EMERALD CITY #93

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Introduction

Wow, what a month. Sometimes I think I'm getting too old for rushing around the world. But it is fun, right? Last week London, this week San Francisco, weekend Madison. It all gives me things to write about, as you will see shortly.

Of course too much travel (and associated jet lag) tends to mean not a lot of work getting done. I'm looking forward to a nice quiet June, which I intend to spend plugged into my computers doing web site stuff. Always assuming that no one offers me some nice paid work in the meantime. Money is always useful. So if you happen to hear of anyone in need of an under-employed SF critic, energy economist or journalist, do let me know. Thanks!

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London SF Week

London appears to be becoming a science-fictional city. Part of that, of course, is a result of Lord Foster's magnificent, Hugo-shaped tower that is now looming over the city (see the photo pages on the *Emerald City* web site).

Londoners (probably prodded by their newspapers) call it "the Giant Gherkin", but I know that we have won the culture war. I was wandering along towards Tower Bridge one morning when I experienced one of those small-child-with-very-loud-voice moments. "Dad," she asked, pointing across the river to Foster's tower, "is that rocket ship going to take off?"

But there is more to it than architecture. London is becoming a city that looks into the future rather than dwelling constantly on the past. And in an environment like that the city's artistic community inevitably starts thinking science-fictional thoughts. Of course they then get thoroughly embarrassed about it, and they to pretend that they are actually doing "slipstream" or "speculative fiction" or some such less loaded euphemism. But they also start looking for ideas, and when they do they notice that British SF is particularly vibrant and enthusiastic right now. And what is more, the quality of the writing is very good. That means that there might be some ideas and techniques in it that are worth ripping off. As a consequence, our little community has come under the microscope, and one particular week in May showed that more than anything I can remember. It was the week when SF became briefly respectable.

Strangely enough, the week also ended up feeling like a rather drawn-out, multi-site convention. Here is the con report.

Back at Borders

The con began on Monday with another of Pat Cadigan's evening readings at Borders. Author readings are, of course, a traditional part of cons, and the scheduled guests were M. John Harrison and Jon Courtenay Grimwood. China Miéville was in the audience too: what more can you ask for?

Well actually that the boys be on top form, which they were not. I suspect that both of them were distracted by preparations for the ICA events later in the week. Whatever, the passages that they chose from *Light* and *Felaheen* were not, in my opinion, anywhere near their best stuff. Pat wasn't on top form either and stumbled somewhat over the interviewing afterwards.

Oh well, at least we got a much better crowd than last month, which must have pleased the Borders folks. And of course we all trotted off to the pub and then to Bodean's afterwards and had some more truly wonderful barbecue. All except China who was apparently in the middle of a hot streak on his new book and didn't want to spend too much time away from the keyboard. Quite right too, gotta keep these authors busy, right?

ICA Nights: Part I

For those of you not familiar with London, the ICA is the Institute of Contemporary Arts, a strange and eclectic venue situated at the Trafalgar Square end of The Mall. It is, as the name suggests, avowedly contemporary. You won't find any Constable exhibitions or Bach concerts here (unless possibly if the Bach is being reinterpreted by an AI electronic organ - AIs like Bach, so I'm told). You are much more likely to find people like Laurie Anderson; you will see the sort of artists who get hung in Tate Modern before they are famous; and you get lots of art house movies. In this particular week you also got us disreputable genre types.

Much of this is, of course, down to China. He has burst onto the British

literary scene with such force that the usual barriers against genre literature are insufficient to keep him penned in the ghetto. Even the fact that he was blackballed from the *Granta* Top 20 Young Novelists for writing fantasy has made him a *cause celebre* rather than got him ignored as was intended. However, Mike Harrison and Jon Courtenay Grimwood have both worked hard on the project too, and Antonia Quirk, our ICA contact, seemed very keen to have us and worked hard to make the events a success.

Wednesday night saw us joined by Gwyneth Jones and Paul McAuley for a panel on the recent explosion in British SF. Also on platform was sometime SF reviewer for the *Daily Telegraph*, Andrew McKie, which in itself was a real coup because most of the Telegraph's staff regard anything that happened after the Napoleonic Wars as dangerously modern and highly suspect. What their one-time (imaginary) diarist, Squire Haggard, would say about them reviewing SF beggars description. Still, Andrew turned out to be very pleasant and didn't hang or flog anyone all evening (although if George Lucas had been there things might have been different).

The panel was chaired by Muriel Gray, once a star presenter of top-rated 80's pop music show, *The Tube*, and now a successful horror author with three novels behind her. Given that she had dealt successfully with punk bands, it seemed likely she would stand a chance of keeping Paul McAuley's sarcastic wit under control.

What followed was pretty much like a convention panel. It was admittedly a panel that you had to pay £5 to attend, but then again we got a nice room overlooking St. James's Park with views of the parliament buildings and the London Eye in the background. It was also a very good panel (and as is usual with such things strayed somewhat from the subject matter).

