

# EMERALD CITY #87

Issue 87

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## Introduction

As promised, this issue contains a bunch of novels (and one novella) by authors I have not reviewed before. Slightly to my surprise, however, I discovered that I had read works by several of them over a decade before. Ellen Kushner, of course, has not been away. She's been devoting most of her energies to radio since 1987, but I've met her several times at Wiscon. Robert Reed hasn't been away either. I had just forgotten about him, something I am now deeply embarrassed about. Patricia Geary, on the other hand, has indeed been missing in action. Thanks to a bad experience with a publisher, she hasn't published anything since winning the Philip K. Dick Award, also in 1987. It is great to have her back.

Some of you may have had trouble getting replies from me by email recently. Partly this is because I've been ill, but it may also be because one of my email accounts is sick as well. When I first started *Emerald City* I used a server run by Kevin's then flatmate, Michael Wallis. The associated email account was [cmorgan@ceres.wallis.com](mailto:cmorgan@ceres.wallis.com). Some of you are still using it. Worse still, I think that some of the mailing lists have that as the default reply-to address, and as we no longer share an apartment with Michael (indeed he may well be on his way back home to Toronto now) I can't change them. I'm doing what I can to fix this,

but it will take time (and probably involve me setting up my own mailing list server). In the meantime, please try to make sure that if you do email me you use the [cheryl@emcit.com](mailto:cheryl@emcit.com) address. You are much more likely to get a prompt reply that way.

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## In This Issue

Mythical Minneapolis – World Fantasy Con comes to the site of the mythical Worldcon

American Gods - Alex Irvine offers an all-American fantasy

Chinless Wonders - Robert Sawyer on the benefits of Neanderthal civilization

Ship of Mystery - Robert Reed sets sail around the galaxy

Little Green Men - Linda Nagata finds new life forms in the Mekong

Kings with Character – Ellen Kushner & Delia Sherman marry manners and magic

Men in Tights - Michael Chabon recreates the history of comics

Short Stuff - the short fiction section

Miscellany - news and stuff

Footnote - the end

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## Mythical Minneapolis

The World Fantasy Con is not an event I normally attend. It is more of a professional networking session than a convention, and as you'll see from the report there isn't a lot to do or see if you are not in the writing/publishing business. However, this year's event was special for two reasons: there was a possibility for Neil Gaiman to make history, and it was in Minneapolis.

The Gaiman thing I have mentioned before. Neil had already won the Bram Stoker Award (for Best Horror Novel) and the Best Novel Hugo for *American Gods*. He was also shortlisted for the World Fantasy Award for Best Novel. If he won it, it would mark an unprecedented triple crown of Best Novel awards. I wanted to be there to see if he got it.

Minneapolis was a more personal thing. I had been there on a business trip earlier this year and, quite by coincidence, had stayed in the hotel where the convention was due to take place. I liked both the hotel and the city, and I wanted Kevin to see the place. Besides, it is the site of the mythical Minneapolis in '73 Worldcon. This is a great fannish tradition. Minneapolis did bid for 1973, and lost, but their team liked bidding so much that they kept on doing it. Minneapolis is a good party town. There has been some suggestion that they may get serious again in time for 2073, or maybe for the 73<sup>rd</sup> Worldcon in 2015. Kevin, being an incorrigible con-running geek, wanted to check the place out.

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## What's to do?

The first thing you notice about WFC is that it is a lot smaller than Worldcon. This one maxed out at the pre-set limit of 850 people. It also seems, at first sight, that there is a lot less going on. They did, at times, get up to three simultaneous program items, but not for long. For a lot of the time there was only one track. That's more people than Wiscon but less than a fifth of the programming.

There were both a dealers' room and an art show. The former was great if you wanted to buy books (which I did) and pretty much a waste of time otherwise. The latter seemed pretty good, although I'm really not qualified to judge. I spent a large amount of time, and a lot of money, in the dealers' room. Kevin got a bit bored because he didn't have any convention jobs to do.

But all of this would be to miss the point of the convention. WFC is not an entertainment for fans; it is a business meeting for professionals. All around us, writers, editors and publishers were chatting, having meetings, doing lunch and dinner, and generally hustling for business. That is what WFC is for.

Now it so happens that I managed to score a couple of review copies of good books, and I bought several more on the basis of recommendations from people I talked to. On that basis I guess you could say that I was there on business too. But I'm a very minor part of the system.

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## The City

Having not a lot to do at the con, and not having business meetings to attend, Kevin and I spent a fair amount of time enjoying Minneapolis. And a very nice city it is too. Sometime or other (if I can find the time) there will be an IgoUgo report on just how good it is. Here it should just suffice to say that it was very

cold (especially in the wind) and that there were lots of very good restaurants (especially Hell's Kitchen).

