

EMERALD CITY #90

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Introduction

OK, so this one is going to be a day or two late. It won't actually come out in February. I blame February myself. It is very inconvenient of it to have less than the normal number of days. I would write to my CongressCritic, except that I don't have a vote in this country so there's no point.

Actually, though, it is the fault of the Hugos, and of various people who have issued award lists and 'best of 2002' lists. You will notice that this is quite a large issue, and that is because I have been trying hard to cover all the good stuff from 2002 that I managed to miss over the year. I hope you won't mind a day or two of lateness as a result.

And that, of course, is a cue for me to remind you that the Hugo nomination deadline is almost upon us. Only a month to go, and as Torcon 3 isn't going to have online voting you'll probably want to get your ballots in the mail before the next *Emerald City* hits the Web. If you had a membership in ConJosé, or you have one in Torcon 3, please take the time to vote. You can find a wealth of excellent suggestions for worthy works on the *Emerald City* Hugo Recommendation List (www.emcit.com/hugo_rec.shtml). There is also a downloadable copy of the ballot in PDF format should you need it.

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List-keeping

Kevin and I have been looking at the possibility of running our own mailing list server so that we can have slightly more control over the *Emerald City* lists. Software for this sort of thing seems relatively straightforward, but there is one small problem. While you are not obliged to have your own internet domain to host such a system, if you do not any mail that you send out is likely to be marked as spam by most spam filters and consequently blocked. We got as far as sending out stuff to a test list, and it came in fine to my various personal accounts, but at both my office and Kevin's the spam filters killed it. As many of you receive *Emerald City* at work, this would not be a good solution.

Of course we could buy ourselves a web domain, but that involves a whole load of additional expense and effort. Plus, as I've seen from watching other people running mailing lists, you have to learn a lot about Internet security to avoid having your mail server taken over by spammers. So having our own domain doesn't sound like a good idea right now.

"But wait", I hear you say, "don't you own emcit.com". Well no. I own the name, but the site is hosted for me by the very wonderful and reliable www.pair.com. They do a much better job of running a server than I could ever do. So can't I run my mailing lists through them? As it turns out, I can, but there is a small problem. I am restricted to a maximum of two lists.

So why is that a problem? Because currently I run six: one for the web notification, one for the text version, and one each for the printable copies in Word and PDF, each in A4 and Letter

paper sizes. Which leaves me with an interesting question: can I cut six lists down to two?

Clearly I don't want to inconvenience anyone out there by reducing the number of formats in which *Emerald City* is available. However, there is, I think, a way to do this without causing too much trouble. What I can do is have one list for the text version, and one that notifies people about the new web site and includes hyperlinks to the various printable versions. What you will then need to do is click on the link you need. That will launch your web browser and take you to the file in question, which you can then save to disk and/or print as required.

Does anyone out there have any major problems with that? Clearly I don't want to do it if it would result in people stopping reading the 'zine. But if you are all relaxed about it I will go over to that method as of next issue. Note that those of you receiving the text-only version will not be affected at all.

Reviewers in Dock

In his editorial in the latest issue of *The New York Review of Science Fiction*, David Hartwell bemoans the lack of unanimity in the current set of "year's best" lists. This, he says, is evidence that "the idea of best has been pushed to some kind of subjective limit" in which best can just as easily mean commercially successful as of high literary quality. That, certainly, is an issue of great concern. One of the primary objectives of *Emerald City* is to recommend good quality science fiction in a world where publishers are increasingly focused on branding and inoffensive predictability. However,

Hartwell goes on to place much of the blame on the shoulders on SF reviewers, and here I think he somewhat oversteps the mark.

To give David his due, the small amount of space available for editorials in *NYRSF* does not give him the ability to develop his argument in any great depth. Indeed, one possible reading of his comments is that reviewers are simply overwhelmed by the quantity of material and therefore cannot get to all the good stuff. But I think it is an issue that deserves more consideration because I feel that there are good reasons why "year's best" lists by different reviewers should differ.

To illustrate the point, let's take a look at the list produced by *Locus*. This is actually a composite list based on the views of *Locus* staff and various published lists that they have surveyed. There are 15 books listed, 14 novels plus Neil Gaiman's *Coraline*, which seems to have accidentally sneaked out of the short fiction category where its length would suggest that it belonged. Of those 15, as of when I write this, I have reviewed 12. And one is a horror novel, which I consider outside the general scope of *Emerald City*. I consider this good going. After all, as Hartwell points out, over a thousand SF&F books are published each year, and that probably excludes the vast flood of self-published novels. It is hard work for a reviewer to catch all the good stuff (especially when you have to buy most of the books yourself). But, as a conscientious editor I'm trying to get hold of the missing material.

However, more tellingly, my personal top ten novels of the year (for which see below) includes only four of the listed novels (plus *Coraline*, which is on my short fiction list). Only one third overlap? That's not good, is it? What does that say? Obviously one conclusion

is that I am possessed of desperately poor taste, but I hope I can defend myself against that charge.

Firstly let us assume that *Coraline* is included, but eliminate the books I have not read, which of course I may have included in my top ten had I got to them in time. That leaves 12 books, of which 5 are on my year's best lists. Those five are:

Coraline - Neil Gaiman; *Light* - M. John Harrison; *The Scar* - China Miéville; *Altered Carbon* - Richard Morgan; and *Redemption Ark* - Al Reynolds.

We can note immediately that two of those books have not yet been published in the USA. The same is true of one of the books I haven't read, *The Facts of Life* by Graham Joyce. Catching good non-US books is one of the things that *Emerald City* exists to do, and I'm delighted that *Locus* has listed these books as well. But I would not, for example, expect the SF reviewer of the *New York Times* or *San Francisco Chronicle* to include such books in their lists. They are unlikely to touch books that their readers would find difficult to buy.

Now we come to the books that were not on my list. They are:

Kiln People - David Brin; *White Apples* - Jonathan Carroll; *The Mount* - Carol Emshwiller; *A Scattering of Jades* - Alex Irvine; *The Separation* - Chris Priest; *Years of Rice and Salt* - Kim Stanley Robinson; and *Bones of the Earth* - Michael Swanwick.

As I said, these are all books I have reviewed, and in most cases reviewed fairly favorably. They just haven't made my top ten. And, I would like to argue, the reason that they have not done so is that a science fiction novel has many different scales against which its quality can be measured, and it is rare to find a book that scores well on all of them. Let us look at a few examples.

