for several days. And so it is with the current World Series. We are six games in, four of them have been won by a single run, and the series is tied 3-3. Kevin's nerves are completely shot. Mine are not much better. Goodness only knows how the players feel. And this being American sport, someone has to win. If the game is tied at the end of nine innings tomorrow night, they'll just keep on playing until someone wins. Images of the classic Steve Davies - Dennis Taylor World Snooker Championship cross my mind. I guess you have to be a special sort of nut to enjoy this sort of thing.

But this issue has to be on the aether before then, so I can't tell you who won. Write to me when you get this if you

want to know if I have any fingernails left.

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## Plokta Vindaloo

Thanks to the miracles of modern postage I received today (postmarked "Zurich") a copy of *Plokta* dated June 2002. This presumably pre-dates the issue I was given at Worldcon. Not that I'm complaining, of course. As usual, the 'zine is utterly hilarious, especially the spoof Bollywood cover. I'm beginning to think that Alison Scott deserves a nomination for Best Fan Artist, even though most of what she does is collages of photos.

*Plokta* - the funniest thing on two staples: Steve Davies, 52 Westbourne Terrace, Reading, Berks., RG30 2RP, UK.

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## Dim Bulb

Kevin tells me that the literary purist crowd on SMOFS are calling the new short-form dramatic presentation Hugo "The Buffy Award", on the assumption that it will always go to a *Buffy* episode, now and forever more. That *Buffy* has not always existed, will not always exist, and that things like *Star Trek* and *Babylon 5* have, in their time, seemed to have a Langford-like grip on awards seems to have escaped them. However, it clearly won't be good if all 5 nominees next year are *Buffy* episodes, so I've started to look around for good, short-form media SF.

During the baseball Fox has been promoting various of its TV series, including their new "gritty" SF show, *Firefly*. We watched an episode last night and I have to say that it is rare for me to be so completely underwhelmed by a TV show. The critics apparently like it, and it is easy to see why: it is a character-based show rather than a plot show, with almost none of that funny sci-fi

stuff to confuse people. The episode we saw had a plot so lame that it made the "Nelix's Lungs" episode of *Voyager* seem positively intellectual by comparison. By the look of the trailer, the next episode is going to follow the Classic Star Trek pattern of making up for lack of ideas and budget by slipping in a costume drama story. Sigh. If anyone has any ideas of series that are actually worth watching, please let me know.

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### **Ms-ing Writers**

Also in today's post was the latest issue of *Mslxia*. Being a mainstream writers' magazine, it doesn't mention genre fiction very often. This issue, however, contains an interview with writers' agency, Anthony Harward. These people, whom one might expect to know what they are talking about, proudly trumpet that they are agents for "Jan Siegel, the only British female sci fi writer".

I guess in their defense I should mention that, under her real name of Amanda Hemmingway, Ms. Siegel has actually written some SF. But really, you would have thought that agents would be better informed.

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### **Footnote**

Next issue should contain a report from the World Fantasy Convention, perhaps even with news of the Gaiman Triple Crown of genre awards. We shall see. In addition it will have a whole pile of reviews by authors who have never appeared in *Emerald City* before, including Robert Sawyer, Alex Irvine, Linda Nagata and Robert Reed. The

guest mainstream author will be Michael Chabon.

Ciao,

Love 'n' hugs,

Cheryl