Kevin and I are especially indebted to local Minneapolis fans, Jeanne Mealy and her husband, John, who were kind enough to drive us round the city and show us the sights. Thanks guys, you were great.

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## The Awards

Unlike the Hugos, the World Fantasy Awards are presented at a banquet. It is a nice idea, and much easier to do with a much smaller con. However, I think I'd need to be nominated for one of the awards before I'd want to pay \$50 for a hotel banquet meal when I can eat much better for half that price out in the city.

Thankfully WFC recognizes this and opens the banqueting hall to the rest of the convention before the award ceremony. This is in many ways the best of both worlds. John & Jeanne got us back to the hotel in time for the announcements, so we were able to see if history would be made.

Before that, however, I was delighted to hear Nalo Hopkinson receive the Best Collection award for *Skin Folk*. Sadly she wasn't there to get the award in person. I was also kind of sad for Kelly Link who is a lovely person and whose *Stranger Things Happen* was also shortlisted. But Nalo is a great writer and I'm delighted to see her get such a major award.

The full list of winners is given below. There was particular approval for the lifetime achievement awards for Forry Ackerman and George Scithers. If you haven't heard of Scithers, he was editor of Asimov's for some time, but he is also a well-known fan. Kevin notes that he and Scithers are amongst the few people whose hobbies include both trains and Worldcon business meetings.

And so for the big moment: the Best Novel award went to... Ursula Le Guin for *The Other Wind*. Oh well, if you have to get beaten, you can't ask much better than to get beaten by Le Guin. And as Neil pointed out to me, he contributed a cover blurb to *The Other Wind* saying how much he adored the book. History, it seems, will have to wait to be made.

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## The Winners

**Lifetime Achievement:** George Scithers, Forrest J. Ackerman;

**Novel:** *The Other Wind*, Ursula K. Le Guin (Harcourt);

**Novella:** "The Bird Catcher", S.P. Somtow (*The Museum of Horrors*, Dennis Etchison, ed., Leisure);

**Short Story:** "Queen for a Day", Albert E. Cowdrey (*F&SF* Oct/Nov 2001);

**Anthology:** *The Museum of Horrors*, Dennis Etchison, ed. (Leisure);

**Collection:** *Skin Folk*, Nalo Hopkinson (Warner Aspect);

**Artist:** Allen Koszowski;

**Special Award, Professional:** (tie) Stephen Jones (for editing) & Jo Fletcher (for editing the *Fantasy Masterworks* series, Gollancz);

**Special Award, Non-Professional:** Raymond Russell & Rosalie Parker (for Tartarus Press).

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## The Site

So what is Minneapolis like as a Worldcon site? Kevin and I were quite impressed. The Hilton, which has been the home of many Minicons and well as the WFC, is a splendid hotel with some excellent function and lounging space. Its six banks of elevators would probably

be taxed by a Worldcon party schedule, but that's nothing new.

There are many other large hotels in the vicinity, and a huge convention center. We didn't have the time or the access to look at the place in detail, but it was clear that there was far more exhibition space that we would need and plenty of meeting space too. Significantly there was a large auditorium. We are not sure how many seats it has, or whether it has enough backstage space for dragons, but at first look it was an ideal location for the Hugos and Masquerade.

As I mentioned earlier, there are lots of good restaurants about. Cheap food is a bit harder to find, but there is an excellent burrito bar not far from the Hilton and the nearby Target has a burger bar. Usefully, because of the horrendous winter weather, much of the city center is connected by the "Skyway", a covered aerial walkway. There are a lot of cafes and sandwich bars along the route, but it is likely that they cater mainly for business people and would not be open over Labor Day weekend. However, the existence of the Skyway would mollify those fans who like everything to be "in the same building".

Minneapolis is a major hub for Northwest Airlines and therefore easily accessible from many places (including Europe - Northwest have a close partnership with KLM). For those who don't like Northwest, the airport is served by several other carriers including United. A cab ride from the airport to the Hilton is only \$25.

All in all, and bearing in mind that we only took a very cursory look, Minneapolis seems a very promising Worldcon site. Of course that means nothing without local fans prepared to do a fair amount of the work, but if they

did happen to bid seriously, I think that Kevin and I would vote for them.

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## American Gods

OK, you can see from the title that I'm being cute, but there is an explanation. Neil Gaiman's *American Gods* is a book that looks at America primarily through the gods that immigrants have brought to the country. After all, it is those immigrants, and their descendants, who make up most of what we recognize as America today. But America does have gods of its own, and mythology. And what Alex Irvine has done with *A Scattering of Jades* is try to write a fantasy novel that is truly American, blending the beliefs of the original inhabitants of the continent with the myths of the first white settlers.

