

# EMERALD CITY #88

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## Introduction

I never learn, do I? I have an extra week to produce this issue, and what do I do? Instead of getting the issue done a week early I go and produce a bumper issue. Sigh. Still, if I didn't enjoy producing this thing it would not appear at all. One of the things about this being an amateur production is that I need to do it the way I want just to keep going.

Anyway, hopefully there is a lot of good stuff in here. Well, at least it is a bit different. Along with the books, we have reviews of a convention, a movie and a rock concert. And in amongst the books there are three short fiction collections. Highly unusual. Go check it out.

But just before you do, this is that traditional end of year issue, and therefore it is time for me to wish everyone a very happy whatever it is that you are celebrating around this time. Here's hoping that it was a good one.

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## In This Issue

Revolution's End - Ken MacLeod finishes his Engines of Light series

Shadow Wars - Chris Priest presents some variations on WWII

Horse and Rider - Carol Emshwiller gets the aliens off our backs

City of Legend - Jeff VanderMeer rediscovers the lost city of Ambergris

Light Exercise - M. John Harrison works out on short fiction

Tall Tales - Umberto Eco takes a grand tour of mediaeval legends

Red Mist - Jack Yeovil lives to bite again

Towering Inferno - Peter Jackson brings the fires of war to Middle Earth

SMOFs in the Sun - SMOFcon comes to San Diego

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Miscellany - All that other stuff

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## Revolution's End

I was not overly impressed with *Dark Light*, the middle part of Ken MacLeod's *Engines of Light* series. However, I am delighted to say that with the final part, *Engine City*, MacLeod is right back on track.

As befits the final part of a series, *Engine City* brings a resolution of sorts to the central theme of the novels. And if you thought that theme was to do with flying saucers and squid then you haven't been paying attention. Of course the series is about revolution. We have seen that already in *Dark Light*. But the main question is what we are revolting against? That is why MacLeod has chosen his rather bizarre setting. The belief that the history of mankind, and indeed of the universe, is a result of beneficent meddling by Higher Powers is an ancient one and by no means unique to Ufologists. It is a paternalist view of the world, and MacLeod attacks it on several levels.

But I am getting ahead of myself. In *Dark Light* MacLeod played at revolution in a relatively light-hearted way. Sure there was fighting in the streets, but things didn't get too bad because Matt Cairns and Grigory Volkov were facing off against each other. In *Engine City* Volkov gets to play all by himself in Nova Babylonia, and the result is a full-fledged, Soviet-style Communist regime. Cairns happens to be off doing other things at the time, and therefore has to engineer some means of saving the Babylonians from Volkov's well-intentioned social engineering. And, of course, he has to hope that the reasons why Volkov felt that Nova Babylonia needed a dictatorship are not well founded. So how is one going to destabilize an overbearing government? Earth history has a few interesting suggestions.

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*She and Matt were identically dressed in black suits, white shirts, black ties and black hats.*

*"I've always wanted to do this," Matt confided as he knocked on the door.*

*The latifundia chairman peered around it, holding a shotgun just in view. His expression went from suspicion to terror the moment he saw them.*

*"Good evening," Matt said, raising his hat. "There is no need to be alarmed. We're from the government."*

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OK, so what do you expect from a series that is built around flying saucers, little gray saurians and intelligent squid? But all of this frivolity hides a very important point. The apparent basis of the series is that the vast, multi-organism minds known as "gods" are in fact kindly, caring creatures who only want the best for lesser intelligent beings. Most of the characters in the books adhere to this traditional view. For the Saurians it is akin to a religion. But Cairns and Volkov, revolutionaries both, maintain that the gods are actually crotchety old fogies whose primary interest is in keeping the younger races in their place. The idea is neatly illustrated by providing a parallel parent-child relationship within the major characters.

MacLeod also considers the related questions of tradition, ossification of thinking and parochialism. I am looking forward to reading reviews that have missed the point. You will be able to spot these because they will claim that MacLeod recommends human expansion into space to escape the baleful influence of Gaia. There is, of course, a typical MacLeod dig at environmentalists here, but mostly we are dealing with allegory. What MacLeod has done is take the traditional Trotskyist vision of perpetual revolution and apply it on a very personal level. There is a lot there to think about here. As with the *Fall Revolution* series, *Engines of Light* will be the subjects of academic papers for years to come.

## Shadow Wars

Chris Priest has been around the UK SF scene for many years now and has generally been regarded of one of the most literary of British genre writers. However, he hasn't had much popular acclaim on either side of the pond, and has largely missed out on the current revival of interest in British SF. I was therefore a little surprised at World Fantasy Con to find the likes of Charles Brown and Gary Wolfe enthusing about Priest's latest novel. Wolfe said something along the lines of "it may be the greatest alternate history novel ever written, if indeed alternate history is what it is." Bear that in mind: as usual, Wolfe is being very sharp.

At first glance *The Separation* is indeed an alternate history novel, and a fascinating one at that. It begins with the story of Stuart Gratton, a successful writer of popular history books based around eyewitness accounts of the Second World War. But it quickly becomes obvious that the WWII that Gratton is writing about is not the one that we are familiar with. At a signing in a small country town, Gratton is given a set of memoirs written by an RAF officer that he believes will help to throw light on one of the greatest mysteries of the war: how Rudolph Hess managed to fly from Germany at the height of the Battle of Britain and broker the treaty that ended the conflict.

The memoirs turn out to be those of one Jack Sawyer, a bomber pilot. He and his twin brother, Joe, had met Hess briefly as a result of winning a bronze medal

for pairs rowing at the Munich Olympics. The Sawyer boys are also half-German, and are fluent German speakers. Jack therefore finds himself asked to interrogate the man who claims to be Hess. In the course of the interrogation, Jack becomes convinced that the man is an imposter, and reports as such to his superiors. It seems that Churchill acted on his advice, because the self-proclaimed Hess is locked away and the war continues for many years.