Carol Emshwiller's *The Mount* has been well received in a number of quarters. Personally I felt that it was a good book but that it was too blunt an allegory and didn't make its points well. I might worry about my diagnosis, were it not for the fact that the same issue of *NYRSF* that carries Hartwell's editorial has a review of *The Mount* by Gwyneth Jones that contains similar reservations to mine.

In the same issue of *NYRSF*, John Clute castigates Jeff Noon's *Falling out of Cars* because its author and publisher are trying to pretend in their publicity that it is not SF so as to appeal to mainstream reviewers. I have dropped the otherwise very fine *The Separation* from my list for the even more heinous crime of copping out at the end and trying to pretend, in the novel itself, that it isn't really genre fiction.

Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Years of Rice and Salt* has been picking up plaudits everywhere, and is a finalist for the Clarke and BSFA Awards. Yet commentators such as Farah Mendlesohn and Harry Turtledove, people who know a bit about history, are less happy with the book because it purports to be philosophy about history and is very weak in that regard. I happen to agree with them. Those reviewers who know less about history, or who are not interested in the correctness of an historical argument, will see only the marvelously innovative approach and breadth of vision that the book boasts.

The other four books on the *Locus* list are all good works, and might easily have made my top ten, especially if I had been running separate categories for SF and Fantasy. *Kiln People* is, I think, the best thing that David Brin has done in ages. It might even have made my list had I not been able to compare it with *Altered Carbon*, which uses similar themes to

create a much more hard-edged and aggressive book. *A Scattering of Jades* might have got in my list if I was prepared to make allowances for it being a first novel, and so on.

So the point here is that actually there is quite a lot of unanimity between myself and the *Locus* list, and but for a few disagreements on certain aspects of the novels in question we might have been a lot more closely aligned. And, furthermore, those disagreements are not a result of divergence in what makes good literature - I think we are largely in agreement there - but rather are a result of the wide range of different bases on which a science fiction or fantasy novel can be judged.

My own feeling is that if you got together a group of SF professionals such as, say, John Clute, Dave Langford, Gary Wolfe, Gwyneth Jones, Farah Mendlesohn, Jonathan Strahan and David Hartwell in a group and gave them the same pile of books there would be a significant amount of unanimity regarding which ones they thought were best, and in most cases they would be able to find good reasons for their disagreements. You could probably add a few less high-profile folks such as Rick Kleffel, Rob Gates, Lisa DuMond and myself and still get a reasonably close match.

Of course the wider you draw the net, the less unanimity you will get. As I mentioned above, newspaper reviewers will inevitably miss out on books that are not US-published. Also, with the honorable exception of the *Washington Post*, I'm not convinced that the SF reviewers in US newspapers are that well informed. And if you widen yet further and look at things like the NESFA or *Emerald City* Hugo recommendation lists then the degree of unanimity will fall yet further, because you now really are getting input from

people who may not be using the same critical framework within which to analyze the works. Look at web sites devoted to self-published books, and you'll get a totally different list.

So to sum up, sure there are levels of subjectivity here. If there were web sites with names such as professionalpublishersuck.com or ilovejarjarbinks.com (and for all I know there might be) and they ran 'best of 2002' lists then you should not expect them to agree with similarly titled lists that you got from *Emerald City* or *Locus*. But get serious SF reviewers together and they will show a lot of agreement. Furthermore, where they do disagree, it will be more a result of the fantastic complexity and diversity of speculative fiction, than of any fundamental dispute over critical standards. Don't panic, Mr. Hartwell, the world is not about to end just yet.

And now, as David asked for people to publish their top tens, here is mine. The following list is taken from books reviewed in issues #78 (Feb '02) to #89 (Jan '03), which is the run that gives the best coverage of 2002-published books. There were a total of 86 books reviewed, though obviously not all of them were 2002 publications. And for novels the list is:

Light - M. John Harrison; *The Scar* - China Miéville; *Redemption Ark* - Al Reynolds; *Effendi* - Jon Courtenay Grimwood; *Dark Ararat* - Brian Stableford; *Altered Carbon* - Richard Morgan; *Fire Logic* - Laurie Marks; *Light Music* - Kathleen Ann Goonan; *Solitaire* - Kelley Eskridge; and *The Iron Grail* - Rob Holdstock.

(Note that I changed my Hugo recommendation from *Dark Ararat* to *The Omega Expedition*. This was because what I really want to do is give Stableford recognition for the whole of the Third

Millennium series, and picking the final book is the closest I can come to that, but *Dark Ararat* is a better stand-alone novel.

For short stories and compilations I haven't read nearly enough so I'm listing only five: *Coraline* - Neil Gaiman; *City of Saints & Madmen* - Jeff Vandermeer; *The Tain* - China Miéville; *Worlds Enough & Time* - Dan Simmons; and 'Voice of Steel' - Sean McMullen.

Footnote: this article was written before I read most of the works reviewed in this issue. I haven't changed my best novels list, but I'm happy to add *Conjunctions* #39 and *V.A.O.* to my list of good shorts and compilations.

Flying with Angels

One of my favorite role-playing games is *Space 1899*. The game mechanics are pretty awful, but the basic concept is great. The idea is that Thomas Edison discovered a means of space travel back in the 19th Century (flight through the Ether, of course) and that consequently the great empires of that time, plus the upstart Americans who got there first, are moving out into the solar system. The key detail is that space in that world is not as we know it, but as the Victorians imagined it. So we have the Moon, Mars and Venus as Verne and Burroughs wrote about them. Sure with what we know from modern science it is technological bunkum, but it is a totally different and unusual SF environment based on something very familiar.

Hey, but suppose we go back further. Suppose that space travel was feasible with even more ancient science. What might that be like?

In this age of exploration, Dee thought, I, too, will become an explorer. I will gather together a likely crew and venture out into the universe itself. I will draw charts of the stars, not as an astrologer here on Earth, but as a sailor upon the seas of space.

Ah, but Dr. Dee, as we know, was in the habit of talking to angels. And those angels were perhaps not always totally reliable or honest.

Several generations later, on the planet Latent Emanation, human beings are enslaved by the mysterious Lords of Night, the powerful and terrifying creatures who brought them from their long-lost homeworld to this swamp-ridden refuge. Their only comfort is that they are of higher social status than the mysterious, jackal-headed anube, the original inhabitants of the planet. Some humans have elected to serve their masters, enlisting in the vicious and arbitrary corps of the Unpriests. Others plot rebellion.