Let us begin, then, with the Lenni Lenape, a tribe of the Algonquin nation known to the Europeans as the Delaware. These people, who may have been the ancestors of all the Algonquin, are believed to have migrated to North America from Asia some 3,500 years ago. On arriving on the East Coast they were forced to fight for land against the current inhabitants, whom they called the People of the Snake. They won, and the enemy was driven south. Using what appears to be a bit of artistic license Irvine identifies the snake people with the worshippers of Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent; people now known to us as the Aztec. It is their centuries-long battle with the Lenape that forms the background to the book.

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*Ompa onquiza'n tlalticpac*

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Now it so happens that the Lenape found themselves right in the path of the European invasion, and their great chief Tamanend signed a treaty with William Penn himself. From him we get Tammany Hall, the infamous New York political society, which Irvine cleverly suggests to have been secretly run by occultists, including the notorious Aaron Burr. They have used ancient Lenape records to delve into Aztec secrets and thereby learn how to restore the fearsome god Tlaloc to power: under their control, of course.

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*The heart, the blood, the world spills out*

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None of this would have had anything to do with Archie Prescott had his little daughter, Jane, not happened to have been born at precisely the right time in the Aztec cosmic cycle to make an ideal sacrifice to Tlaloc and thereby restore Aztec ascendancy to the Americas. The plot therefore involves Prescott in various adventures and leads him to encounter such famous characters as Phineas T. Barnum and a nutty writer called something like Pope.

That in itself is a fairly bold basis for a novel. But Irvine goes further into the heart of the nation by making the entire plot hinge on the actions of another real person: Stephen Bishop, a black slave who was a famous guide to the giant Mammoth Cave complex in Kentucky. By doing so (she says, trying hard to avoid spoilers), Irvine brings the whole question of slavery into the plot as well.

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*"Was not your Christ a human sacrifice, Stephen? To die yourself is easy. The thrust of the knife, then paradise. The true believer is that man who will kill another in the name of his God. This is what gods feed on, life spilled in the name of belief."*

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All in all *A Scattering of Jades* is a very well crafted and ambitious book. It does perhaps fall down right at the end where the author brings in one myth too many. The vision of a better life on the West Coast is certainly an important American theme, but we know now that we took our devils with us when we settled there, and that rather spoils its power. That aside, however, I was very impressed with Irvine, and I'm looking forward to what he does next.

*A Scattering of Jades* – Alexander C. Irvine – Tor - hardcover

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## Chinless Wonders

I guess that this book could be described as the Great Canadian Hope. After all, next year's Worldcon is in Toronto, and what would please the local crowd more than for one of their own to walk off with one of the coveted chrome rockets? Robert Sawyer has been shortlisted for a Hugo many times, so his latest offering has to be a hot favorite, right?

Well, politically perhaps. And I suspect that *Hominids* will be a popular choice amongst people who prefer their science only lightly sprinkled with fiction. But I'm afraid it won't be getting on my nominations list. Which is a shame, because Sawyer has chosen some interesting topics to address.

The basic set-up for *Hominids* is that parallel worlds do exist. In some of them (probably many), *homo neanderthalis* has become the dominant intelligent species, rather than *homo sapiens*. A couple of Neanderthal physicists are experimenting with quantum computing. Now, one of the theories of such things is that the quantum

computer is so fast because it is making its calculations in many different universes at once, each one corresponding to a possible quantum state of the logical unit in question. And consequently (enter great leap of story logic), when an accident occurs, one of the unfortunate researchers may just find himself dumped into one of those other worlds. He may even find himself in a world in which his own species has been extinct for millennia and a rather different sort of primate is dominant.

The reason for this set-up is that there is a fashionable theory out there that the Neanderthals were a gentler species than ourselves. They had bigger brains than us, so they must have been smarter, right? But they became extinct and we didn't. Why? Well, it must just have been that those nasty old homo sapiens had evolved a genetic disposition towards murder whereas the poor Neanderthals preferred to plant flowers. So if we were able to interact with a functioning Neanderthal civilization we would see that it was a much nicer place than our own world, right?

Thankfully Sawyer is by no means that uncritical. While he does portray the Neanderthals as substantially less violent and much more a part of the natural environment than us, he doesn't try to pretend that they are flawless. Instead what he does is give them a radically different social morality, and ask the reader to sit back and compare the two alternatives. The game for the reader then becomes trying to spot the sleight of hand, for in presenting a bad side to Neanderthal society, Sawyer appears to be hoping that we will miss the things he doesn't examine.

The Neanderthals, for example, have been reading David Brin's *The Transparent Society* and have become convinced by its arguments. So every single one of them carries a monitoring

device that records their every movement and statement. Naturally this results in almost a complete absence of crime, and no privacy either. Of course being nice people, the Neanderthals never snoop on each other except when the course of law demands it. Nor do they seem to worry about lack of privacy. After all, they are nice, so they don't want to commit crimes. And they don't have any sexual hang-ups. They are naturally bisexual, they don't worry about unfaithfulness if it isn't likely to result in children, and they seem blessedly free of any strange sexual habits that might cause them to be classified as perverts.