As you can see, we already have two different versions of WWII, one of which may be the one we know, and one of which is very different. We also have the start of a long and involved riff on doubles and imposters that runs throughout the book. There are two versions of Hess, one of whom may have been a decoy sent out to help the real Hess avoid Goering's attempts to sabotage his mission. There are two Sawyer brothers, one of whom is a war hero. The other, Joe, is a pacifist with a deep loathing of Churchill who works for the International Red Cross and does everything he can to bring the war to an end. There may even be two Churchills in order to confuse German spies who might try to assassinate him during his famous morning-after-the-blitz tours of London.

So far so good, but remember my approximate quote from Gary Wolfe above. As a reviewer, I think I have to say that *The Separation* is not an alternate history. Or at least it is not the sort of book that an alternate history fan would enjoy. Firstly the book is full of issues about narrator reliability. It becomes clear that the Sawyer brothers have quarreled, not only over the rights and wrongs of the war, but also over a girl. Consequently neither of them may be telling the truth in their reports of their war experiences.

In addition, it is a general requirement of an alternate history novel that the revised timeline be justified and developed. Priest does neither. He does give us a few glimpses of the world after the Hess treaty. The US, for example, launches a pre-emptive attack on Japan and then spends many years bogged down fighting Communism in eastern Asia. As a result, in our time the US economy is still a disaster zone and the country is effectively run by a gang of unregulated rich capitalists and a collection of Capone-like city mayors. However, none of this is worked out in any detail, and more importantly Priest does not convince us that any of the possible alternate histories he presents are believable. Possibly he may not have intended to, also it is also possible to read the latter third of the book as a giant cop-out in which Priest decides that he can't make sense of his set-up and takes the easy route out.

What Priest is certainly trying to do is shake up our preconceptions about the war. Joe Sawyer, for example, continually rails against the massive loss of life on both sides as a result of air raids clearly aimed at civilians. He argues that this is purely a result of two stubborn and bloodthirsty warmongers engaged in a personal feud, and that the duty of rational Britons and Germans is not to fight someone else's war but to dispose of Churchill and Hitler.

There are, of course, serious issues behind this. Hitler has already proved that he can't be trusted where treaties are concerned. But Priest argues that once Hitler had made up his mind to invade Russia he would have been happy to honor his word with Britain. Furthermore, as the war with Russia would have been just as unwinnable if it were Germany's only front, Britain would have come out of the war in a much better condition (especially vis-à-

vis a vehemently anti-Communist America that could not resist joining Hitler's crusade). The other major issue is the Holocaust, but Priest argues (rather unconvincingly) that Britain would have been able to rescue the German Jews if Britain and Germany had been at peace.

Overall I hesitate to recommend this book quite as highly as I would have done if Priest had stuck to what appeared to be the original plan. The ending of *The Separation* is precisely the sort of cop-out that appeals to arrogant mainstream literary critics. It gives them the opportunity to say, "oh, Priest might play with those stupid genre ideas, but he doesn't actually *believe* in them, so he must be one of us, not one of them." On the other hand, the book is for the most part beautifully written, and it raises a whole bunch of fascinating issues. Hopefully the above has given you enough information to decide whether you will enjoy it or be offended by it.

*The Separation* - Chris Priest - Scribner - softcover

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## Horse and Rider

Carol Emshwiller seems to have been about for ages without receiving a lot of notice. She was one of the very small group of women writers to have had a story in Harlan Ellison's original *Dangerous Visions* anthology, and she is still writing now. Her latest novel, *The Mount*, comes from a small press publisher (the wonderfully named Small Beer Press) but still managed to find its way into the San Francisco Chronicle's list of best SF of 2002. Emshwiller is also one of the guests of honor at next year's Wiscon, so I figured

it was about time I featured her in *Emerald City*.

There will now follow a short digression on the subject of allegory. If you are familiar with Tolkien's views on literature, or have listened to the documentary about him on the Fellowship of the Ring Extended Edition DVD, then you will know that Tolkien was particularly dismissive of allegory as a form of fiction. This may seem strange, because of course it is generally accepted that *The Lord of the Rings* is an allegory about the industrialization of England (in particular the area around Birmingham where Tolkien grew up). However, Tolkien had a very narrow definition of what the term "allegory" meant.

In writing *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien attempted to create what he would have regarded as a True story. That is, the general message that it transmits to the reader is True (in a mythic sense) but not specifically related to any particular issue. The fact that it happened to apply to the particular circumstances of Tolkien's home was fortuitous, but it could equally apply to many other times and places, and most importantly it was a story that could be enjoyed in its own right. Those who did not see the message in the text would imbibe it through literary osmosis as they read. The sort of thing Tolkien was complaining about (and the specific example is pure guesswork on my part) is Orwell's *Animal Farm*, where the reader has to be pretty dumb indeed to not see the parallels and get beaten over the head with the message, and is unlikely to believe that Orwell's world of talking animals is in any way "real". So, to get back to the point of the review, *The Mount* is an allegory, and whether you like it or not may well depend on how much you agree with Professor Tolkien.

The basic set-up of *The Mount* is that Earth has been conquered by aliens (the Hoot) who have taken to using human beings as transport. In this future world, humans are treated in pretty much exactly the same way that we treat horses. The Hoot breed their humans carefully, train them ruthlessly, race them when they are in their prime, and would doubtless feed them to their cats when they are old and infirm if indeed they actually kept cats (which they don't). There are several points at issue here; the most obvious of which is how we humans treat animals. But Emshwiller is far too good a writer to stay that shallow.

