

EMERALD CITY #89

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Introduction

Hmm, this is strange. For once I find myself with absolutely nothing to say. A New Year has started, hectic as usual, but so far nothing I can't handle. This issue is, if anything, running early. Hope your 2003 is going as well.

Thankfully I do have a few things to say about some books. Here goes...

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Sailing at Speed

Sean McMullen's new novel is something of a departure in that it is not set in the Mirrorsun world. Ostensibly it is a fantasy, but it would not pass muster as one by any but the simplest of tests. What it actually is, is a science fiction novel set in an alien world with a medieval society where some of the inhabitants are able to perform amazing feats through the use of a form of technology that they happen to call magic (or possibly "etheric effects"). Of course the book has to have kings and priests and wars and strange beasts, but then so did the Mirrorsun books. Indeed, McMullen is much happier writing in a milieu in which acts of violence are common and can be used to advance characters' careers and mete out rough justice. More of this later, but first a little about the book.

In *The Voyage of the Shadowmoon* we meet the usual McMullen collection of unusually eccentric, talented, ambitious and obsessive individuals caught up in world-shaking affairs. For example, we meet the world's most chivalrous vampyre, the world's fattest sorceress, an ex-king who is a eunuch, an ex-queen who is a belly dancer and a sizeable collection of power-hungry maniacs. The objective of most of the lunacy is Silverdeath, a magical weapon capable of reducing entire continents to bubbling slag. Naturally, some of McMullen's characters are only too eager to try it out. Ranged against them we have a motley collection of possible heroes who rush back and fore around the oceans in the Shadowmoon, the world's only submersible sailing galley.

If all that sounds a little breathless, it was intended to be. McMullen's plot races off in multiple threads at great speed, giving the reader the impression of a multi-headed centipede on amphetamines that is always threatening to trip over its own multitudinous feet but in fact somehow manages to end up where it was going. There is, indeed, never a dull moment.

What is interesting about the plot, however, is that most of the problems are resolved through the application of logic and engineering rather than sorcery and swordplay. From the world-building point of view, this is a little dangerous. It is not at all obvious, for example, why a world that can produce magical artifacts of the power of Silverdeath cannot use magical means to achieve the same ends that the characters spend much practical ingenuity chasing after. Given the breakneck pace of the book, it sometimes gives the impression of a *Clan of the Cave Bear* style torrent of inventions.

What saves the book, however, is that it is by no means just a rollicking good

adventure. McMullen manages to address a range of interesting issues along the way, including the relative benefits of being alive or undead, the meaning of virginity, and most importantly the vexing question of how many innocent bystanders it is reasonable to let die in order to destroy Silverdeath. McMullen's morality may be a bit rough and tumble at times, but it is always well thought out and very well stated.

One thing that may disappoint McMullen fans is the relative lack of invention on the world-building front, as compared to the wonderful post-apocalyptic society of the Mirrorsun books. However, there is clearly a lot to be revealed, not the least of which is how Laron the vampyre happens to be a mediaeval French nobleman from Earth. I am sure that McMullen has a lot of ideas for this world, and that we will be visiting it again in the near future.

The Voyage of the Shadowmoon - McMullen - Tor - hardcover

Shards of Being

*Picture yourself in a train in a station
With plasticine porters with looking glass
ties*

It started in mirrors. Perhaps no one noticed at first. After all, no reflection is perfect. Maybe they just looked ever so slightly less perfect each time you looked, and the change was so small each time that you didn't notice. Until one day the face looking back at you wasn't yours at all.

Then you realized that other things were fraying at the edges too: books,

television, telephones, road signs. Information was unraveling. By this time, governments were starting to panic. Thankfully a few people proved to be immune, and from them an antidote was produced.

If you can read this, it means that you are alive.

Official Government Road Sign

A drug that allowed people to make sense of the world, that propped up the crumbling scaffolding in their brains and held open the information neuro-highways. "Lucidity", they called it. But the general public knew it by another name.

*Suddenly someone is there at the turnstile
The girl with kaleidoscope eyes*

Marlene Moore: journalist.

Marlene Moore, whose daughter, Angela, was one of the first in Britain to die from "the sickness".

Marlene Moore: treasure seeker. Because Mr. Kingsley knows a thing or two about mirrors. And rather a lot about one mirror in particular. One mirror that has been shattered and sundered and fought over. One mirror that, if sufficient shards were collected, might have rather more power than those individual pieces that are being hoarded by greedy amateur magicians. Besides, Kingsley is prepared to pay a lot of money for pieces of the mirror, and with the world falling apart, what else is there to do?