More worryingly from our point of view, the Neanderthals have taken a draconian approach to ensuring the niceness of their society. The standard punishment for violent crime is sterilization, both for the criminal and all near relatives. To our mind this is unspeakably cruel - punishing the innocent along with the guilty. Sawyer's rationalist approach suggests that if it works then it might be worth it, even though it is cruel and will result in resentment amongst the innocent victims. What he avoids mentioning is that it assumes that the propensity to violence is entirely genetic. And something else that perhaps didn't occur to him, but is worth throwing into the pot, is that our habit of throwing criminals into prison often punishes their families as much as it punishes the criminals themselves.

So far, so good. Despite often feeling that Sawyer was cheating, or perhaps simply hadn't thought deeply enough about the issues, I was fairly impressed with his boldness and willingness to tackle a difficult and politically explosive topic. What ruined the book for me was the general style. Like Kim Stanley Robinson, Sawyer seems to believe that the primary purpose of writing a novel

is to lecture your audience about all of the fascinating things you found out while researching it. Sawyer has clearly done an awful lot of research. I guess it is necessary for us to know that Neanderthals have no chins, because the author needs to describe their features. And the fact that they are incapable of pronouncing the sound "ee" does make for some nice by-play between characters. But eventually I got tired of being lectured, not only about Neanderthals, but also about all of the science that the various characters did or that could be worked into the plot. I suspect that Hugo Gernsback would be delighted by the educational qualities of Sawyer's book, but I just got bored.

I also think that an official health warning should be put on all of Roger Penrose's books. Every time I come across an SF novel where Penrose's theories are mentioned I feel like taking the author aside and saying (to quote a popular Toyota commercial), "now you are just being silly". Penrose seems to bring out the very worst tendencies towards metaphysical speculation amongst SF writers, and it does them no good at all.

*Hominids* is apparently the first in a series of novels exploiting the parallel worlds setting. It is fairly easy to see where things will go from here. Sooner or later some militarist loons amongst the humans will decide that the Neanderthals are a security risk and will try to wipe them out. "These people are not like us - we must destroy them before they destroy us". Given the current state of the world, I have every sympathy with Sawyer for wanting to write such a book, and I wish him luck. But I don't think I will be reading it. For that sort of thing, give me Laurie Marks' *Fire Logic* any day.

*Hominids* - Robert Sawyer - Tor - hardcover

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## Ship of Mystery

One of my objectives in collecting books to review for this issue was to seek out those American writers who were hailed as undiscovered geniuses by the folks on the "state of SF" panel at ConJosé. Robert Reed was someone who was held up as a great writer of short fiction (he's had several Hugo nominations) but not a success as a novelist. Little did I realize it at the time, but I had already read one of his novels, the deliciously strange *The Hormone Jungle*, back in the 80s. Reed is still about, and his last novel, published in 2001, is just as weird and just as good.

On the cover blurb for *Marrow*, Allen Steele compares Reed to E.E. 'Doc' Smith. I think he was trying to be kind. Certainly *Marrow* has the space opera tendencies as Smith's work, but don't mistake this for pulp. A much more appropriate comparison would be with Al Reynolds. Listen.

Deep in intergalactic space, The Ship continues on its way, just as it has for billions of years since The Builders sent it on its way. Now it will pass close to a spiral galaxy, one that happens to be home to many intelligent races, including those annoyingly brave and persistent creatures called humans. So it is that a bunch of human astronauts take possession of this giant Marie Celeste of the spaceways. Bigger than Jupiter, The Ship is in good working order, but is completely deserted. Having worked out how to fire the great engines, the humans pilot The Ship into their galaxy, fight off a group of aliens who want the prize for themselves, and finally, in desperate need to pay off the cost of their adventure, fit The Ship up to be the ultimate galactic pleasure cruiser. Thankfully modern biology allows both

crew and passengers to live for hundreds of years. There is plenty of time. Come, tour the galaxy with us, in the largest vessel known, and the only existing extra-galactic artifact.

Of course a ship that is bigger than Jupiter is not easy to explore. It can't be done in a lifetime, Biblical or science-fictional. So there is still a mystery. Where did The Ship come from? Who built it? How old is it? Why is it deserted? And what was it doing charting a path through deep intergalactic space? Humans are inquisitive creatures, and while the Master Captain and her crew are primarily intent on running a successful cruise business, they cannot help but speculate. It never occurs to them that there might be things that mankind was never meant to know.

Lovecraftian imagery aside, however, *Marrow* is a book that is primarily about ambition, about ruthless determination, and about the sort of megalomania that can develop when you have centuries in which to plot, or for resentments to fester. By the end it states very clearly that ambition is a fine thing when genuinely directed towards the common good, but in other circumstances it can be a disaster.