What the book is really about is paternalism. The Hoots genuinely believe that they are doing the best that they can for the humans. They look after them, they train them to behave properly, and they give them treats and presents when they are good. Isn't that what we do to our children? And when the humans show their displeasure with how they are treated (by staging a revolution), then the Hoots kindly offer to give them more freedom. Can you see why the humans decline this offer?

Philosophically, *The Mount* is a fine book. Where it falls down is as a story. Firstly, as Tolkien might have said, the suspension of disbelief runs very thin. The explanation of how the Hoots, who appear to have very little in the way of weaponry, managed to conquer Earth is very weak. In addition, the story desperately needs the characters to be treated more like people and less like the appropriate stereotype for their place in the allegory. Most of the plot is very predictable once you have got the general idea. Which is a shame, because although Emshwiller is good enough to make you come away feeling uplifted, you also end up with a strong impression that you have been lectured

to, and that doesn't generally encourage one to like a book.

*The Mount* - Carol Emshwiller - Small Beer Press - softcover

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## City of Legend

The legend of Ambergris is generally thought to date from the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Certainly the idea of a mysterious city founded by a piratical gang of whalers gained popularity on the back of Melville's *Moby Dick*. There are those, however, who claim that Cinsorium, the mushroom dweller city that the founders of Ambergris destroyed and replaced, was in fact the source of the legend of El Dorado. We certainly know that Ambergris exists close to vast jungles full of primitive native tribes, so the probability of it being in South or Central America is quite high. However, it is only from the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century onwards that the name "Ambergris" becomes commonplace in popular culture.

The mysterious city first came to widespread fame in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Magical organizations such as the Golden Dawn are known to have sought it, and Aleister Crowley once wrote a spell that involved an incantation to a squid god named Albumuth, coincidentally the name of the main street of Ambergris and the location of its famous Festival of the Freshwater Squid. H.P. Lovecraft was almost certainly heavily influenced by the Ambergris legend, as his work betrays an obsession with both squid and fungi.

Ambergris largely disappeared from the public imagination during the Second World War, but it made a strong

comeback in the Sixties. Erick von Däniken is believed to have written an entire book (*Fungi of the Gods*) based around the idea that the mushroom dwellers were in fact aliens. However, the book was canned by his publishers after they discovered that the existence of Ambergris was uncertain. Industry gossip has it that von Däniken commented, "why did they object to Ambergris and not to Peru? They should at least be consistent."

Hippie culture took to Ambergris with enthusiasm. Shea and Wilson set several chapters of their notorious *Illuminatus!* trilogy in the city, although this seems to have been largely an excuse to have various members of the cast ingest a variety of new forms of hallucinogen. Timothy Leary wrote a pamphlet explaining how the mushroom dwellers were indeed aliens who were able to travel through space bodily thanks to a particular type of fungus that they cultivated and which allowed them to enter a mental state that made them at one with quantum reality.

Most recently the Ambergris legend has been carried forward by Jeff VanderMeer. This little-known fantasy writer published several short works in the nineties, which he claimed to have been inspired by actual visits to Ambergris. VanderMeer even claimed to be in the possession of actual Ambergrisian texts that he had purchased at the famous Borges Bookstore. These claims gained VanderMeer a certain notoriety, and a publisher called Prime offered to print a collected edition of the Ambergris texts.

However, as the inside cover blurb explains, just before the book was to be published in early 2002, VanderMeer mysteriously disappeared. Prime claims that he had gone into hiding, and even includes a shadowy picture of him supposedly taken in Prague shortly after

his disappearance. VanderMeer's fans, however, have more fanciful explanations, including his being captured by mushroom dwellers who are holding him in a secret lair beneath New York, and his having been arrested by a secret US government agency and held for questioning in Area 51.

Just as suddenly as he vanished, VanderMeer reappeared again. He was present at World Fantasy Con, and in contrast to Prime's photograph he now sports a thick beard. Whether he adopted this for purposes of disguise during his disappearance is uncertain. It seems likely to me that he adopted the beard to cover the mysterious, black, tear-shaped scar that can just be seen on his left cheek. VanderMeer now claims that the entire Ambergris corpus is "simply a work of fiction". However, his right eye developed a distinct nervous tick as he explained this to me. Also I am sure that a convention member deliberately photographed me as I purchased the book. I know that he wasn't a normal convention goer - no one wears *Star Trek* t-shirts at WFC. And I'm sure I saw him photographing other people at VanderMeer's stall later in the convention.

The strangest thing that happened to me, however, did not occur until SMOFcon several weeks later. I had taken Saturday morning off to visit old ships in the San Diego Maritime Museum. From the stern of the *Star of India* you can look out under the boardwalk. Imagine my surprise when I did so to find myself staring into the eye of a giant squid. The creature extended a tentacle out towards me and colors pulsed along the length of that limb. This may sound very strange, but I am sure that I saw the letters A-M-B-E-R-G-R-I-S spelled out along the length of the tentacle. Shortly afterwards as I was having lunch at a harbor café, several attack helicopters took off from

Coronado Island and dropped depth charges into the bay. Sunday's newspapers quoted the US Navy as claiming this to be a "routine exercise", but it was clear from how the event was reported that it was anything but routine.

You can now obtain VanderMeer's book, *City of Saints and Madmen*, from good bookstores and even from Amazon. I advise that you purchase it at your own risk.

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Um, sorry folks, sometimes the only way to review a book is to get into the spirit of things.

What I should say, because this is supposed to be a review, is that *City of Saints and Madmen* contains some very fine short fiction as well as some very silly stuff. It is also a beautiful book. A lot of care has been put into its preparation and printing. Jeff tells me that he has sold the book to Pan MacMillan for UK publication next October (or Tor UK as it will probably be by then), but I don't think that British readers should wait that long. If, like me, you believe that writing fantasy is an art form, not a production line process for an ignorant and undiscerning market, you will enjoy Jeff VanderMeer's work. Get this book now.