The new novel by Jeff Noon is called *Falling out of Cars*. Like everything else Noon has written, it has a sound track. And like all of Noon's other work, it

speaks of a reality that is seriously frayed at the edges. Fascinating, disturbing, unashamedly weird, gloriously different: all the usual Noon adjectives apply. But let's face it folks, if you wanted something easy to read with a predictable happy ending you would not be reading *Emerald City*, would you?

And so we follow Marlene through a Britain that we can perceive only sideways. She keeps a journal, but it is about as intelligible and reliable as that kept by Gene Wolfe's amnesiac soldier, Latro. Things happen, as they do. Mirrors are all banished, or at least turned to the wall. No one knows their own face any more. Who needs mirrors anyway? Looking Glass Land is here. And it is getting more here by the day.

*Now the drugs don't work
They just make you worse
But I know I'll see your face again*

Falling out of Cars - Jeff Noon - Doubleday - hardcover

Emortality's End

Six novels and one-and-a-quarter thousand years later, Brian Stableford has reached the end of one of the most impressive speculations on future history ever written. If you have been following my reviews of the previous books, you will know that each story has stood alone and each has been very different. Now, with *The Omega Expedition*, Stableford draws the threads together and brings the series to a conclusion.

So, in this final volume, we become re-acquainted with Madoc Tamlin from *Inherit the Earth*; he is joined by Michael Lowenthal, the diplomat from *Architects of Emortality*; and we meet Alice Fleury, daughter of the hero of *Dark Ararat*. Of course the whole edifice is bound together by the historian, Mortimer Gray, from *Fountains of Youth*. And most importantly we meet the man who has lurked behind the story since *The Cassandra Complex*: Adam Zimmerman, the founder of the Ahasuerus Foundation.

(Note: for various complicated reasons Tor did not publish the books either in chronological or logical order, but thankfully they did save the conclusion until last.)

You may remember from my review of *The Fountains of Youth* that Stableford had left us with something of a cliffhanger. Mankind had finally encountered alien life forms. They have also discovered why it took them so long to make contact. A virulent nano-virus known as the Afterlife that feeds off organic matter has wiped out other forms of life in most of the galaxy. It is still spreading, and in a few hundred years it will put an end to the empire of man.

I suspect I was typical of many readers in wanting to know what would happen next. Would those ingenious humans manage to find a way to defeat this implacable enemy? I should have known better than that, especially given that I know Stableford quite well. In *Locus* Nick Gevers, formerly an enthusiastic supporter of the series, takes Stableford to task for failing to produce a rousing, dramatic conclusion to his story. But he has missed the point completely. Stableford is far too much of a thinker to opt for such an easy ending.

So what is the point? As you may recall, the overriding theme of the series has been the search for emortality. The use of that word is deliberate. Immortality implies that the person in question cannot die, even if burned to cinders by a tac-nuke or chewed up and digested by a passing tyrannosaur. Emortality simply means that the person does not age. The former is the stuff of fantasy novels; science fiction can aspire only to the latter.

Enter Adam Zimmerman. Known to the public at large as “The Man who Stole the World”, Zimmerman was the financial genius who helped a small cabal of mega-corporations to destroy the economies of the world’s major countries and gain control of the world. But, unlike his backers, Zimmerman did not do this for power. Zimmerman was a man with a mission. As a result of reading Heidegger late at night when he was young and impressionable, Zimmerman acquired a burning ambition to live forever. Therefore he set out to earn enough money both to fund research into longevity and to have his own body cryogenically frozen and cared for until such time as his project should succeed and he could be woken and made emortal. Having netted himself several billions of dollars, Zimmerman was frozen down in 2035. Now, in 3263, his Ahasuerus Foundation has finally decided to wake him.

But wait, we know from *Fountains of Youth* that emortality has been with us for some time. Mortimer Gray was born in 2520 and is still around, a sprightly 743 years old. It has been clear for some time that Zimmerman was more valuable to Ahasuerus, and much less dangerous, as a famous corpsicle than as a living man. Why have they chosen to wake him now? And then there is question of the trial subjects.