In summary, *Marrow* is a fine book: full of imagination, plenty of scientific ideas, profoundly disturbing in places, and uplifting in others. I see from *Locus* that Reed has a new novel due out in the spring. I'll be near the head of the queue to get a copy.

*Marrow* - Robert Reed - Tor - hardcover

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## Little Green Men

Linda Nagata is another person whose name has been suggested to me as an up-and-coming American SF author. Most of her early work has been nanotech-based, but for her latest novel she has gone up a little in size. The title, *Limit of Vision*, refers to the fact that the man-made creatures in the story are so-sized that you can just barely see them with the naked eye. Something that small, you would have thought, is hardly a good candidate for a modern-day Frankenstein tale. But the LOVs, as the little creatures are called, have a coral-like ability to form much larger, multi-organism structures, and en-masse a group mind can form.

From there the structure of the story is obvious. The keen young researchers, fascinated by the artificial life form that they have created, fail to realize how smart it is and let things get out of hand. The LOVs escape into the wilds of the Mekong delta in Vietnam, and the UN's biohazard people struggle to contain the outbreak. From here, the only question left for the reader is, "whose side are we on?" Are we in the "science is dangerous and we must save the world from it" camp, or the "new life forms are cute and fascinating and must be protected from the Luddites" camp?

A really good book of this type would leave the question open, especially given the politics of the situation. I am reminded of Ian MacDonald's excellent *Chaga* series, in which the West desperately tries to fight off the invading nanotech-based alien plague, but the Third World embraces it, bearing a massive cost, but gaining significant benefits as well. Nagata tries to do the same sort of thing, with the Vietnamese government resenting the incursion of the American-backed UN scientists, but



she's just too fond of her LOVs to make the story balance.

Overall I found *Limit of Vision* entertaining, well conceived, but perhaps a little predictable. There was also some rather unbelievable stuff in the climax. Nagata started to ask some very interesting questions, but then chickened out and settled for a thriller designed to appeal to a science-loving audience. She has also left masses of room for a sequel. I'll certainly follow up what she does next as she has a lot of promise.

Of course some of you may have tripped a few neurons at the thought of SF and the Mekong. And yes, the LOVs are a sort of off-green color. I wasn't quite sure whether or not this was a little in-joke until right near the end. When the LOVs started to manufacture little dish-shaped flying pads for the humans to ride around on my mind was made up. Nice one, Ms. Nagata.

*Limit of Vision* - Linda Nagata - Tor - softcover

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## Kings with Character

Back in the late 80s Ellen Kushner produced two of the finest fantasy novels ever written: *Swordspoint*, and *Thomas the Rhymer*. The latter won both the Mythopoeic and World Fantasy Awards, but it is the former that captured the imagination. A tale of manners, sword fighting and gay love in a city well out of the mediaeval, *Swordspoint* was a breath of fresh air in a genre already bogging down in novels from people who wanted to imitate Terry Brooks. Gene Wolfe described it as "the book we might have had if Noel Coward had written a vehicle for Errol Flynn", and *Interzone* described it as

being like "a collaboration between Jane Austen and M. John Harrison". And then Kushner went and got into radio, and that was that.

There have been some short stories since that continued the themes begun in *Swordspoint*, but finally, with the aid of her long-term partner, Delia Sherman, Kushner has given us another novel in the same world. *The Fall of the Kings* is set a generation or two after the time of *Swordspoint*. Dueling is now frowned upon as barbaric, but the Duchy of Tremontaine is still very much in existence and a few of the *Swordspoint* characters are still alive. I particularly liked the scene where two of the younger characters comment that they can't believe that dear, ancient Michael Godwin was a dashing bravo in his younger days.

But enough of the old book (which I'm delighted to see Bantam will be re-issuing in 2003), what of the new one? Primarily it concerns two characters. Theron Campion is the young heir to the Duchy of Tremontaine. He has the unwitting arrogance of a spoiled member of the nobility, and is given to wild passions and inadvisable love affairs. Basil St. Cloud is a historian at the university. He specializes in the distant past when wizards were said to be the power behind the throne, and barbarian northern kings were said to enact bizarre blood sacrifices. This, of course, is before one of the more famous Tremontaines disposed of the last king and his wizardly advisors and helped set up the current system of government by a council of nobles.

Basil, being a good historian, sees much good said in the ancient records about both wizards and kings, and worries about the modern propaganda that paints them as perverted despots. Politically, that is perhaps a little naïve. You see the royal line isn't exactly dead.

That regicidal Tremontaine was married to the last king's sister, which makes Theron the best claimant to the throne. Lord Arlen, the Serpent Chancellor, doesn't worry much about St. Cloud's odd theories. After all, he's only a foolish academic. When St. Cloud and young Campion become lovers he barely raises an eyebrow. Even when St. Cloud declares publicly that the ancient wizards practiced real magic it seems that there is little to worry about. After all, everyone knows that magic is just nonsense, don't they.