*City of Saints and Madmen* - Jeff VanderMeer - Prime - hardcover

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## Light Exercise

Some writers like to trial their ideas in short stories before turning them into full-blown novels. One of those people is M. John Harrison. Much of Harrison's short fiction has not been published in

the US, but now a new collection is being issued from a small press publisher, Night Shade Books, that will provide American readers with a fascinating insight into the work of Britain's leading genre writer. The collection, *Things That Never Happen*, includes 24 works written over the period 1974 to 2000, including the pilot stories for *The Course of the Heart* and *Signs of Life*, and a story that became a fragment of *Light*. There are also introductions by the author and by China Miéville and, perhaps most interestingly, a set of notes by Harrison setting out his thoughts about each of the stories.

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*New trains run on the line between Wakefield and Huddersfield. Inside them, next to every door, is a sign which reads PRESS WHEN ILLUMINATED TO OPEN. Illuminati everywhere should know about this sign.*

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If you are in search of illumination, however, you should be warned that there are not many jokes. Indeed, one of the main themes that Miéville addresses in his introduction is that, for the most part, Harrison's fiction can come over as rather depressing. Certainly this is not the place to look for happy endings. But then, as Miéville goes on to point out, people who are looking for happy endings are looking for comfort, not inspiration, and Harrison is not in the business of providing sweetened dummies for his readers to suck upon. Indeed, he is in the business of chastising such people for their habit of clinging to hopeless, vacuous fantasies.

Much of Harrison's fiction is precisely about wanting. Characters such as Pam Stuyestant in *The Course of the Heart* and Isobel Avens in *Signs of Life* go through entire novels desperately wanting things that they clearly cannot have, and

making themselves ill through their wanting. And of course the theme of clinging to fantasy is central to the whole Viriconium myth. This desire is perhaps best expressed in this passage from one of my favorite Harrison stories, "Engaro".

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*Is it possible that the real pattern of life is not in the least apparent, but rather lurks beneath the surface of things, half hidden and only apparent in certain rare lights, and then only to the prepared eye? A secret country, a place behind the places we know, which seems to have but little connection to the obvious schemes of the universe?*

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Does that sound a little like Lovecraft to you? It does to me. Of course Harrison has several orders of magnitude more skill with the English language than Lovecraft, but he shares the same ability to take the depressingly ordinary and find behind it glimpses of something terrible, and if ordinariness itself were something that generates horror. Whereas Lovecraft found his strangeness in isolated New England hamlets, Harrison finds his in dreary Northern English towns ("Hell, Hull and Halifax"), and in the grimy back streets and cafes of London.

It is terribly tempting, with a book like this, to dive into a psychoanalysis of the author. You do, after all, have much of his thinking over two and a half decades laid out before you. And Harrison is a writer who likes to worry at issues. "Engaro" was written in 1980, but the themes it introduced have been explored in many other stories since. Furthermore, Harrison writes a lot of his work in the first person, from the viewpoint of characters called "Mike" or "Michael". It is very tempting to conclude that these stories are all about him.



That, however, would be unfair, because while these stories may represent some personal journey for Harrison (which seems to have reached some sort of destination in *Light*), there is plenty in here for us as well. We do, after all, spend a lot of our time reading this fantastical literature and it would be all too easy to fall prey to some of its blandishments. We need people like Harrison to remind us that we can't always have what we want, especially if what we want is "make everything good/easy/safe for me". In short, we need people in the genre who are going to write stories replete with meaning, and make us work to find that meaning, no matter how slippery it might be.

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*Language is a scandal because it can make connections like these. Stories pass the experienced world back and forth between them as a metaphor, until it is worn out. Only then do we realize that meaning is an act. We must repossess it, instant to instant in our lives.*

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So go on, do something. Act. Buy this book.

*Things That Never Happen* - M. John Harrison  
- Night Shade Books - publisher's proof

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## Tall Tales

Umberto Eco is no stranger to these pages. Nor indeed should he be, for we are all hoping that he will produce a novel as startling as *The Name of the Rose*. Thus far, he has failed to deliver, but for his latest opus he has returned to the medieval epoch that brought him such success. Is *Baudolino* the book we have all been waiting for?

Let's start with the basic set-up. We first meet Baudolino as a young Italian boy with an amazing talent for languages and a passion for telling tales. A conveniently timed story of a vision of a saint manages to help solve a local political dispute, and as a result our hero becomes the adopted son and political advisor (read spin-doctor) of Frederick Barbarossa, the Holy Roman Emperor. We soon meet Baudolino again far in his future. As an old man he turns up in Byzantium and saves a Greek courtier, Niekas, from the Crusader army that is sacking the city. Delighted to make the acquaintance of such an intelligent and cultured individual, Baudolino decides to tell his life story to Niekas in the hopes of it being recorded for posterity.

And what a story it is, for Eco uses Baudolino's life as an excuse for a grand tour of all of the most popular superstitions of medieval Europe. You will recall that *The Name of the Rose* is all about philosophical theories, in particular those of the ancient Greeks. *Baudolino*, on the other hand, is primarily about what we would call urban myths. It is about Prester John, the Holy Grail, fantastical beasts and relics, and it gives us a highly amusing origin for the Turin Shroud. Towards the end Eco also provides us with a Cook's Tour of interesting and obscure heresies.

All of this is pretty much expected of Eco. We know that he is going to give us a tour of some group of ideas, and that it will be amazingly comprehensive. Typically an Eco novel makes us feel as ignorant about the history of ideas as a Kim Newman novel makes us feel about books and movies. The big question is, will there be a story as well?