We last saw Madoc Tamlin in 2193. He wasn't the sort of man who could afford to be frozen down. His friend, Damon Hart, who did have money, outlived him substantially and died naturally. Madoc has no idea why he was frozen. All he can think of is that he must have committed some horrible crime, perhaps one so foul that he was mind-wiped. In Madoc's time, freezing had become a popular alternative to capital punishment. This theory is supported by the fact that the other corpse that Ahasuerus chose to use as a trial was that of Christine Caine, a notorious serial murderer.

There we have a plot, and Stableford does, of course, provide a resolution, albeit a slightly hackneyed one. But the plot is simply a crutch for the main point of the novel, the debate. Whatever the real reasons for Zimmerman being awakened, it is clear that by waiting Ahasuerus has been able to give him a choice. There are now several versions of emortality on offer, and Zimmerman will be asked to determine the future of humanity by deciding which is best.

The standard emortality technique, the Zaman Transformation, as exemplified by Mortimer Gray, is proven and effective, but it does suffer from problems. The main issue is the fear of robotization: that is the theory that emortal minds become set in their ways and incapable of creative thought. This charge is normally leveled at the Earthbound by the more adventurous half of mankind who have chosen to reinvent themselves in order to allow them to colonize the solar system. The most extreme of these are the cyborganizers who have replaced much of their bodies with machinery and who constantly seek out new challenges to fight off the threat of senility.

The Ahasuerus Foundation has taken a different route. Concerned about

robotization, they have chosen to freeze their physical development at nine years of age, roughly the point at which aging first kicks in for present-day humans. They have also chosen to dispense with unnecessary biological functions such as gender and reproductive capability. The world into which Zimmerman is awakened is populated by child-like hermaphrodite angels.

Zimmerman's final choice is offered by Alice Fleury. The dramatically different alien biology of the planet Ararat offers an entirely different version of emortality. The life forms on Ararat do not reproduce as we understand it. Instead groups of them enter a cocoon-like state and re-emerge youthful and changed. The incorporation of Ararat-style genetics offers stunning new vistas of biotechnology, including the ability for humans to adapt to any environment through biological means rather than through cyborgization.

There will doubtless be many among you who will be somewhat bored by a lengthy philosophical debate. Unlike *Dark Ararat*, *The Omega Expedition* is not a very commercial novel. But it is fascinating, and I for one am delighted that Stableford doesn't sacrifice his principles for a few extra sales. I'm also impressed at quite how readable the book is, given the amount of exposition and debate that it contains.

When I reviewed *Dark Ararat* I said I've added it to my Hugo list for this year. But what I really want to do is nominate the entire series. It is a stunning achievement, and deserves far more recognition than it has received.

The Omega Expedition - Brian Stableford - Tor
- hardcover

Changing the Future

The latest book by Joe Haldeman, *Guardian*, is one of those stories that leaves reviewers and critics asking "what is it"? For over 150 pages (of a 230 page book) it is a perfect ordinary take of 19th Century America. A naïve young girl marries a wealthy Philadelphia lawyer but discovers him to be an abusive control freak. When he begins to use their son to satisfy his need to dominate people through sex she flees west, taking the boy with her, and begins a new life in Dodge City. Finally tracked down by her husband, she has to flee once more, and her son, now a young man, suggests the newly opened Yukon gold fields. There she meets a widowed farmer from the mid-west with a son the age of her own and falls in love.

There is nothing out of the ordinary about that, save for a couple of appearances by a talking raven that saves our heroine at crucial times in her life. It looks like we may be being set up for some sort of magical realism tale, especially as the heroine spends some time as a missionary to native Americans. But Haldeman has nothing of the sort in mind. The remainder of the book is pure SF. I can't tell you too much about it without generating spoilers, but I think it is safe to say that Dr. Who fans will recognize a few themes.

So exactly what is going on here? One view is that Haldeman has written a 1950s SF novella with some nervous warnings about the dangers of nuclear weapons. In order to pad it out to a novel he has tacked an attempt at a frontier novel onto the front as set-up. But I think what he has actually done is try to write a Sheri Tepper novel without some of the odious politics of Tepper's more recent output. The tale of an ordinary, much abused woman being

made an envoy of mankind to ultra-powerful aliens is very reminiscent of *The Fresco*. Sadly, it doesn't work too well.

To start with the set-up section is very shallow. Reading it I kept thinking that Karen Joy Fowler would do it ten times better. Even Tepper would have spent much more time exploring the feelings of the heroine and her relationship with her son. If nothing else, a girl brought up a staunch Methodist and finding herself in an abusive relationship would spend a lot of time worrying about whether she was being punished for some unknown sin. And her new life in Dodge City should have more complications than people in the local church choir not being very friendly. Haldeman isn't interested in exploring his heroine in that sort of way. He just narrates the plot.