The trouble is that the Land needs blood. When there are no longer sacrifices at midwinter, blight and famine follow. Deep magical forces are at work, and the spirit of the great Guidry, prince of wizards, walks abroad. None of this, of course, is noticed by the fashionable folk on The Hill, nor by the rationalists in the university. A popular artist has no idea why she chooses to paint Theron with antlers, or tattoo his body with oak leaves. Basil never stops to think why long-lost books fall into his path just when he needs them. Slowly but surely, a storm is building.

As you can see, Kushner has lost none of her touch. But I mustn't ignore the contribution of Sherman, nor what the two have been up to in the past 15 or so years. In particular, Kushner and Sherman are part of the driving force behind a literary group known as "The Young Trollopes". They named themselves after the great 19<sup>th</sup> Century author, Anthony Trollope, who is famous for the quality of his characterization, and they do their best to emulate his skills. Does it work? Consider. In these pages I have often railed against the habit of lesser authors of having their characters do completely stupid things in order to further the plot. Because this is done purely as a matter of convenience, it spoils the reader's

belief in the characters. Theron and St. Cloud are both deeply flawed characters who do things that, to the reader, are totally irrational. Yet their characters have been so well drawn that each action is utterly believable. That takes skill, and there isn't enough of it in genre fiction.

If I have one complaint about the book it is possibly regarding the excessive frequency and breathless enthusiasm with which Kushner and Sherman describe men having sex. If you are into slash fiction, you are going to love this book. Everyone else is going to occasionally wonder if they have accidentally wandered into the wrong sort of pornography. But hey, it is a small complaint, and if I didn't have *The Scar* to compare it to I'd be rating *The Fall of the Kings* as one of the top fantasies of the year.

*The Fall of the Kings* – Ellen Kushner & Delia Sherman – Bantam – softcover

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## Men in Tights

This month's non-genre guest book is an actual genuine Pulitzer Prize winner: *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, by Michael Chabon. So what on Earth is it doing here? Well, because it is about superheroes. Honest and truly, it is.

But let's start at the beginning. Joe Kavalier is a young Jewish artist living in Prague in the 1930s. When the Nazis take over his country his family sells almost everything they have to buy him a ticket to America. It isn't enough, but with quite a bit of help from his old teacher, escape artist Bernard Kornblum, and a small nudge along the way from Rabbi Loew's famous golem, Joe makes it to New York and the home of his aunt and cousin, Sam Clayman.

Young Sammy is a typical New York kid: brash, confident and full of schemes to get rich quick. And what better way for a couple of creative lads to make it big than in comic books. Everyone wants to have the book with the next Superman or Batman, Joe can draw seriously well, and Sammy turns out to have a natural feel for comic book plots. With his escape from Prague fresh in his mind, Joe is inspirational in the creation of *The Escapist*, a masked hero with more tricks than Houdini and a mission to free mankind from oppression.

From there, the book goes forward in a number of interesting ways. Firstly it is a study in survivor guilt. As the situation in Europe worsens, Joe finds his newfound wealth powerless to help his trapped family. In addition, Chabon finds misery for his other hero. Sam Clay, it turns out, is gay, and that makes him almost as unpopular in 1940s New York as Jews are in 1940s Prague. Of course Joe's desperate rage against the Nazis and Sam's desperation to be "normal" are both doomed to failure.

Both of these themes, which wrap neatly in with the idea of escape, are very deftly handled. But what really makes the book stand out for the likes of us is Chabon's love of comics. He clearly knows the genre well. Indeed, given the two origin stories that he slips into the book, one for the *Escapist* and one for a heroine called Luna Moth, Chabon could have easily made it as a comics writer had he not had bigger fish to fry. Along the way, Chabon also has his heroes run through the entire history of comics in just over a decade. Not only do they match Will Eisner, but they also invent styles and techniques that we didn't see until the comics explosion of the 1970s. Indeed, Chabon cheekily credits *Citizen Kane* with giving Joe the inspiration to break out of the traditional six-panel format of comics and do some truly experimental

art. And along the way Joe and Sam give thousands of Americans a chance of escape from their war-torn lives.