In the case of *Baudolino* I'm afraid that the answer is once again a qualified "no". *The Name of the Rose*, you will remember, is a fully-fledged mystery story. *Baudolino* does have a murder mystery

of its own - we need to work out how Emperor Frederick died. But he doesn't actually die until around half way through the book, and it isn't until right near the end that the story actually focuses on solving the mystery.

Those of you who have waded your way through Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum* will know that it is a fascinating read for anyone who has a passionate interest in secret societies and conspiracy theories, but a crashing bore otherwise. Baudolino is very much in the same mould. If you have a reasonable knowledge of medieval legends and heresies, or would like to obtain one, you will find the book highly entertaining. Happily I happen to fall into that group. But for those of you who are not part of it, I would advise you to avoid this book.

*Baudolino* - Umberto Eco - Harcourt - publisher's proof

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## Red Mist

*In the Darkness of the Fortress of Drachenfels, the Old Woman crept, her fingers curled like claws, her still sharp mind reaching before her. She had no need of her eyes after all these centuries. As a creature of the night, the cursed stones were comfortable to her. There were intruders now, and she would have to see them off or be destroyed. Her veins were thinned and her sharp teeth slid in and out of their gumsheaths. It was too long since she had slaked her red thirst.*

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Accepted wisdom is that tie-in series are full of bad books by no-hope authors who produce hackwork to order. There are, however, always exceptions. The original Games Workshop series of novels was edited by David Pringle and consequently quite a few well known

British authors got involved. The series has now been reissued and expanded under the Black Library imprint (edited by my good friend Marc Gascoigne), so if you happen to know your pseudonyms you can find some very good stuff in an unusual place.

The names that you need to know are Brian Craig, better known as Brian Stableford, and Jack Yeovil, who as you may well have guessed from the above quote is more commonly known as Kim Newman. (Also Ian Watson is Ian Watson, but I think you might have guessed that.) This is a review of *Silver Nails*, which Amazon lists as a *Warhammer* novel but is actually a set of short stories set in the *Warhammer* universe.

Writing for a particular universe does occasionally have its problems. In the case of *Warhammer* this is most obvious in the silly names of some of the Gods. Having seen *Dungeons & Dragons* have some run-ins with Christian fundamentalists, Games Workshop decided to have made up names for all of the gods in *Warhammer* rather than steal names from ancient religions. But often this just meant tweaking things a bit. Thus, while the ancient Babylonians worshipped a chap called Nergal, which looks sort of godly, some people in the *Warhammer* universe worship a being called Nurgle, which raises giggles even though it sounds the same. (He is the Chaos Lord of pestilence, if you really want to know.)

However, the good news is that the editorial red pen is not so draconian as to bring down the Wrath of Sigmar on any writer who tries to slip something through. Thus, if you keep your wits about you, you will notice that Newman has slipped Margaret Thatcher and John Major into the list of past rulers of The Empire. Indeed, large parts of the story, "The Ibbby the Fish Factor" seem to be

commentary on the idiocies of late 80s and 90s Britain, including a quick riff on the subject of government by spin doctoring. ("Ibby" is a new story written specially by Newman for the collection.)

This, of course, is just one little game that Newman plays. Another story in the collection, "The Warhawk" (also previously unpublished), is about a rough, tough cop hunting down a rather cracked serial killer who obviously belongs in a Batman story. Or at least he would if he existed in present day Gotham rather than medieval Altdorf. Yet another story, "No Gold in the Grey Mountains", is a fairly straight vampire spine-tingler. And "The Ignorant Armies" does a superb job of making the fight against Chaos (which is central to the *Warhammer* universe) seem real.

As you might expect from Newman, it is the vampires who are the stars of the show. Genevieve Dieudonné appears twice, as does her eccentric grandmother-in-darkness, Lady Melissa d'Arques (who is the star of both of the quotes in this review). Newman also re-uses several other characters from his *Warhammer* novels. Indeed it helps if you have read the novels. They are *Drachenfels*, *Genevieve Undead*, and *Beasts in Velvet*, and they are all helpfully available from the Black Library.

But enough of this shameless plugging. The important point is that these are books by Kim Newman, and that consequently they contain precisely what you have come to expect: great story telling, excellent in-jokes, and far more references to popular culture than most of us have any hope of spotting.

Oh, did I mention that a couple of the minor characters include a body builder called Arne and a bumbling policeman called Dibble.

So there: yes, these books are set in the *Warhammer* universe, but by no means

are they limited by it. A Kim Newman book is a Kim Newman book and consequently is wonderful no matter where it is set.

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*"I myself snoozed through the Undead Wars, surrounded by pressed and dried flowers. I woke up to find a shrine thrown up around me and a group of outcast dwarf miners worshipping me as some sort of martyr princess. They'd somehow got hold of a handsome prince whose kiss was supposed to bring me back to life."*

*"Does this story have happy ending?" he asked.*

*"Oh yes. Well sort of. I drained the prince and raised him as my get. He had to be put down, though. The red thirst made him blood simple. He killed those dear little dwarfs. And all their animal companions. And quite a few other people, actually."*

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And if you feel disinclined to believe me when I tell you that this stuff is good (after all, I have known Kim and Marc for years and therefore might be considered somewhat biased), here's another recommendation. Shortly after I wrote this review I received an email from Steven Baxter who is writing a history of the Games Workshop fiction line for the BSFA journal, *Vector*. Baxter also argues that much of what has appeared in this line is far better than what you might expect from a tie-in series. His article will probably be in the Mar/Apr issue of *Vector*.