Also the final section, whilst not stomach-churningly despotic like *The Fresco*, is desperately simplistic. So war is bad for us, and we might destroy ourselves. I think we knew that.

Then again, maybe the message does need repeating. Maybe there are people for whom it has to be couched in the simplest terms possible. I read this book while on a business trip to San Diego for a conference. Over breakfast on the Friday I got to watch the might of the US Navy make its way out of Coronado on its way to the Persian Gulf. Ten thousand young marines, most of whom had no expectation of ever going to war when they signed up. Joe Haldeman, you will remember, won a purple heart as a draftee in Vietnam. He's also the author of *The Forever War*, one of the best anti-war novels ever written. He's a man we should listen to, even when he's talking to the likes of children and White House staffers.

Guardian - Joe Haldeman - Ace - hardcover

Picture of Insanity

Jeffrey Ford is one of those writers that I've been meaning to try out for some time now. He won the World Fantasy Award in 1998 with *The Physiognomy* and generally gets good reviews. Having been introduced to him at this year's World Fantasy Con I had serious pangs of guilt and went in search of his latest book. And I'm glad I did.

In style *The Portrait of Mrs. Charbuque* is perhaps most reminiscent of the likes of Conan Doyle and Stevenson. It is set in late 19th Century New York, and has very much the feel of mystery novels written in that period. At times it flirts with fantasy, but it always leaves room for doubt as to whether anything supernatural actually occurred, and its villain is most definitely human, albeit somewhat warped.

The hero of the book, Piero Piambo, is one of the most successful artists in New York. He makes an excellent living painting the portraits of the nouveau riche, and has one of the city's most famous actresses as a girlfriend. But his mind is not at ease. Like many an artist in any medium, Piambo recognizes that he has sacrificed his creativity in search of commercial success.

Piambo's latest commission is to paint a flattering portrait of the wife of a successful industrialist. It isn't until he finishes the commission that Piambo realizes that the portrait is in fact a subtle insult to poor Mrs. Reed by which her philandering husband intends to give her a constant reminder that her plain looks are not what he needs from a woman. Disgusted by the sort of work he has ended up doing, Piambo resolves

to return to pure art, but how to support himself in the meantime? Then, out of the blue, he receives an offer of a commission that is challenging and likely to give him the financial freedom he craves. The job is just a little strange, that's all.

Mrs. Charbuque is a mysterious and fabulously wealthy woman. She is prepared to offer Piambo far more than he would receive from a normal commission. Her only condition is that he produces the portrait without once seeing her. If what he paints turns out to be a good likeness his payment will be doubled.

So Piambo finds himself interviewing his subject as she sits behind a screen. He is allowed to ask her any question he wishes except ones about her appearance. Hoping to get an impression of the sort of person she is, he asks for the story of her life, and soon finds that her history is as strange as her commission. Her fortune has come from her successful work as a medium, a job that she undertook without ever once being seen by her adoring public. The only person allowed to approach her, to deliver questions and receive her written answers, is her blind manservant.

Seeking to find a way to the promised double payment, Piambo, his best friend Shenz and his actress lover, Samantha, investigate the eccentric recluse in the hope of finding someone who has seen her, perhaps as a child. Their research reveals that her story, bizarre as it seems, is largely true. But there are holes in it. In particular, the missing Mr. Charbuque, whom his wife claims to have drowned at sea, is very much alive and not at all pleased at the amount of time that Piambo is spending with his estranged wife. Furthermore, as Piambo becomes more and more obsessed with his subject, Samantha begins to worry that he is falling in love with his patron.

And precisely what does Piambo's commission have to do with the dreadful curse that strikes the city, leaving numerous young women bleeding to death from their eyes?

The truth of the story is, of course, even more bizarre. And in discovering that truth Piambo finds not only his art, but also himself. *The Portrait of Mrs. Charbuque* is a fine little story. It doesn't have any deep philosophical message, not is it going to win any prizes for breaking new ground. But it does what it does very well indeed. Recommended.