Theoretically we were supposed to be discussing the hot new British authors, but there was an understandable reluctance to name names, especially with the likes of Justina Robson and Liz Williams in the audience. Paul led off with a rousing plea for imagination and relevance, as opposed to what he described as that awful "sci-fi" stuff that has no ideas and is totally self-referential. "We live in a world of spaceships and monsters", he said, "science fiction has the toolkit to make sense of that world."

Gwyneth pointed out that much of what SF used to talk about is now commonplace. For example, a product that she had come up with in a book, a drug to treat heroin addiction by giving you really bad trips, is now available over the Internet. (Should have patented the idea, Gwyneth.) "Science at the moment is bursting with stuff that is so bizarre, so fantastic, that the only thing that SF can do is go completely fantastical." This, she explained, was why she had taken to writing fantasy, although the *Bold as Love* series seems a lot like SF to me, and the idea she came up with for using the body as an energy source for personal electronics is now apparently feasible, albeit using different technology.

In searching for reasons why SF was doing so well in Britain, Andrew pointed to very supportive publishers and gave credit to Iain Banks who, by dint of having both SF and mainstream publishing careers, has made SF much more respectable. Paul also gave credit to Douglas Adams for pulling stodgy old techno-centric SF apart and laughing at it, thereby giving young authors the

confidence to play with ideas rather than tremble in the shadows of Asimov, Heinlein and Clarke.

Where the debate really got moving was the subject of whether what is happening now is anything unusual. It is traditional to dismiss the 70's as a period of fashion disasters and gross lack of taste, but Moorcock and Harrison caused a huge stir back then and dragged SF kicking and screaming out of pulp and into literature. Gwyneth is of the cyberpunk generation and sees no reason to label the Thatcher/Reagan years as a cultural wasteland. China, on the other hand, views cyberpunk as a product of a depressing vision of a world ruled by mega-corporations, and regards himself as part of the post-Seattle generation which has the confidence and optimism to challenge that world view and fight against it becoming reality. But, as Andrew pointed out, Seattle might not have happened if Gibson and Sterling hadn't given us that nightmare vision of where we were going.

And so it went on. We could have talked all night. But there was another event due.

Quatermass Returns

Being an avowedly multi-disciplinary venue, the ICA was reluctant to just talk about books. So Kim Newman was drafted in to provide some media programming. By some miracle he acquired Nigel Kneale, the scriptwriter behind the legendary Quatermass TV series and films. (And I do mean miracle here because Kneale suffered a stroke two weeks prior to the event but was remarkably healthy and cheerful on the night.)

Discussion of old TV series inevitably seems to focus in on the difficulties that people labored under in those days, as compared to the high tech luxury of today. For example, *Quatermass and the Pit* (to be shown in its entire 6-episode run over the Wednesday and Thursday nights) required a huge pit leading down into the bowels of the earth. That isn't easy in a studio with no computer effects. Set designer Cliff Hatts had turned up to hear Kneale talk, but sadly there wasn't time to have him explain how it was done.

Then there is the matter of live production, film being expensive. Kneale described how Canadian actor, Cec Linder, had to do two unrelated scenes back-to-back. The sets were built next to each other and the camera crew simply switched rapidly between them when the first scene ended. The other actors in the second scene were filmed talking to Linder's character as if he was there, while Linder himself ran as quietly as possible behind the backdrop to take up his position ready for when he had to give his lines.

Working for the BBC is, of course, not always easy. Kneale had done the screenplay for the television adaptation of *1984*, which caused questions to be asked in Parliament as some MPs felt that it was too frightening and might damage the moral fiber of the nation. It isn't easy being in the public spotlight like that. Kneale, however, said that the corporation was much easier to deal with than Hammer Films, with whom you could simply not argue no matter how outrageous their demands. The only time that the BBC really got upset with him was when he wrote a scene involving a BBC newsreader reporting on some momentous event. Apparently his script was not sufficiently proper BBC English and it was substantially re-written so that the corporation's news service should not be improperly portrayed.

I confess that I didn't stay up late to watch *Quatermass and the Pit*. When it was first shown my dad told me that it was far too frightening for me. I'm sure he was right.

Visiting Surrealism

Having done readings, panels and media, it was time for a visit to the art show. That meant a trip down to County Hall where the Saatchi Gallery had a visiting exhibition of work by Salvador Dalí.

I don't suppose that there is any doubt that Dalí is an appropriate subject for an SF art show, but I hadn't realized quite how appropriate a choice he is until I got there. Only one of Dalí's big paintings was on show — "Spellbound", which he did for the Hitchcock movie of the same name. Presumably the others are all in big galleries in Spain and France. But there were literally hundreds of Dalí paintings and sketches. Apparently he did a lot of work illustrating books, and as each book needs a lot of illustration that adds up to a huge number of pictures (103 alone for Dante's *Divine Comedy*).