*Silver Nails* - Jack Yeovil - Black Library - softcover

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## Towering Inferno

Over the past couple of weeks Kevin and I have been wading our way through the vast quantity of material on the *Fellowship of the Ring Extended Edition* DVD. I would thoroughly recommend this version of the film to anyone interested in the movie. Firstly the *Extended Edition* is a much superior version of the film as it restores a lot of material that was cut in order to shorten the film for theatre release. *Fellowship of the Ring* is by no means as bare bones as the original *X-Men* film, but it still benefits hugely from an additional half hour of background and character development. In addition, I have learned an awful lot about how movies are made from listening to Peter Jackson's commentary on the movie. I think that should be required listening for all of those people who complained that the film wasn't an exact replication of the novel.

With this background in mind, we attended the opening of *The Two Towers* with great hopes. The trailers had been spectacular, and the first movie had been really good. We were very disappointed. I'll try not to dwell here on the major deviations from the plot of the novel. After all, some of you may have not seen the film yet. All I will say is that I am not nearly as distressed by them as many people have been, although I believe that there are major logical flaws in the treatment of Eomer and Faramir. What I am much more concerned about is the quality of the filmmaking.

There are a few places in *Fellowship of the Ring* where Jackson has done silly things or lets the continuity slip in search of dramatic action. The most obvious of these is the ridiculous wizard smackdown, but there are a couple of other places where things seem wrong when you think about them. For

example, given how easily the Black Riders caught up with Arwen, how come they could never catch her? And look carefully at the action on Weathertop. The relative positions of Frodo and the Riders changes during the fight to allow some additional dramatic shots. These niggles were fairly minor, and didn't really spoil my enjoyment of the film. *The Two Towers*, however, was a very different matter.

Given the amount of money being spent on the film, you would have thought that Jackson could have afforded to hire an expert on medieval warfare as a consultant; Mary Gentle would have been ideal. Instead the whole of the Helm's Deep sequence seems to have been plotted with a view to dramatic shots, and as a consequence much of it is very silly indeed. Everything from the design of the fortress to the actions of both sides in the battle is dubious, and the final scene where the siege is relieved is one of the silliest things I have seen in a movie in ages. It is on a par with Flash Gordon wandering around on the outside of his ship while in deep space, without a helmet. I'm looking forward to the Extended Edition DVD of this movie so that I can see what excuse Jackson has for all this silliness. In the meantime I guess I had better see some more movies. On the strength of *Fellowship*, I had *Two Towers* down as the hot favorite for next year's Hugo. Having seen it, I think that it is merely a contender.

*Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring, Extended Edition* - Peter Jackson - New Line Cinema - DVD

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## SMOFs in the Sun

This year's SMOFcon took place in San Diego. This is an excellent venue for a December convention because the weather is wonderful. Being *persona non grata* with large portions of SMOFdom these days, I didn't bother attending much of the con. I don't see any point in spending a weekend being pointedly not spoken to. Most of my time was therefore taken up with touring, which will hopefully result in an IgoUgo journal eventually. I did, however, attend a couple of panels. Here's what I saw go down.

The one event I wanted to attend was a guest appearance by David Brin. David was, of course, promoting his Reading for the Future project, a scheme to encourage children to read and develop a love of science by exploiting their interest in SF. It was, I'm sorry to say, rather sad, because poor David thinks that most fans believe in outreach and want to encourage young people to attend conventions. It is a rather obvious idea, but by no means true. In fact many of the sort of people who go to SMOFcon would rather jump off a cliff than encourage young people to attend their conventions. Especially if, shock horror, they are interested in things other than fandom (you know, awful things like books, TV and film). Thankfully there were enough people there who do believe in outreach to give David a reasonable-sized and sympathetic audience.

One of the things that came out of this meeting was that the annual student writer contest that has been a feature of Worldcons for several years is running out of money. It was originally set up with a substantial endowment from Bucconeer, but that money could not last forever, and looks like being exhausted after Torcon III. Therefore we set up a

little meeting in the bar afterwards for representatives of ConJosé, Torcon III and Noreason 4 to talk about what to do (the Interaction folks were about, but we didn't manage to find them in time). What I am hoping will come out of this is a tradition whereby Worldcons with excess funds will fund the contest for one year into the future. Obviously this money will have to be allocated after things like reimbursements and pass-along funds have been paid, and not all Worldcons will be able to do it, but hopefully we will be able to keep the contest going. The next stage on this is for the SFSFC Board to vote on whether to donate some of the ConJosé surplus to the contest. Given that Tom Whitmore, Dave Gallaher and Kevin have all expressed support for the idea I am cautiously optimistic.

Talking of pass-along funds, I am pleased to report that ConJosé has already made payments to each of its three successor Worldcons. \$10,000 was given to each of Torcon III, Noreascon 4 and Interaction. You may remember that ConJosé's budget crisis was helped considerably by a last minute payment from The Millennium Philcon. I am delighted that ConJosé has handed over the money so quickly.

Kevin had made some fake giant checks for the presentation ceremony (you can see photos on the ConJosé web site - [www.conjose.org](http://www.conjose.org)). I thought it was a rather cute idea, but in line with the usual SMOFish policy of "no good deed goes unpunished", he spent much of the rest of the weekend dealing with complaints from people who were convinced that the fake checks were cashable. As Kevin said, even if a bank managed to ignore all of the deliberate mistakes and warning message he had put on the fake checks, he very much doubted that the people to whom they had been presented (Peter Jarvis, Deb

Geisler and Vince Docherty) would risk their conventions and fannish reputations by trying to defraud ConJosé of \$10,000. Sadly it seems that quite a few of the people at SMOFcon would have tried to cash those checks just to prove that it could be done.

Finally on the subject of SMOFcon it looks like something very interesting may be developing with regard to the race for 2007. As you are probably aware, there is an extant bid for Yokohama, Japan. This has been going for some time and has the backing of many well known SMOFs, but it is viewed with some distrust by the more travel-shy and impecunious amongst the Americans. Now it seems that there is a potential alternative. A group of fans from Columbus, Ohio is mounting a serious bid for that year.