Alivet Dee is firmly in the latter camp. Ever since her twin sister, Inkirietta, was taken by the Lords of Night to be a servant in their dark palaces Alivet has devoted her life to a rescue mission. At first she planned simply to work hard enough at her business as an apothecary to buy Inki's freedom. But when a rich heiress dies after taking one of her concoctions Alivet has no choice but to flee into the marshes. The Unpriests, after all, have no interest in justice, only in keeping order by whatever means possible. The trouble is that Alivet has only one ally, a stranger who doesn't look entirely human and who calls himself a Poison Master.

The latest novel by Liz Williams, *The Poison Master*, is further evidence of the breadth of her imagination. An intermittent sequence of chapters tells

the story of how John Dee led an expedition of dissenters and free thinkers into space, but the majority of the book is given over to the tale of his descendant's fight against the Lords of Night. It is a science fiction novel. After all, it takes place on four separate planets. But the science it uses is that of Dee's day: alchemy and the Cabala. This gives rise to a whole new collection of technologies; not to mention societies, human and alien, based on Cabalistic ideas. This is Williams using her doctorate in the philosophy of science to magnificent effect.

What really impresses me, however, is that this is the third novel from Williams in about two years, all of them different, and all of them brimming with imagination. And judging from the teaser at the back of *The Poison Master*, we can look forward to a fourth totally different novel this fall. These days most new writers would be happy to have just one really good idea that they could milk to produce a ten-volume series. But Williams has no fear, and goes on writing new and innovative work time after time. What is more, her publishers let her do it. Three cheers for both of them.

The Poison Master - Liz Williams - Bantam - softcover

Martial Thoughts

I would like you to imagine a continuum. At one end is the relatively hard space opera of Al Reynolds. At the other is the fantastical speculation of China Miéville's Ghosthead Empire from *The Scar*. Reynolds is a practicing scientist at the European Space Agency; Miéville is a fantasy writer who likes to

sprinkle his story with bits of fanciful SF. Somewhere in between these two points lies John Meaney's Nulapeiron.

It has taken Meaney quite a while to produce a sequel to *Paradox*, but then I think he is still holding down a full-time job as well as writing, and books like his won't come easily. Is *Context* worth the wait? That really depends on what you were expecting.

The first thing I should say is that *Context* is very much a continuation of the story begun in *Paradox*. It is set once again in the vast underground city of Nulapeiron, and once again it stars Tom Corcorigan. The new book shares the length and complexity of its predecessor. However, the basic themes have changed somewhat. Rather than being focused on politics, information theory and the nature of time, *Context* looks more at martial arts, and most importantly it begins to bring together the two strands of the story.

Readers of *Paradox* will remember that the main story line, that of Corcorigan, is cut with a back story that begins to explain how mankind made its way into space and thereby came to settle the world of Nulapeiron. *Context* continues this, and by the end of the book there is a clear link between the two timelines. I can't say any more without spoilers, but I think it is reasonable to postulate that a promised final volume called *Resolution* will bring the two strands together. Along the way there is likely to be further speculation about the structure of space-time, string theory and 10-dimensional geometries.

The best parts of the book are the grandeur and invention of the whole thing, and the insight that we get into the mind of the martial arts fanatic. Meaney is almost as devoted to punishing personal fitness regimes as Sean McMullen, and he makes good use

of his knowledge throughout the book. On the downside, Meaney is still somewhat shy of relationships. The book is centered around one, but Meaney manages to keep the girl offstage most of the time so that Corcorigan only has to moon over her, not actually relate to her.

All in all, however, it is another entertaining and imaginative book from a very promising author. I really don't understand why Meaney hasn't been picked up by a US publisher. His books are long and full of stuff about computers and martial arts. He doesn't fill them with thinly veiled attacks on US Imperialism or sympathetic portrayals of Muslims, such as might frighten off a US audience. What more can a publisher want?

Context - John Meaney - Bantam - hardcover

Hummingbird Heaven

Somehow I missed this one, but it turned up on the *Locus* Best of 2002 list, and being US published it wasn't too hard to get hold of. Sorry folks, this was a major omission. I should have reviewed it when it came out.

So there is weird and there is weird, and *The Impossible Bird* by Patrick O'Leary is sufficiently weird to be mistaken for an idea by Jonathan Carroll, except that it isn't about coming back from the dead, it is about being dead, and trying to get to be really, most sincerely dead. It goes like this.

The Earth has been invaded by aliens in flying saucers. However, because they are so very alien, we don't actually realize that they are about. Besides, they are not grey and humanoid with big heads and bug eyes. Nor do they have

half a ton of latex on their heads. They are kind of hard for us to visualize, so they manifest themselves as humming birds. Hardly fair, is it. How are Mulder and Scully to suss that one?

Now, like any good conqueror, the aliens have only our best interests at heart. Like us, they were once mortal, but they have since conquered entropy and they seek to do the same for us. Unable to free us from mortality when we are alive, they have built a giant VR environment that reproduces the entire Earth, and when people die their minds are captured and preserved there. The population is a little low at the moment, the system only having been running for about a decade, but it is working nicely and the aliens are getting endless amusement from watching the humans getting on with their afterlives.

Of course the trouble with being dead is that it isn't always what it is cracked up to be. So you are in heaven and life is perfect. Now what? Some people are very happy with an unchanging, unthreatening existence. Others think that they might be better off dead, and are looking for a way to finish the process that the aliens so rudely interrupted. There are extremist groups on both sides. They can get quite violent. After all, what does it matter if you kill someone who is already dead.

Into this story we inject two brothers: Michael and Daniel Glynn. They are, as is usually the case for fictional brothers, complete opposites. Michael is handsome, athletic and pleasure-seeking. Daniel is a musty academic. They are both in love with the same woman. And for good plot device reasons their deaths are pivotal to the struggle against the aliens.

This sets us up nicely to consider the whys and wherefores of being dead, and whether or not Heaven is Hell. It allows

us an excuse to consider unspeakable crimes and to impose all sorts of extreme emotional stress on our viewpoint characters. All of which makes for a very interesting, if very strange novel. O'Leary suggests towards the end that it is not the sort of book that you can understand by reading it once, and he is probably right, there is far too much to think about. But I don't have time to read it again right now, so you'll have to make do with this one-shot appraisal.

If I have a reservation it is that the book suggests that being a father and a husband are trivial issues in comparison to being a brother. That sounds awfully like a retreat into mate-ishness. It is also the case that all of the female characters are either sex objects or mothers (or both). But I was sufficiently bamboozled by the weirdness to not be offended. This is a very strange and fascinating book, and well worth reading if you don't mind having to work a bit on following what is going on.