The Portrait of Mrs. Charbuque - Jeffrey Ford - Morrow - hardcover

Plato to Pretoria

This month's mainstream novel was recommended to me by Jeff Vandermeer when I spoke to him at World Fantasy Con. It was first published in 1995, but I had no trouble finding a copy. Being a later edition, my copy's cover blurb is full of extracts from praiseful reviews, and what a strange selection of praises they are. The New York Times Book Review compares *The Chess Garden* to work by Nabokov and Calvino; The Village Voice mentions Márquez and Borges; the Boston Sunday Globe picks Tolkien and Lewis; and the Times Literary Supplement Poe and Carroll. Just what is this book?

To start with, *The Chess Garden, or the Twilight Letters of Gustav Uyterhoeven*, to give the book its full title, is a delightful fix-up. As the subtitle suggests, it contains a number of letters. Each of these relates the adventures of the good Dr. Uyterhoeven in the fabulous land of The Antipodes. The letters are interspersed with episodes taken from

the doctor's life, telling how he met his wife, Sonja; how he came to live in Dayton, Ohio and found his famous Chess Garden; and why he chose to end his days as a medical volunteer in the Boer War and write letters home for the amusement and edification of his neighbors' children. As I will show later, the whole edifice is cunningly woven together, but the initial effect of one of the collection of delightful short stories artfully strung together.

Let us dispose of some of the wilder speculation first. Sadly we can't expect mainstream book reviewers to know anything about genre fiction and this leads them into making wholly inappropriate comparisons. Sorry, Boston Globe, Brooks Hansen's novel has almost nothing in common with Tolkien and Lewis. There is no attempt to construct a believable alternative world. Not only is *The Antipodes* a bizarre setting more reminiscent of Carroll's Looking Glass Land than of Middle Earth or Narnia, but it is made clear from the beginning that Dr. Uyterhoeven is making the whole thing up. Neither is the book in any way Magic Realism. At no point does magic enter the real world.

Comparisons with Carroll are much more obvious, especially as *The Antipodes* is populated by living game pieces, most particularly chess sets. But Brook's ambitions are rather wider than those of Carroll. Because it comes clear as the book develops that Dr. Uyterhoeven's purpose in writing these letters is not just to entertain the children of Ohio, but to impart to them his personal philosophy. And Hansen's purpose in writing about Uyterhoeven's activities is to enter into a discussion about moral philosophy that only the most precocious children are likely to pick up on.

At first sight, Uytterhoeven is something of a Platonist, for he is much taken with the pawn, Eugene, and his legendary collection of Goods. After his king was taken in battle, and his team scattered, Eugene, an uncommonly self-reliant pawn, decided to set up in business. Naturally he set up a pawnshop. But as people brought him things it turned out that he had a talent for recognizing items that were the absolute essence of what they were intended to be. A lamp that was an absolute ideal of what a lamp should be, perfectly formed for its purpose; the same for a kettle, or a walking stick. Eugene called these ideal items Goods.

For a while it became a game for the pieces of *The Antipodes*. Everyone wanted to be known as having found something that Eugene would recognize as a Good. But then the Good loon was accidentally broken in a fight, and people realized that they could no longer remember what a loon was used for. From then on the game turned dark. The Goods appeared to have power. Kings and Queens wanted to hoard them for themselves. Bishops debated over their significance. Political revolutionaries speculated that if you could find and kill the Good King then pawns would no longer be forced into military service. And a mysterious group called the Vandals dedicated itself to destroying every Good in the world.

Meanwhile, outside the world of the letters, Uytterhoeven's biography is showing him to be something of a rebel. A leading figure in the development of pathology in the latter half of the 19th Century, he constantly speaks out against the obsession with discovering the "causes" of disease, and is sympathetic towards homeopathy. This denial of a necessary link between cause and effect seems fundamentally opposed to Plato's concept of ideal forms from

which all things in the material world depend. So the alert reader may suspect that Uytterhoeven is setting his young audience up with his tale of Eugene and his Goods, and that the truth of the tale is much more complex.

Later still, while researching malaria in South Africa, Uytterhoeven contracts the disease himself and, while at death's door, is persuaded of the value of the theological writings of Emanuel Swedenborg. This further informs his moral outlook on life, and enables Hansen to reach a synthesis in Uytterhoeven's tale of *The Antipodes*.