At first glance this might be very simple: a pro- v anti-travel contest. But in fact it is much more complex, because the Columbus folks are (shock, horror) largely media fans who want to run something more like Dragon\*Con than a traditional Worldcon. This could turn out to be one of the most interesting Worldcon races in a long time.

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## Having a Ball

I haven't been to a concert in ages. The last one was the Amazing Rhythm Aces gig in Melbourne that I reported on back in issue #21. It isn't that there is a lack of concert venues in the Bay Area, far from it. However, Kevin has never shown a great deal of interest in concerts (despite being far more musical than I am) so I have waited for something really spectacular before luring him out to one.

Of course the days are long gone when Peter Gabriel's passion for complex costumes and sets could turn a sell-out Genesis tour into a financial disaster, but Gabriel has lost none of his passion for a big show, and I knew I could rely on him to deliver the goods. Also these days Peter Gabriel is not just an artist, he is an industry. His Real World record label is home to many excellent bands that he has discovered through Womad, and of course you can expect to see some of them as support on his tour.

Consequently the show was opened by the Blind Boys of Alabama, a truly fabulous Gospel band who appear to have been recording since 1948. Some of those guys are into their seventies, but they still sing wonderfully. They were followed by a Tanzanian act: Hukwe Zawose and his nephew, Charles. These guys were most definitely not the sort of thing you expect at a rock concert, but they were great musicians and had some truly amazing instruments, the like of which I had never seen before.

Gabriel's own set was a pleasing mixture of old favorites and new material. He opened up with a solo version of "Here comes the flood" before introducing a band that comprised three guitarists, keyboards, drums and a backing singer. There followed a couple of hours of excellent entertainment, despite the fact that the venue, the San José Arena (officially the HP Pavilion, but better known as the Shark Tank and designed as a hockey arena) is by no means acoustically perfect.

The performance was done in the round with a circular stage, the outside of which rotated to allow everyone a good view of the band. As I expected, things dropped down from the ceiling or rose from a central pit fairly regularly throughout the performance. Despite the fact that he now resembles an aging, overweight and balding version of

Robert Silverberg, Gabriel still has masses of energy. He bicycled around the stage during "Solsbury Hill", and for "Downside up" he and his backup singer, daughter Melanie, spend much of the song walking on the ceiling in harnesses. There were only two costumes, but one of them required a power lead and the other was a giant, 10 ft transparent plastic ball that Gabriel got inside and proceeded to roll around the stage.

All in all it was an excellent evening's entertainment. There was enough old material to keep long time Gabriel fans happy. The band, especially bassist Tony Levin, were superb, and the support bands were really good. According to the official web site, [www.petergabriel.com](http://www.petergabriel.com), the North American tour seems to be over. I have no idea if it is coming to Europe, or anywhere else, but if you get a chance go see it.

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## Short Stuff

### London Falling

China Miéville is better known for lengthy novels than for short fiction, but a writer of his class is likely to be a success regardless of what he tries his hand at, and so it has proved with novellas.

The latest offering from PS Publishing, *The Tain*, is nothing to do with cattle-raiding Irishmen. In this particular case the word means something entirely different. You can look the word up in a dictionary, but I advise you not to because it will tell you rather more about the background to the story than you might want to know at the start. What I

can tell you is that Miéville based his story around an idea from one of those fabulous fragments that Borges produced. It is, of course, a considerable challenge to take an idea from the master of the world's shortest fiction and turn it into a story, but Miéville manages magnificently as usual.

The story, such as I can tell you without spoilers, is about a London that has been invaded by fantastical creatures. Humanity has nothing that can stand against them, but one man appears to be immune to their attacks. There is one man in the whole of London that they are afraid of. The story will perhaps mean more to those of us who have lived in London and recognize the places that Miéville describes with such affection, but hopefully the emotion will get through to others as well. And remember, with Miéville you will not get anything like the expected ending.

*The Tain* - China Miéville - PS Publishing - softcover

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### Arioch Rising

Another recent offering in PS Publishing's excellent series of novellas, *Firing the Cathedral*, is something of a revenant. Michael Moorcock is, of course, still writing novels. But Jerry Cornelius? What could the foppish assassin possibly have to offer the modern world? Didn't we bury him along with Mary Quant and Tim Leary?

For some two decades that might have been true. The forces of Law, embodied first by Reagan and Thatcher, and more recently by Alan Greenspan, had acquired a vice-like grip on the world. Jerry's fashion statements have turned into the high street fad for designer labels and thence into a tool of global capitalism. Chaos, it seemed, was defeated.

Yet help can come from the strangest of sources. As Moorcock knows, the cosmic balance is difficult to maintain, and success for Chaos can come as easily from an overly-aggressive leader as from social decay. Jerry Cornelius could never survive in a world run by Alan Greenspan, IBM and Nike, but the world of Enron, George W. Bush and Osama bin Laden is made for him. Political instability is on the rise, and it is time for Jerry to come out of retirement.

Some of the gang are, of course, getting on a bit. Bishop Beesley is fatter and more grasping than ever, but Ms. Brunner, after a decade or so as Prime Minister, has succumbed to senile dementia and has been largely replaced by her daughter, Trixie, a veritable embodiment of the Countryside Movement. Trixie is adamantly against Brussels and Asylum Seekers, though she cannot for the life of her work out why anyone would want to seek an asylum.

The story is, I suspect, aimed primarily at Cornelius fans from way back. After all, a Cornelius story is hard enough to follow as it is, without not knowing who all of the characters are. However, I'm happy to recommend it on two counts. First, Moorcock is first writer I have seen to actually draw parallels between the religious fundamentalism of sections of Islam and America and the equally bloody intolerance practiced by Oliver Cromwell. Secondly, even if you don't read the story at all, you should read the introduction by Alan Moore, which is one of the best bits of commentary on contemporary fiction and society that I have read in ages.