The Impossible Bird - Patrick O'Leary - Tor - hardcover

Home, Frozen Home

Next up is the one novel on this year's Philip K. Dick Award shortlist that I haven't yet reviewed. The presence of a book on such a prestigious shortlist is generally a good sign, so I figured that I ought to check out *Maximum Ice* by Kay Kenyon.

The basic idea of the book is very promising. It starts shortly after our own time with a major plague afflicting mankind. For some reason people of pure Romany blood are immune to the disease. This leads to fear and resentment, and eventually to

persecution and attempted genocide. After things have calmed down, an international court awards compensation, and the gypsies choose to take as their due the generation ship, *Star Road*. After all, travelling is what they do, and staying on earth doesn't seem like much fun.

Several generations later, however, the expedition is in trouble. No habitable worlds have been found, and long term exposure to small amounts of interstellar radiation is affecting the fertility of the crew. Reluctantly they decide to return home where, because of relativistic effects, ten thousand years have passed.

The Earth that *Star Road* and her crew discover is nothing like what they expected. Almost the entire planet is covered with a thick coating of what looks like ice. But this "Ice" is nothing like their scientists have ever seen before. Animal life, aside from rats, is non-existent, and a small remnant of humans struggle to survive in "preserves" under the Ice, growing algae for food and mining ancient cities for supplies. Civilization, such as it is, is preserved by the mysterious Ice Nuns, the Sisters of Clarity, who have all the trappings of religion but, as the devoutly Catholic crew of *Star Road* soon discover, none of its beliefs.

The shortest journey of all has been that of Zoya Kundara. Elected 'Ship Mother', it is her job to preserve the traditions and stories of the Romany as they travel through space. She spends most of her time in cryogenic sleep, but she is woken every so often to catch up on events and to help the crew when they are in need of guidance. Her latest mission is as *Star Road's* envoy to the Sisters of Clarity.

Now that is a great set-up. And Kenyon does a good job of assembling a cast of interesting characters with sufficient conflicting aims and ambitions to make

Star Road's arrival home anything but straightforward. In anything other than a science fiction novel that would have been sufficient. Unfortunately, *Maximum Ice* is badly let down by some very sloppy science.

It turns out that the Ice is a giant optical computer, built to save all of Earth's data after an attack by an information-eating cloud of space matter. Oh dear. And Kenyon doesn't seem to have much understanding of the beast she has created. It is unclear, for example, why if the Ice can be many meters thick in places it has to cover the entire planet to achieve its target processing power (or indeed why precisely covering the Earth is the exact size it needs to be). It can't be the need for surface area to collect solar power because it hasn't bothered to cover mountain peaks where its access to solar radiation would be best. Kenyon doesn't even seem to appreciate the scale of what she's doing as she seems to think that there would not be a huge amount of difference between Ice covering the planet and it only covering, say, an area the size of Seattle.

Nor are any of the philosophical issues well handled. The matter of the gypsies' supposed history as plague carriers isn't made good use of. And as for the religious debate, the idea that scientists without religion would automatically be utterly amoral and cruel, and that inserting a devout Catholic scientist will solve the problem, is the sort of tawdry name-calling that we saw from Eric Raymond on 'The Scottish Panel' at ConJosé. Painting your opponents as abominably evil in order to appear better than them is not debate, it is cowardice.

All of which is a huge shame, because it was a lovely idea for a book. It also hums along nicely and keeps the reader interested. But a top-rate SF book has to be more than just a good story. It has to be good science and a good argument as

well. And in those categories *Maximum Ice* fails dismally.

Maximum Ice - Kay Kenyon - Bantam - softcover

Universe Building

This book was a last minute addition to the issue. I bought it because of its appearance in the Nebula shortlist (see Miscellany below). Looking at that list, I was pleased to see that it was full of really good books. In particular it has *American Gods* (Hugo winner), *Perdido Street Station* (Clarke winner) and *The Other Wind* (World Fantasy Award winner). What it doesn't have, at least from the books I have already reviewed, is something that could be described as hard SF. The closest it gets is Michael Swanwick's *Bones of the Earth*, which is quite scientific about dinosaurs but rather fanciful about time travel. So what can we expect from the one book on the list that I haven't yet reviewed? Congratulations, you got it in one.

Well, almost; *Picoverse* is written by a practicing scientist, Robert A. Metzger, and it does start off with some mind-numbing detail about an experimental fusion reactor. The lead characters are all scientists (and one kid genius). Initially I was expecting it to carry through in that vein: something turgid but worthy and educational. But around 50 pages in Metzger suddenly launches the first of many curve balls. Our heroes have their funding cut off by spineless Washington politicians who have bowed to international pressure ("boo, hiss, down with foreigners"). But they are offered a chance to continue their project if they will sign up to work for a Secret Government Department.

Oh dear, so much for rationality. I mean, I understand that it is a Great American Myth that the Government is running lots of clandestine projects, all of them with nefarious objectives and staffed by Men-in-Black. But I can't understand why anyone takes this seriously. First of all it is my experience that most government departments are so incompetent and disorganized that they could not arrange for a traffic jam on Highway 101 (or the M25 for UK readers). And even if they were that competent, does anyone really believe that they could arrange for several ultra-high powered lasers and a bunch of top-of-the-line Cray supercomputers to vanish into their project without anyone noticing? I'm sorry; this is the sort of plot that only makes sense on the *X-Files*.

Unfortunately it gets worse. Almost immediately we discover that the fantastically beautiful woman in the perfectly tailored scarlet, mini-skirted business suit who heads the project is in fact a 4-million year old artificial being from another universe, who wants our heroes to use their fusion reactor to distort space-time and create a new universe for her to rule. This girl could teach the Emperor Ming a few things about ambition. And it doesn't stop there. Why should it when you can create new universes to play in? So we get Evil Commies (ably assisted by Evil Nazi Commies) conquering the USA. We get Albert Einstein and Werner Heisenberg as characters. We get artificial black holes and Neanderthals. One has to admire Metzger's ambition in trying to throw so many tired old SF clichés, but what was the point?

The bottom line is that *Picoverse* is not hard SF, it is hard Sci-Fi. It has a lot of good science in it, but the plot oscillates wildly between a sub-par *X-Files* episode and 1950s pulps. Heck, we even have a female lead (supposedly a brilliant

cosmologist) who spends most of the book in a hysterical funk, weak-minded woman that she is. Just don't get me started, OK?