I have to say that *The Chess Garden* is one of the cleverest books I have ever read. It presents a very deep philosophical and theological argument dressed up as a delightful, if occasionally slightly scary set of stories for children, plus a fictional biography that appears (in the absence of my doing a lot of research to verify it) immaculately woven in with the historical background. Whether you end up agreeing with Hansen's argument (and I suspect that many of a scientific bent will not), it will be hard to register your disagreement without feeling that your case is woefully under-presented compared to his. Thank you, Jeff, this one is seriously impressive.

The Chess Garden - Brooks Hansen - Riverhead - softcover

Hobbit Dissected

When a book becomes as well known as *The Hobbit* it is inevitable that people should study it in minute detail. In this particular case, one of the best such studies has been done by Douglas A. Anderson, a leading light in the Mythopoeic Society. His annotated

version of *The Hobbit* was first published in 1988, but thanks to a wealth of additional scholarly research and an excellent marketing opportunity a revised and expanded version appeared last year.

The book, *The Annotated Hobbit*, is of course first and foremost a version of the source novel. It contains the full text of the current version of the original story, but the text is heavily embellished with informative sidebars and there is a long and interesting introduction that tells the history of the novel. Large numbers of illustrations – all of Tolkien's and many taken from foreign-language versions of the tale, are included.

Now I have to admit that you need to be something of a Tolkien nut to really benefit from such a book. Most readers will not really care whether Tolkien made slight revisions to various sentences in later editions of the book. But buried within the detail is much of interest. For example, we get to discover the origin of the name "Baggins". It is apparently a Northern English term meaning "afternoon tea", or more generally "snacking between meals". We discover that in the first drafts of the story Thorin was called Gandalf and Gandalf was named Bladorthin. And we have a fine print of the painting by Swiss artist Josef Madlener that provided the original inspiration for Gandalf as a character. (Indeed, a surprising amount of *The Hobbit* was inspired by a walking tour of Switzerland that Tolkien undertook in 1911.)

The changes themselves can also be interesting and informative. For example, there has been much wailing and gnashing of teeth amongst fandom over the fact that the *Fellowship of the Ring* movie shows the Hobbits cooking tomatoes. Oh dear, there should be no New World food in medieval England. Except, of course, that Middle Earth is

not medieval England. Anderson points out that the original version of *The Hobbit* included mention of tomatoes being in Bilbo's larder. Tolkien changed this to pickles in the 1966 third edition of the book, having decided upon a more English view of the Hobbits while writing *The Lord of the Rings*. However, he did not excise all of the references to pipeweed as "tobacco", and he kept potatoes, thinly disguised as "taters".

The most interesting change in the third edition, however, comes in Bilbo's encounter with Gollum. When writing the original story, Tolkien had yet to devise the mythology of the One Ring. Gollum used the term "my precious" to refer to himself. In the third edition the ending of the chapter "Riddles in the Dark" was substantially re-written to conform with the history expounded in *The Lord of the Rings*. Both versions are presented here.

One of the delights of such books is, of course, the appendices. Trivia fans amongst you will relish the complete listing of all versions of *The Hobbit* in foreign languages. Those who take a greater interest in the story will turn instead to the newly discovered version of "The Quest of Erebor". This, according to Tolkien, is "Gandalf's account of how he came to arrange the expedition to Erebor and send Bilbo with the Dwarves". It is taken from notes made by Frodo of a conversation between Gandalf and Gimli. The version published here is later than the one originally included in *Unfinished Tales*.

To summarize, *The Annotated Hobbit* is by no means a book for everyone, but if you love Middle Earth you will enjoy this work. And in any case it is a beautifully produced book.

The Annotated Hobbit - Douglas A. Anderson
- Houghton Mifflin - hardcover

Still Battling

This one turned up in the post one day. I'm still not sure why Kevin ordered it. I've always thought that books of stills from movies are particularly pointless exercises, especially in these days of DVD when you can stop the film at any point. The visual companions to the *Lord of the Rings* movies, however, do have the advantage of being compiled by someone exceptionally well placed to do the job.

The lady in question is here is the fantasy author known as Jude Fisher who, under her real name of Jane Johnson, has a long and illustrious career in publishing, including managing the (mainly posthumous) output of one J.R.R. Tolkien. If she doesn't know the books well enough to produce a decent commentary then there would be precious few who did. And indeed Ms. Fisher does a good job of filling in background to the pictures. She helpfully explains the full story of Gandalf's fight with the Balrog (horribly cut and deeply confusing in the film); she tells us what a Palantir is; and she deftly avoids or glosses over most of the more egregious deviations from the plot perpetrated by Peter Jackson and his scriptwriters. So far, so good.