*Firing the Cathedral* - Michael Moorcock - PS Publishing - softcover

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## Miscellany

### Best of 2002

It being just about the end of the year, it is time once again to think about awards. Many have you have already noticed that the *Emerald City* Hugo Recommendation List for 2003 is now open and have sent in contributions. Those of you who have not can find the list at: [www.emcit.com/hugo\\_rec.shtml](http://www.emcit.com/hugo_rec.shtml).

Also on that page of the web site you will be able to find the official Torcon III Hugo Nomination Ballot. If you are a member of Torcon III you are entitled to nominate and to vote in the final ballot. Members of ConJosé are entitled to nominate but may not participate in the final ballot.

It occurs to me that this is probably my best ever chance to get a nomination. Last year I finished seventh in both Best Fanzine and Best Fanwriter, despite the fact that I would have had to decline had I been nominated because I was responsible for online ballot. Most, if not all, of those kind folks will presumably be eligible to nominate again, and their ranks may be swelled by those who had heeded my warnings about not wasting nominations on me. It could be interesting, especially with Dave Langford having moved *Ansible* into Best Semiprozine. Of course I don't expect to actually win anything, but I do very much hope that *Plokta* finally gets the recognition it deserves.

Meanwhile, it is time to stick my neck out. I'm going to do my Mystic Meg impression and try to predict what is going to win the various Best Novel major awards next year. You will then be able to laugh at me when I am proved horribly wrong.

**The Hugo:** of course M. John Harrison's *Light* should win it, but without US publication it doesn't stand much



chance. My money is on Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Years of Rice and Salt*, even though I found it deeply flawed. Any book where I get hate mail after giving it a bad review clearly has enough devoted admirers to carry it through.

**World Fantasy Award:** here's hoping that the judges show some good taste and give it to China Miéville's *The Scar*.

**The Tiptree:** goes to *Fire Logic* by Laurie Marks, with an honorable mention for *Solitaire* by Kelley Eskridge.

**The Clarke:** I have great faith in the judges - *Light* will win by miles.

**The BSFA Award:** this will be interesting. *Light* and *The Scar* will both be in with a good chance, but I'm going to go out on a limb and suggest that either *Redemption Ark* by Al Reynolds or *Effendi* by Jon Courtenay Grimwood will pip them to the post.

**The Nebula:** goodness only knows, after this year anything could happen.

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## Radio Twilight

Here is an unusual development that many of you might find interesting. A Chicago-based production company, Falcon Picture Group, has secured the rights to produce a series of radio plays based on the Twilight Zone TV series. All of the original 23-minute TV scripts will be adapted to 60-minute radio scripts. Dennis Etchison has been hired to write the scripts. Stacey Keach, most famous for his role as detective Mike Hammer, will take Rod Serling's role as host. Serling's wife, Carol, has expressed her delight with the venture. If you would like to learn more, check out [www.twilightzoneradio.com](http://www.twilightzoneradio.com).

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## Devotion to duty

I don't normally run letters in Emerald City, but this comment in an email from Sean McMullen was too good to ignore. I think that we readers should be aware of just how hard authors work to bring us novels. Sean said:

"I have been doing some literary research on medieval forced marches - I did 30 miles in 9 hours on sand and walking tracks, with no meal breaks, a 50-pound pack, chain mail, and really horrid medieval-style boots. The march took me to a karate training camp, where I did some sparring with some of Australia's top black belts the following day. This simulated a forced march followed by a battle after a night's sleep. It was truly appalling, but I found that it can be done. On the other hand, having gained first-hand experience, I can think of no authors who come even close to describing the sheer misery of a forced march."

Now that is what I call dedication.

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## Novas move forward

The Novas, Britain's premier fanzine awards, have taken a giant step forward into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century by agreeing to extend eligibility to electronic fanzines. According to a report in *Ansible*, any electronic zine that wishes to be eligible must fulfill two criteria. Firstly the 'zine must be a proper discrete publication, not something like an online journal that grows amorphously. Not a problem with that, I suspect. The other criterion is a little more controversial. For an electronic fanzine to be eligible, the editor must agree to send paper copies of the magazine to anyone who requests them.

Yeah, right.

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## Footnote

In most issues the books that I review are picked largely on the basis of when they were issued. I try to cover the latest stuff. When there is a theme it is normally the country I happen to be in at the time (or have just made a visit to). In this issue, however, I am rather pleased with the way that the Ken MacLeod novel connects to so much of the other material.

On a fairly trivial level, *Engine City* and *City of Saints and Madmen* are based around jokes about squid. However, *The Mount* echoes *Engine City's* themes of paternalism and self-determination. And it is interesting to compare MacLeod's passion for continual revolution with the *Warhammer* philosophy (subtly subverted by Newman) that Chaos is destructive and evil. Games Workshop, of course, got the idea from *Dungeons & Dragons*, which got it from Moorcock. A certain amount of Chinese whispers took place along the way. It is also worth noting that where MacLeod plays with a bunch of modern superstitions, Eco does pretty much the same thing with the daft things that people believed in during the Middle Ages. If only I could fit Priest and Harrison in as well I'd be happy. But then of course if I found myself looking for obscure connections I would be as mad as one of Harrison's characters.

Anyway, enough of this idle speculation. Time to ring out 2002 and see if the New Year brings anything new and interesting. For certain I can tell you that it will include Sean McMullen, Brian Stableford and Jeff Noon. Hopefully the new John Meaney will turn up in time as well. The guest mainstream novel will be

*The Chess Garden* by Brooks Hansen. See you next year.

Ciao,

Love 'n' hugs, Cheryl