The trouble is that I keep remembering that last year SFWA gave the Nebula to a Catherine Asaro romance novel, presumably on the grounds that it was teaching us girlies about quantum mechanics in words simple enough for us to understand. So there it is: *Picoverse* is going to win this year's Nebula, and highbrow newspapers around the country will run articles explaining how this proves that SF is mindless junk. And we won't have a leg to stand on when they do. <sigh>

Picoverse - Robert A. Metzger - Ace - hardcover

Aliens Among Us

I have to admit that when I saw an Elizabeth Moon novel on the shortlist for the Clarke Award I was somewhat surprised. I know that she has a good reputation amongst the military SF community, but I could not see why one of her books, amongst the very many American military SF novels published every year, had found its way onto a British award list. The answer, of course, is that *The Speed of Dark* is not military at all, it is something very different indeed.

SF writers spend much of their time writing about characters who are alien to us, but generally they have to be very careful about doing so when the aliens are closer to home. There are some people who are very good at putting themselves in the place of others, but even so it would be surprising to find, say, a white writer who can write black characters as well as Nalo Hopkinson, or

a woman writer who can write gay men as well as Geoff Ryman. On this sort of scale, writing a novel where the lead character and many of the supporting cast are autistic is particularly brave. To start with, how can we "normals" know what it is like to see the world through an autistic's eyes? And if we get it wrong, the danger of being vilified for having misrepresented a defenseless minority is severe.

But if you happen to be both a top class SF writer and the mother of an autistic boy, then the challenge probably seems more like a duty. Elizabeth Moon happens to fit that category, and she has risen to the challenge most impressively.

Everyone needs some regularity; everyone enjoys series and patterns to some degree. I have known that for years, but now I understand it better. We autistics are at one end of an arc of human behavior and preference, but we are connected.

That comment comes toward the end of the book, when Lou, the hero, finally comes to realize that he is not quite the freak that society has been telling him he is. But it is obvious from very early on in the novel that autism is not an isolated condition. In much the same way that homosexuality comes in various shades and grades of differentiation from heterosexuality, there is a complex spectrum of mental quality between "normal" and autistic. It is also very obvious that the number of borderline autistics in the fannish community is quite large. If you don't recognize parts of yourself in this book, you will certainly recognize traits of people you know well.

The human brain is a complex organism that has to learn many different skills. It could easily be argued that a lack of facility with language and inability to

pick up on social cues, which are characteristic of autism, are no more serious mental flaws than a lack of appreciation of mathematics or being tone deaf. Yet one set of deficiencies is classed as a mental illness while the other is perfectly acceptable. This is, perhaps, not very fair, especially when autistics may have particular skills in areas such as pattern recognition that far outclass those of so-called "normals".

Simply writing about autistics, of course, does not make a science fiction novel. For that you need something more, and preferably you need to pose a moral dilemma. Moon does this by placing her story slightly in the future and extrapolating medical science a bit. Lou and his friends work at a technology company where their special skills in pattern recognition and manipulation make them invaluable in the creation of some unspecified product. In order to make best use of the autistics, and comply with government regulations for the employment of disabled persons (and gain the associated tax breaks), the company provides them with special working conditions suited to their needs. A new manager, Mr. Crenshaw, decides that these special conditions are a waste of money and tries to pressure the autistics to undertake an experimental treatment that will "cure" them.

This, then, is our dilemma. Lou has a successful career, and a reasonably functional social life. His special skills not only help with work, but also give him a useful edge in his chosen hobby of fencing. Marjory, one of the women at the fencing club, appears to be sweet on him and he's trying to work up the courage to ask her out. All in all, he's doing pretty well. Should he risk giving up all that in the hope of becoming "normal"?

A particularly successful element of the book is where Moon contrasts the

treatment being forced on the autistics with a different technology used on violent offenders. If it is right to alter the minds of criminals to make them safe to release into society, is it right to insist that autistics accept a cure?

As you can see, *The Speed of Dark* is a very thoughtful book. Some of the characters are a little stereotyped, particular the bullying Crenshaw. But that should not detract from an otherwise careful examination of the issues. Not knowing any autistic people myself, I can't really say how well Moon has done, but the book was definitely convincing and thought provoking, and I'm pleased to see it short-listed for a major award.

The Speed of Dark - Elizabeth Moon - Ballantine - hardcover

Arabian Delight

Harun al-Rashid, known as Harun the Righteous, was Sultan of a vast Islamic empire from 786 to 809, Christian calendar. In 758, after a particularly nasty period of civil war, Harun had established a new city as his base and capital. Optimistically for the time, he called it the City of Peace, but during his reign it came to be one of the greatest and most prosperous cities in the world. Ironically this City of Peace is the city we now know as Baghdad.

Harun's reign is the historical setting for the great Arabian legends, now collected and framed by the story of the 1001 Arabian Nights. With commendable ambition, Daniel Horch has set out to add to that canon with his own tale of life in old Baghdad.

The book, *The Angel with One Hundred Wings*, is not precisely fantasy. Its hero is

an alchemist, but it is not clear whether he really succeeds in transmuting base metals into gold. He claims to have met Sinbad and commissioned the famous explorer to collect Roc blood for his experiments, but then who knows what the nautical rogue actually brought home. The closest approach of magic to the story comes late on with the appearance of a man who claims that his life is threatened by a djinn. But that is about as close as we get. On the other hand, the novel is a charming story of love, loyalty and family, and magnificently evokes the Arabian Nights setting, and therefore should be a joy to lovers of fantasy everywhere.

Our hero is Abulhassan, once desperately poor, but now the richest and most well-known pharmacist in Baghdad. Having, through ignorance and honesty, been the only person in the city brave enough to best the Sultan at chess, he is now a close personal acquaintance of Harun. Indeed, given the level of intrigue in the city, Abulhassan is perhaps the Sultan's only real friend.

As a result of his position as a local sage, Abulhassan is frequently visited by young noblemen wishing to learn a little philosophy with which to spice their dinner conversations. Most of these fellows are very shallow, but a notable exception is another Abulhassan, the young Prince of Persia. As the heir to the throne of a country that Harun has conquered, the Prince must maintain a low profile politically in order to keep his head, and learning philosophy from an old pharmacist seems a safe enough occupation.