And yet, the point of such a book is presumably the selection of the pictures, which is decidedly odd in places. Some of the absences are understandable. A clear decision has been taken not to reveal the outcome of the film, so there are no views of the relief of Helm's Deep or the destruction of Isengard. I suspect also that hunk-value has been an important determinant. There are many fine views of Viggo Mortensen and Orlando Bloom striking dramatic poses,

but the only decent view of Gimli is on the cover. Other aspects, however, are not so easily understood. There is no picture of the oliphaunts, surely a fine piece of special effects. And the section on the Elvish troops at Helm's Deep has no pictures of those troops. What puzzled me most, however, was that so many of the photos are taken in very poor light. If you are going to have a book of photographs, at least choose some in which you can actually see the subjects being pictured. Very odd.

Oh, and there is a nice, large foldout picture of Helm's Deep. Take a look at it and see if you can work out why they built the curtain wall where it is. Sigh.

Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers Visual Companion – Jude Fisher – Houghton Mifflin – hardcover

Two Types

Well, it was a dream for a while. We had an all-California World Series, and we had a prospect of an all-Bay Area Superbowl. We did at least manage the satisfaction of putting out both New York teams, but the really big prize eluded us. In expectation of something glorious happening, I penned this little guide to Bay Area football teams so that outsiders could choose whether to cheer for the 49ers or the Raiders. It isn't quite so useful now, but I might just get this issue on the Web in time for you to decide whether or not to cheer for the Raiders in the Superbowl. In any case I thought you might find it interesting.

The 49ers live at Candlestick Park where visiting teams are invited to play. The Raiders live at the Oakland Coliseum where visiting teams are offered up for sacrifice.

To get to the game, Raiders fans use a Monster Truck. 49ers fans use a Luxury Sports Utility Vehicle.

At their tailgate parties, 49ers fans serve wine and cheese. Raiders fans serve raw meat and blood.

At the entry gates, Raiders fans are searched for clubs, knives, pistols and weapons of mass destruction. 49ers fans are searched for hot stock tips.

On the morning before the game, 49ers fans can be found polishing their cars and checking their stock portfolios. Raiders fans can be found getting into costume.

Raiders fans buy last minute tickets in clandestine back street deals, often involving barter. 49ers fans buy last minute tickets on eBay.

If their team is playing away from home, Raiders fans will go to the game (assuming that they can afford it - if they have no more children to sell then they will watch the game with their mates in a sports bar). 49ers fans will spend the weekend skiing and posing at Lake Tahoe.

To stave off the winter cold, Raiders fans wear several layers of leather, rubber, chain mail and face paint. 49ers fans wear pretty much the same gear as they wear to Tahoe.

If their team is doing badly, Raiders fans hurl abuse and empty beer cans at the players and coaches. 49ers fans call the sideline on their mobile phones to offer coaching suggestions.

If their team loses, Raiders fans will call local sports radio station, The Ticket, and yell abuse at the players and coaches. 49ers fans will put their season tickets up for auction on eBay.

49ers fans want the team to go public so that they can buy stock. Raiders fans

suspect that their team owner, Al Davis, is undead.

49ers fans have their children privately tutored by Stanford professors. Raiders fans encourage their kids to play with the rotweiller.

Outside of football, 49ers fans like to eat at posh restaurants, watch ballet and opera, and read prize-winning novels. Raiders fans, er, what do you mean, "outside football"?

If asked to pick the greatest football player of all time, 49ers fans will name Jerry Rice. Raiders fans will name Jerry Rice.

Short Stuff

Faded red

I picked up a copy of the anthology, *Mars Probes*, because a couple of the stories in it were posted to the *Emerald City* Hugo Recommendation List. It certainly looks a promising publication. The idea is very simple: get a bunch of excellent SF writers to produce stories about Mars. And editor Peter Crowther has produced a fine selection of contributors. The writers include Gene Wolfe, Michael Moorcock, Al Reynolds, Steven Baxter, Allen Steele and Ian McDonald. All of the stories are new, save for a Ray Bradbury tale from 1982 that is receiving its first US publication. So far, so good.