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*Having lost his mother, father, brother, and grandfather, the friends and foes of his youth, his beloved teacher Bernard Kornblum, his city, his history -- his home -- the usual charge leveled against comic books, that they offered merely an easy escape from reality, seemed to Joe actually to be a powerful argument on their behalf. He had escaped, in his life, from ropes, chains, boxes, bags, and crates, from handcuffs and shackles, from countries and regimes, from the arms of a woman who loved him, from crashed airplanes and an opiate addiction and from an entire frozen continent intent on causing his death. The escape from reality was, he felt -- especially right after the war -- a worthy challenge.*

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It is clear that Chabon spent a lot of time talking to comics people before writing the book. Stan Lee and Gil Kane even have small walk-on parts in the novel as a thank-you for their help. But I don't think he would have even considered writing this book had he not desperately wanted to do so. *Kavalier & Clay* reads like a boyhood wish come true. Michael Chabon has made it as a big time author, and now he can write comics just like he wanted to when he was a kid. Someone like that deserves to be in the pages of *Emerald City*. And heck, it is a Pulitzer Prize winner. It is a great novel. Go read it.

*The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* - Michael Chabon - Picador - softcover

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## Short Stuff

### Lost and Found

In 1987 Patricia Geary won the Philip K. Dick Award for *Strange Toys*. It was her second novel, and it was wonderful. But thanks to an unfortunate experience with her publisher, and the usual industry reluctance to deal with anything that isn't easily pigeonholed, she hasn't published anything since. Or at least, not until last year. Browsing Jeff Vandermeer's stand at World Fantasy Con, I chanced upon copies of *The Other Canyon*. Jeff said he had found the books at the New Orleans Book Fair and had immediately snapped them up. At 127 pages, several of them artwork, the work is probably a novella, though the publishers call it a novel. As it is a 2001 US publication I guess the distinction no longer matters. The publishers are a small press outfit from L.A. called Gorsky Press ([www.gorskypress.com](http://www.gorskypress.com)).

Ostensibly the book is a story about a woman, Carla, who is sensitive to energy vibrations from metals. It makes her life hard. She has to wear gloves in restaurants to avoid picking up emotional discharges from people who have handled the cutlery before. But it makes her a good living as a jewelry consultant to rich and eccentric Californian women. One day a client brings in a Navajo necklace that simply screams outrage. Carla can sense that a crime has been committed, and heads off to Arizona to take it home.

So on the face of it we have a fantasy, though not the sort of Tolclone or mediaeval romance book to which publishers have narrowed the genre. It is much more in the vein of Tim Powers, who interestingly contributed a cover blurb. The story starts out nervously as if Geary is embarrassed about writing this weird stuff, but by the end it has turned into a strong allegory about being an

outcast and the stifling nature of social conformity. According to Gorsky Press, Geary has another 5 unpublished novels. Please, go buy this book. Give them some money, so that they can afford to publish the others.

*The Other Canyon* - Patricia Geary - Gorsky Press - softcover

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### Time Twisting

I originally started this column with the intent of being better able to vote in the short fiction Hugos. To date I haven't been covering much that is eligible, but here is a novelette that was highly rated by two Locus reviewers and by Ahmed Khan's index of online fiction. What is more, it is by the ever-so-wonderful Sean McMullen. And that, of course, means that it will be very different.

The great thing about Sean McMullen is that he has no inhibitions about doing something different. Most science fiction writers do time travel stories in which they agonize over paradoxes and desperately try to avoid changing the future. So what does McMullen do? In *Voice of Steel* he writes a story in which the heroine repeatedly changes history in outrageous ways. Along the way there is the usual McMullen humor, and at the end there is a useful moral about cultural development. Excellent stuff, and it is online, so it is free. Go read it now. You can find it in the August archives on Sci-Fiction

(<http://www.scifi.com/scifiction/archive.html>).

*Voice of Steel* - Sean McMullen - Sci-Fiction - online

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### Of Men, Monks and Pigs

Despite our common interest in SF, Kevin and I don't actually have many crossovers in our reading. In particular,

he doesn't read much fantasy, and I don't read much alternate history. So when I saw a book that was a collection of alternate history novellas, including works by Harry Turtledove (Kevin's favorite author) and Mary Gentle, I figured I was onto a winner. This review, of course, is about the *Ash* story, but I'll touch on the others as well.

In her afterword to the story, Gentle says that she never intended to return to the world of *Ash*. After half a million words, who can blame her? But as they do, a couple of characters kept nagging at her and thus a novella appeared. "The Logistics of Carthage" is set a decade or two earlier than the events of *Ash* (and is datable by the appearance of a platinum-haired baby towards the end), but many of the themes are the same. In particular the story looks again at women in warfare, and at the unreliability of history. It is also a powerful story of a stand-off between a company of mercenaries and a group of monks, and it is an amusing tale about pigs.

Those of you who have read *Ash* will enjoy this as much as I did. Kevin, who doesn't always follow my recommendations, especially where thousand-page opuses are concerned, found it a little hard to follow because he didn't know the background.

Of the other works, Walter John Williams tale of Nietzsche slumming it in Tombstone ("The Last Ride of German Freddie") suffers from a similar problem. It looks like it is an interesting commentary on Nietzsche's philosophy as applied to the American cowboy myth (and by extension American Libertarianism). But unfortunately I don't know enough about Nietzsche's work to judge it. The other two novellas are the Turtledove, and a Peshwar Lancers story by S.M. Stirling. I haven't read them, but Kevin says they are less philosophical and more in the tradition

of alternate history stories. Overall, an interesting book for alternate history lovers, and a must for Ash fans.