One day, while the two Abulhassans are in conversation, a young woman enters the shop. She is Shemselnehar, the Sultan's favorite teenage mistress. Naturally, this being an Arabian Nights tale, she and the Prince fall in love at

first sight. From that moment on, Abulhassan the pharmacist's fate is sealed. The Prince can think of nothing but escaping to the rival Islamic empire of Spain with the most beautiful woman in the world. And Shemselnehar is desperate to escape a life as the pampered sex slave of an old man who, though he claims to love her, has of necessity over the years learned to ignore the wants and feelings of others. Abulhassan is faced with a stark choice: condemn the two young lovers to death, or betray his oldest and best friend, who also happens to be the most powerful man in the world.

As you might expect from the Arabian Nights, the story plays itself out with many a secret tryst, cunning plots by the harem master and vizier, strange coincidences and timely accident. The main thrust of the novel, however, concerns how this experience causes Abulhassan to reassess his own life, and his relationship to his wife and family. There are one or two chinks in the atmosphere - the use of the term "ring road" really grated on me, for example - but for the most part it is beautifully done. Recommended.

The Angel with One Hundred Wings - Daniel Horch - St. Martins - hardcover

Looking for Relatives

One of the Hugo categories that I always have the most trouble with is Best Related Book. I don't have a lot of time to read non-fiction, and much of what gets nominated is art books which I do not consider myself competent to judge. But I am trying to produce some decent recommendations. I haven't read any of the following books in their entirety, but

I've dipped into all of them and they all look pretty good.

Of Canals and Craters

Top of my list is *Mapping Mars* by Oliver Morton. This is a history of the exploration of Mars, told mainly through the story of man's attempts to map the red planet. The author, Morton, is a former science editor of *The Economist*, but he's also a regular visitor to SF conventions and knows the genre well. Thus he manages to illustrate his work with both fine detail about the goings on at NASA and amusing anecdotes from top SF writers. I particularly liked Ray Bradbury's story about how to deal with overly intelligent young fans, and Ian Watson's tale of how a chance visit by Greg Benford saved the novel *The Martian Inca*.

Along the way Morton also manages some beautiful descriptive passages, including attempts to illustrate what Mars is like using earthy sites such as Meteor Crater. There are, of course, some beautiful art plates, one of my favorites being a Chesley Bonestall speculation on how much more grand buildings could be in the lower gravity of Mars. All in all this is a superb book and bound to be of interest to anyone interested in science fiction.

Mapping Mars - Oliver Morton - Picador - hardcover

Role Models

When I do read non-fiction, most of it tends to be literary criticism. I know this isn't everyone's cup of tea, but if you are interested then the best book of this kind from 2002 is *The Battle of the Sexes in Science Fiction* by Wiscon regular, Justine Larbalestier. This is a collection of essays charting the history of female characters

in SF from monster bait and love interest to the feminist heroines of Russ and Charnas. There is, of course, a lot about Alice Sheldon (a.k.a. James Tiptree Jr.) and the Tiptree Award. My only real complaint is that the book seems to stop short and never gets around to discussing the hard-bitten warrior women of modern SF. Can we have a sequel, please, Justine?

The Battle of the Sexes in Science Fiction - Justine Larbalestier - Wesleyan - softcover

Cosmic Myths

Kevin found this one for me. Philip Plait runs a web site (www.badastronomy.com) that is devoted to exploding the cosmological equivalent of urban myths. The book (cunningly titled *Bad Astronomy*) is simply a collection of the best of the web site as of publication. The content ranges from simple and understandable explanations of things like the Coriolis Effect, the blueness of the sky and the twinkling of stars, through to debunking of everything from astrology to Velikovsky and the "Moon Landing Hoax" claims. For adults it is a lot of fun watching Plait expertly exposing conspiracy theorists, but the book would also be a valuable resource for any high school kid with an interest in astronomy.

Bad Astronomy - Philip Plait - Wiley - softcover

Best of Blogs

Everyone has one these days. Even *Emerald City* has a blog, though it does only get used during Worldcons. Most of them, of course, are not terribly good. After all, they are not produced by professional writers. But when a genuine expert does get in on the act the results can be spectacular. One of the best blogs

on the web is by Neil Gaiman (<http://www.neilgaiman.com/journal/journal.asp>), and back when Neil was Guest of Honor at Boskone the cunning folks at NESFA Press hit on the idea of printing a lot of the material from the journal as a book. That is now available as *Adventures in the Dream Trade*. This is a must for every Gaiman fan, and should also be required reading for everyone who thinks that they can make their life sound interesting simply by publishing details of it online.

Adventures in the Dream Trade - Neil Gaiman - NESFA Press - softcover

Short Stuff

Online Gems

In search of things to nominate in the short fiction categories I have been browsing other people's "Best Of" lists. Of course back issues of magazines are not always easy to come by. However, stories that are published online are both readily available and free. Therefore the best place to start looked seemed to be Ellen Datlow's excellent Sci-Fiction site (<http://www.scifi.com/scifiction/>).

One of the stories on that site that has received most attention this year is 'What I Didn't See' by Karen Joy Fowler. There are many reasons for its notoriety. Firstly it is an excellent story. It is also a wonderful feminist rant. But probably the thing that attracted people's attention most is that, as with Fowler's novel, *Sarah Canary*, there is no obvious SF or fantasy element to it at all.

Some of you may well be aware that there is an ongoing debate, I suspect rather fanned by Fowler herself, over whether *Sarah Canary* is indeed SF. The

usual excuse is that the mysterious Sarah is in fact an alien. Doubtless there is similar discussion going on about 'What I Didn't See'. But in lieu of anything else we can at least say that it is a very good story indeed and that it is published in an online science fiction magazine. So it must be SF, right? You can make up your own mind by reading it at: http://www.scifi.com/scifiction/originals/originals_archive/fowler/.

A rather more obvious SF story that is also getting a lot of attention is 'Jury Service' by Charlie Stross and Cory Doctorow. Early on this is one of those stories so brimming with imagination, invention and humor that I found myself insisting on reading passages aloud to Kevin. Unfortunately the story eventually has to have a plot, and at that point the authors' creativity seems to desert them and things get a little predictable. Shame really, it has a wonderful set-up. You can find the story at:

http://www.scifi.com/scifiction/originals/originals_archive/stross-doctorow/.

And finally from Sci-Fiction, in the grand tradition of leaving the best until last, there is a wonderful novelette by Ray Vukceвич called 'The Wages of Syntax'. It is a humorous little tale of predestination, quantum causality and academic jealousy. Very clever, very silly, and everything a good piece of short fiction should be.

http://www.scifi.com/scifiction/originals/originals_archive/vukceвич2/vukceвич21.html.