The trouble is that having read several of the stories I have ended up reinforcing my opinion that the quality of short stories we get today is very poor. For the most part, having finished a tale, I ended up thinking, "why did you bother?" I haven't read everything, but the only

story that I have really enjoyed is the Edgar Rice Burroughs pastiche by Moorcock, "Lost Sorceress of the Silent Citadel". This is firstly because it is a great pastiche, and secondly because Moorcock manages to slip in a bunch of pointed political asides along the way. Patrick O'Leary's "The Me After the Rock" is also quite clever, but not clever enough to make me want to nominate it for anything. Sad.

Mars Probes - Peter Crowther (ed.) - DAW - softcover

Mourning for Mir

For the benefit of those of you who can't wait for Dan Simmons' promised return to SF later this year, Eos has put out a collection of short stories under the title, *Worlds Enough and Time*. Again I haven't read all of them yet, but I did make a point of checking out the one newly written piece, "The End of Gravity". This is much more like the right stuff.

Ostensibly the story is about an aging American novelist who is asked to visit Russia and write a report on the state of the Russian space effort. Along the way he has an affair with the beautiful young doctor and would-be cosmonaut who is assigned to look after him.

Of course there is much more to the tale than that. Firstly Simmons has done a lot of research into the history of the Russian space program. I learned a lot from the story. But more importantly the tale is a subtle allegory about the health of the American space effort. Like Simmons' aging hero, we come to see that, in comparison to the Russians, NASA has a serious problem with its heart. Very slick. I don't think the story is Hugo worthy, but at least someone out there is writing short stories with a purpose.

Worlds Enough & Time - Dan Simmons - Eos - softcover

Whisky dreams

My latest sampling from the novella series by PS Publishing is by Ken MacLeod. The story, *The Human Front*, appears to have come out of the same, quite probably alcohol-soaked piece of inspiration that gave rise to the *Engines of Light* series. This one, however, has little revolutionary dialectic to it. The story starts off seriously enough with tales of a Third World War in which the Americans and Communists have been hard at it pretty much since the end of the previous planetary conflict. By the 1960s, however, the USA has some unusual hardware. The stealth bombers are circular and silvery in color. John Matheson and his father are the only Britons to have seen a pilot: he was very short, with a large head, greyish skin, and only four fingers on each hand.

From there get steadily more weird and the jokes start popping in. There are several about the ignorance that 1970s Scotsmen have about dinosaurs, but my favorite is when the Russian comrades declare that time travel is impossible because it contradicts dialectical materialism. My only real complaint is that I think having gone that far MacLeod should have played the game even more for laughs.

The Human Front - Ken MacLeod - PS Publishing - hardcover

Miscellany

Dick Nominees

Two award shortlists have been published since the last issue. *Ansible* #186 carries the finalists for this year's Philip K. Dick Award (for books first published in paperback in the US). The hopefuls are: *The Mount*, Carol Emshwiller; *Report to the Men's Club and Other Stories*, Carol Emshwiller; *Warchild*, Karin Lowachee; *The Scar*, China Miéville; *Maximum Ice*, Kay Kenyon; *Leviathan Three*, Jeff Vandermeer & Forrest Aguirre, Eds.; and *Empire of Bones*, Liz Williams. I'm delighted to see how many of those I have actually caught. I will seek out the Kay Kenyon for next issue. No promises on the short fiction collections. Unless the judges have a complete brainstorm the winner should be a forgone conclusion. Guess this gives you a good excuse to avoid the Hinkley Horror, China. (Norwescon, where the award is presented, being held at the same time as Eastercon.)

Clarke Finalists

Meanwhile the Clarke Award judges have issued their shortlist, and there are some interesting entries, including no less than three Americans. Thanks to Farah Mendlesohn for forwarding the list. The lucky finalists are: *Speed of Dark*, Elizabeth Moon; *Kiln People*, David Brin; *Light*, M. John Harrison; *The Scar*, China Miéville; *Years of Rice and Salt*, Kim Stanley Robinson; and *The Separation*, Chris Priest. The Elizabeth Moon is also on my list for next issue.

Incidentally, does anyone know why the title of Brin's book was changed to "Kil'n People" for UK publication? Surely someone didn't think that British readers would fail to spot a joke where Americans would not.

Footnote

And there we have it. *Emerald City* cruises gently into 2003. Anyone spotted that December of this year will see issue #100? Guess I'd better think of something special to do, huh?

In the meantime I have February to think about. As promised above we will have Kay Kenyon and Elizabeth Moon. There is also a new Liz Williams due out. And the new John Meaney novel has just arrived.

Oh, and keep those Hugo recommendations coming.

Ciao,

Love 'n' hugs,

Cheryl