*Worlds that Weren't* -  
Turtledove/Stirling/Gentle/Williams - Roc -  
hardcover

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## A Legend Returns

Thirty-five years ago, Harlan Ellison made a name for himself by bringing together an amazing anthology of short fiction. I confess to having been a little young for it at the time. My parents were probably grateful to be weaning me off the *Eagle* and *X-Men* onto proper books, even if they were about fat, furry-footed fairies. The people that Ellison brought together felt themselves to be radical visionaries, hence the title of the book, *Dangerous Visions*. I wouldn't have been allowed to read anything dangerous then. But has this famous book stood the test of time? Now that a special anniversary reprint has been issued, do we still find those stories revolutionary?

Two of the stories in the book won Hugos in 1968: Philip José Farmer's "Riders of the Purple Wage", and Fritz Leiber's "Gonna Roll the Bones". The Leiber is nicely written, but a rather ordinary piece of American male mythology about gambling. I wasn't impressed. The Farmer is a monumental piece of experimental prose. It is full of fabulous literary tricks, but it is harder to read than Iain Banks' notorious *Feersum Enjin*, and you probably need to be on an acid trip to make sense of it. Well, Worldcon was in Berkeley that year, so what can you expect? Although I note that the Farmer actually tied for Best Novella with a very different and now much more famous story: "Weyr Search", by Anne McCaffrey.

Of course there are a lot more stories in the book. I've only scratched the surface so far. But what struck me most about it was the pervasive air of sexism. Both the Farmer and the Leiber gave the impression that their authors regarded women as a sort of domesticated animal — cows when they were stupid, bitches when they were not. Ellison's story is also rather unsavory on the face of it, being about slicing up young women and distributing their insides artistically around the streets of London. It, however, is clearly a tale about voyeurism and is probably more applicable now than then. I'll dip into the book a little more for next issue, but if my first impressions prove correct I'll be pleased at how far we have come since 1967.

*Dangerous Visions* - Harlan Ellison (ed.) - ebooks - softcover

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## Miscellany

### Astronomy and SF web site

The usual reaction of the educational profession to science fiction is one of scorn. I was therefore particularly pleased to get an email from the astronomy department of local Foothill College. Their Andrew Fraknoi has compiled a list of science fiction novels that are noted for their high and accurate astronomical content, and he has posted that list to the web site of the Astronomical Society of the Pacific. I note that Fraknoi hasn't discovered Al Reynolds yet, but the list contains some excellent novels. You can find it at <http://www.astrosociety.org/education/resources/scifi.html>.

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### Bookshops closing

It has been a bad year for independent SF bookshops. The bizarre closing and re-opening of Andromeda in Birmingham has been well chronicled in *Ansible*. Justin Ackroyd was at WFC and told me sorrowfully that he had closed Slow Glass the weekend before. He at least will be continuing as a mail order enterprise, so check out [www.slowglass.com.au](http://www.slowglass.com.au) if you need Australian-published books (or you are in Melbourne and are in mourning). And now I learn from *Locus* that L.A.-based Dangerous Visions has also closed. Ironically their last event was to have Harlan sign the reissue of the book from which the store took its name. I feel somewhat guilty, having Amazon links on my site, but I suspect that the likes of Borders and Barnes & Noble are a much greater threat. After all, I know from my sales reports that hardly any of you guys actually buy from Amazon through *Emerald City* (one copy of *Coraline* was the only reviewed book sold in the last quarter). Hopefully you are supporting your local specialist store, if you have one.

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### End of Who Novellas

One sad piece of news from the UK. Telos Publishing has announced that its license to produce novellas based on Dr. Who has been rescinded. The current license has a year to run, so a few more books will be published. None of them are by big name writers, but as the print runs are being produced they will doubtless become rarities.

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## Footnote

This issue came quite early in the month because Kevin and I will be away for Thanksgiving. That gives me five weeks before the next one is due, so with luck and a following wind I might manage to get the whole thing finished in time to get it properly proofed. (I'm sure you've noticed Anne's absence over the past few months). Then again, there's this Holidays thing (Christmas to non-Americans), so goodness knows what will happen.

What I do know is that I have novels from Ken MacLeod, Carol Emshwiller, Christopher Priest and Umberto Eco lined up, along with collections from M. John Harrison and Jeff Vandermeer, and a new novella from China Miéville. There are new novels due out from Brian Stableford, John Meaney, Sean McMullen and Jeff Noon, but I don't know if I'll be able to get hold of them in time. See you at the end of the year.

Ciao,

Love 'n' hugs,

Cheryl