Another good place to look for short fiction online is Strange Horizons (www.strangehorizons.com). One of their 2002 stories, 'Little Gods', by Tim Pratt, has made it onto the Nebula ballot. And very splendid it is too. Quite Gaiman-esque in its portrayal of supernatural beings. You can read it

here:

http://www.strangehorizons.com/2002/20020204/little_gods.shtml.

In the Zone

Quite a few of the stories being recommended by people this year come from Interzone. I'm ashamed to say that I have stopped getting the magazine regularly since I moved to the US. However, John Meaney was kind enough to send me a copy of his novelette, 'The Whisper of Disks', from the October issue, with an attached comment that the story had been selected for the 2002 edition of Gardner Dozois's *Year's Best Science Fiction* anthology.

Dozois, of course, has very good taste. 'The Whisper of Disks' is a backfill story from the Nulapeiron universe that tells us some of the history of the woman who discovered mu-space. It is also a tribute to the very wonderful Ada, Countess Lovelace, and a respectful nod to female programmers everywhere. It is a bit soppy in places, but I loved it. Check out the Dozois anthology when it comes out - assuming the eligibility extension gets passed again this one will be a good bet for next year.

Absolutely Fabulist

Meanwhile, offline, the anthology that everyone has been talking about of late is *Conjunctions* #39. Technically this is a magazine, but it is huge (430 pages) and therefore looks like a book. It is a little hard to come by - I finally found a copy at Cody's on Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley - but it is now available through Amazon. *Conjunctions* is a mainstream literary magazine that specializes in experimental short fiction. With issue #39 the publishers have taken

the bold step of inviting some of "them", you know, those awful genre people, to write for them. The issue is sub-titled 'The New Wave Fabulists', and it is full of some wonderful stuff.

Of course if you are going to present a collection of the very best fantasy writers to the avant garde of mainstream literature you are not going to fill the magazine up with the likes of David Eddings and Robert Jordan. Dear me no, that would only inflame prejudices. Instead you pick the best we have: Gene Wolfe, Neil Gaiman, M. John Harrison, China Miéville, Nalo Hopkinson, Elizabeth Hand, Karen Joy Fowler and so on. That much you can take for granted.

The interesting question, however, is what your chosen authors produce in return. Will you get out and out genre stories set in fantastical places like Urth, Viriconium and Bas Lag, or will the writers tone down their approach to suit their audience. On the basis of the stories I have read so far, the latter approach was very much favored. Gaiman and Harrison have produced spooky stuff set in graveyards; Miéville and Hand have opted for works that could easily be classed as Magic Realism; and Hopkinson and John Crowley have taken the cunning step of referencing Shakespeare, who was big on fantasy but is acceptable to the mainstream and therefore unthreatening.

This has resulted in a certain amount of wailing and gnashing of teeth in certain quarters. Our leading lights, some have claimed, have prostituted themselves to mainstream prejudices rather than producing the brilliant works of imagination of which we know they are capable. I disagree. There are some great stories in the collection, and they are all very approachable. Any fan of mainstream literature reading this collection will find it instantly accessible

and of very high quality. And that is just what we need to encourage them to take the big step of trying some of the more unconventional work that they find so difficult to comprehend. A little compromise, I suspect, will go a long way.

Meanwhile, what of the stories? The stand-out tale for me is 'The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines', by John Crowley. It has almost no fantasy elements at all, but it is truly wonderful. Harrison's 'Entertaining Angels Unawares' is as unsettling as we have come to expect, but not one of his best. Miéville's 'The Familiar' is a stomach-churning horror story that once again proves the author's mastery of the unexpected and unsettling ending. Gaiman produces what I think would be a wonderful graphic novel script in 'October in the Chair', a tale of tale-telling by mythological beings. Hopkinson produces an interesting portrait of Aerial and Caliban as mischievous adolescents in 'Shift'. And Hand caps the book off nicely with a haunting novella, 'The Least Trumps', which has some connection with the Tarot but is much more about writing and fantasy fiction and, once again, her beloved Maine geography.

There are a lot more stories that I haven't read yet. And there are essays by Gary Wolfe and John Clute. Sorry I haven't had time to get through it all. There may be some more mention of this in a later issue.

Conjunctions #39 - Peter Straub (ed.) - Bard College - softcover

Age Rage

Another continuously excellent source of fine short fiction is the British publisher, PS Publishing. My latest acquisition from their range is *V.A.O.*, a wonderful

story about Age Rage by Geoff Ryman. The title refers to 'Victim Activated Ordinance', one of those charming military euphemisms that, in this particular case, refers to things like land mines. Ryman expands the idea into a future where everyone's property is protected by such devices. This makes crime rather dangerous. However, in nursing homes around the country, the aged and infirm are bored stupid and increasingly frustrated at how they are treated by society. A little bit of hacking can go a long way, and before you know it the acronym has been redefined by the media to mean 'Very Ancient Offenders'. Fire up that power armor, Pops, let's go mug someone.

V.A.O. - Geoff Ryman - PS Publishing - softcover

Return to Mars

I have also managed to find time to look through a few more of the stories in the Mars Probes anthology. What is more I am pleased to say that I have found a story by Ian McDonald that I really like. I admit that it is a little sentimental, and it does help if you have a passing fondness for the thirty-three thousand ton heavy fusion haulers of the Bethlehem Ares Railroad, not to mention Feisty and Resourceful (But Cute With It) heroines. 'The Old Cosmonaut and the Construction Worker Dream of Mars' is both a bitter-sweet tale of failed space exploration and something of a prequel to Desolation Road and Ares Express. It also neatly introduces the Khyberpunk setting that will be the background for a forthcoming Ian McDonald novel. I loved it.

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

Miscellany

Middle Earth Tours

The inimitable Wombat (a.k.a. Jan Howard Finder) passes on this little gem for those with plenty of money and time.

Janet Coyle of Pacific Pathways Tours, www.pacificpathways.com, & a native New Zealander, is arranging a tour of Peter Jackson's New Zealand over 7-25 January 2004. Michael Stanton will be the tour scholar. He is Professor Emeritus of English at the University of Vermont. Among the courses he taught was one on *The Lord of the Rings*.

BSFA Award Shortlist

The shortlist for the British Science Fiction Awards has just been published. The finalists are as follows:

Novel: *Effendi* - Jon Courtenay Grimwood; *Light* - M. John Harrison; *Castles Made of Sand* - Gwyneth Jones; *The Scar* - China Miéville; *The Separation* - Chris Priest; *The Years of Rice & Salt* - Kim Stanley Robinson

Short Fiction: 'Singleton' - Greg Egan, *Interzone* #176; *Coraline* - Neil Gaiman; 'Voice of Steel' - Sean McMullen, *Sci-Fiction*; 'If Lions Could Speak' - Paul Park, *Interzone* #177; 'Router' - Charlie Stross, *Asimov's* Sept. 2002; 'Five British Dinosaurs' - Michael Swanwick, *Interzone* #177

Related work: 'The Interrogation' - Nick Gevers interviewing Christopher Priest, *Interzone* #183; Dave Langford's introduction to *Maps: the Uncollected John Sladek*, Big Engine; *Mapping Mars* - Oliver Morton, Picador; 'The Timex Machine' - Lucius Shepherd's review of *The Time Machine*, [electricstory.com](http://www.electricstory.com) (<http://www.electricstory.com/reviews>

[/timex.asp](#)); *Once There Was a Magazine*, by Fred Smith, Becon Publications, 2002

Artwork: 'Experiment 1' - Peter Gric, cover of *The Third Alternative* #31; cover of *Interzone* #179, Dominic Harman; 'My Name is Death' - Fraser Irving, *2000 AD*, May 1st 2002; illustration for 'The Routine' - Joachim Luetke, *The Third Alternative* #31; 'Obliquitese' - Richard Marchand, *The Third Alternative* #32

More details, including links to some of the artwork nominees, can be found at the BSFA web site, <http://www.bsfa.co.uk/>. The winners will be announced at this year's Eastercon.

I note in passing that my predictions for 2003 are already coming unraveled. I had expected Al Reynolds' *Redemption Ark* to be a potential winner. Ah well, I did also list *Effendi* as a possible winner, and of course both of those only if British fandom is sufficiently rebellious to avoid the obvious picks of *Light* and *The Scar*.

Nebula Shortlist

Not to be outdone, SFWA has published its shortlist for the Nebula Awards. As usual, the qualification period stretches well back into the year before last, so it is not necessarily very much help with the Hugos, but here it is.

Novel: *American Gods*, Neil Gaiman (Morrow); *Bones of the Earth*, Michael Swanwick (Eos); *The Other Wind*, Ursula K. Le Guin (Harcourt Brace); *Perdido Street Station*, China Miéville (Del Rey); *Picoverse*, Robert A. Metzger (Ace); *Solitaire*, Kelley Eskridge (Eos)

Novella: 'Bronte's Egg', Richard Chwedyk (*F&SF* Aug 2002); 'The Chief Designer', Andy Duncan (*Asimov's* Jun 2001); 'Magic's Price', Bud Sparhawk (*Analogue* Mar 2001); 'The Political Officer', Charles Coleman Finlay (*F&SF* Apr

2002); 'Sunday Night Yams at Minnie and Earl's', Adam-Troy Castro (*Analog* Jun 2001)

Novelette: 'The Days Between', Allen Steele (*Asimov's* Mar 2001); 'The Ferryman's Wife', Richard Bowes (*F&SF* May 2001); 'Hell is the Absence of God', Ted Chiang (*Starlight 3*, Patrick Nielsen Hayden, ed., Tor); 'Lobsters', Charles Stross (*Asimov's* Jun 2001); 'Madonna of the Maquiladora', Gregory Frost (*Asimov's* May 2002); 'The Pagodas of Ciboure', M. Shayne Bell (*The Green Man: Tales From the Mythic Forest*, Datlow/Windling, eds; Viking)

Short Story: 'Creation', Jeffrey Ford (*F&SF* May 2002); 'Creature', Carol Emshwiller (*F&SF* Oct/Nov 2001); 'Cut', Megan Lindholm (*Asimov's* May 2001); 'The Dog Said Bow-Wow', Michael Swanwick (*Asimov's* Oct/Nov 2001); 'Little Gods', Tim Pratt (*Strange Horizons* 4 Feb 2002); 'Nothing Ever Happens in Rock City', Jack McDevitt (*Artemis* Summer 2001)

Script: *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*: 'Once More with Feeling', Joss Whedon; *The Dead Zone*: 'Unreasonable Doubt', Michael Taylor (created for TV by Michael Piller and Shawn Piller, based on characters from the Stephen King novel); *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, Fran Walsh, Philippa Boyens & Peter Jackson (New Line Cinema); *Shrek*, Ted Elliott, Terry Rossio, Joe Stillman, & Roger S.H. Schulman (DreamWorks)

You know, there's an awful lot of stuff in there that was on last year's Hugo ballot.

N4 Goes Retro

I'm sorry to have to report that Noreascon 4, the 2004 Worldcon, has elected to award Retro Hugos. My personal opinion on this is that the Retros were a funny-once joke and that

continuing to award them brings the real Hugos into disrepute. Thankfully N4 is the last Worldcon for some time that will be able to award Retros because from then on the 50 year window will be looking at years where real Hugos were awarded at the time. It will be a few years before the 75-year window catches an actual Worldcon where no Hugos were awarded.

Only in America

Readers outside of the USA will probably have heard by now that the American people have entered a state of deep panic about the forthcoming war. The government has advised us that the best way to protect against a biological warfare attack is to seal up our houses with plastic sheeting and duct tape. Consequently both items are now impossible to obtain in the shops, and enterprising individuals are trying to corner the market in security preparation kits. Thus I was not surprised to receive an email spam from a company called Patriot Systems, whose offer claimed to be far superior to ordinary plastic sheeting and duct tape, and who even threw in a supply of potassium iodide to protect us in case of nuclear fallout. Wow, how useful, and a real bargain at only \$49.95.

But wait a minute, there's something odd here. The company's web address is www.science-writers.com (which at time of publishing seems to have vanished). Surely they can't be associated with SFWA? Then again, the email is signed "Steven Davis", and when you think about the style of the ad is remarkably familiar. Could it be? Is the Plokta Cabal spoofing the whole of America? Or is this just a case of life imitating art? I think we should be told.

Footnote

There is some good stuff lined up already for next issue. I'll be headlining with the new William Gibson novel, *Pattern Recognition*. There is also the debut novel by short-story expert, Cory Doctorow. See you (later) in March.

Ciao,

Love 'n' hugs,

Cheryl