The subject matter for Dalí's illustration work fell into two main groups, both of which can be described as "fantasy". On the one hand he worked on books by writers such as Dante and Rabelais, along with things like the Bible, Tarot cards and alchemy. On the other he had a passion for erotica and so gravitated to things like Casanova, de Sade and Boccacio's *Decameron*. I found his work on Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel* to be the most interesting as it was inspired by Hieronymous Bosch. Just think about the combination of Dalí and Bosch for a moment…

There, was it a good trip?

Another thing that I had not realized about Dalí was that he re-used many images again and again. So, for example, the exhibition included a pair of swan/elephant paperweights and several sculptures featuring the melted clock image. So even though the major paintings were not present, aspects of them were everywhere.

Sadly the staging of the exhibition did not live up to the quality of the art. The construction of the gallery looked shoddy, and many of the labels for the exhibits were either missing or covered up by the artwork they referred to. Where the gallery did manage to produce a commentary on a piece, that was often marred by howling grammatical errors.

I was particularly disappointed with the staging of a fascinating set of works by Goya and Dalí. Dalí had taken a large collection of sketches by Goya and had reinterpreted them. For the most part Goya was copied expertly and precisely, but there were subtle and dramatic changes. My favorite is one where Goya had drawn a young woman standing with her hands clasped demurely in front of her holding a ball of wool. Dalí had replaced the wool with the severed head of John the Baptist. All of the Goya works had titles, and Dalí had produced his own titles for his versions. Had I known some Spanish I think I would have leaned a lot from the changes in titles. The gallery should have translated them.

Shoddy staging aside, however, the exhibition was fascinating and well worth the £8.50 I paid to see it. Anyone doing fantasy art should study Dalí intensely.

ICA Nights: Part II

That evening we were back at the ICA for what, in convention programming terms, was the ten thousand pound gorilla event. We were given a 150+ seat theatre, and appeared to fill more than half of it, mostly with people I had never seen before. London fans, I suspect, were turning their noses up at actually having to pay to attend an event.

The gorilla in question was Toby Litt, one of the UK's hottest young novelists and one who did get on the *Granta* list despite the fact that he has experimented widely with genre themes (including SF and fantasy) in his work. Litt turned out to be a small, very friendly and remarkably perceptive gorilla. Alongside him on the panel were John O'Connell, the book reviews editor for London's weekly "what's on" magazine, *Time Out*, and representing SF, Justina Robson. Once again Muriel Gray was in the chair.

The theme of the panel was, "Is genre the new mainstream?" and the purpose was to discuss the increasing use of genre themes and tropes by mainstream writers. John O'Connell opened the discussion by pointing out that genre was now all-pervasive. Publishers micro-manage genre in search of ever more precise audience targeting. Chick-lit has spawned related sub-genres of teen-lit and mum-lit. All of them have their own distinctive and easily identifiable cover styles so that browsers in bookshops know exactly what to expect. Everything, therefore, was genre.

Justina countered by pointing out that some genres were still more respectable than others. Why was China Miéville so publicly and rudely banned from consideration from the *Granta* list? Why does Margaret Atwood feel the need to denounce science fiction as trash when it is abundantly clear that much of her work is SF? And why especially when SF has so much to offer in helping us to understand our newly technology-dominated world?

Toby Litt began with an hilarious example of how "a monster" is a convenient and effective shorthand for whatever sort of threat the author is talking about. I can't remember his exact words, but they were along the lines of, "I was being pursued by a psycho-sexual complex of great intricacy and full of dangerous cultural memes". He went on to add that, "reality is an aberration." We know that our world is full of monsters. The problem is that we have reached what he called "the Scooby Doo impasse." We know that the monster is really the janitor of the fun fair in a silly costume, and we need good writers to make us properly afraid again.

John O'Connell seemed to have got the short end of the stick somewhere along the line. He is clearly friendly to SF, because he has hired Roz Kaveney to review SF for his magazine, and he was very proud of the fact that he doesn't put genre labels on the reviews. But someone seems to have asked him to play devil's advocate, and the arguments he raised against SF were not very persuasive. He seemed stuck in a world view in which SF was nothing but Flash Gordon movies and boring, Gernsbackian educational hard SF. He commented, "my sense of what SF does is forever polluted by my bad experience of reading *Dune* when I was 14." Justina countered that she had had an equally bad experience with Asimov's *Foundation Trilogy*, but she knew that she loved SF so reading Asimov just made her determined to one day do better. Towards the end John made the facile comment that the subject matter of SF was much better done by blockbuster movies with huge effects budgets. While Justina quietly blew several fuses in a

corner Toby calmly pointed out that blockbuster movies have no literary content and are therefore incapable of providing the cultural analysis that we had been talking about.

All of this was something of a shame, because it detracted somewhat from the panel by introducing an element of mudslinging. Muriel, doing that good moderator thing of spotting an emerging controversy and fanning it to provide entertainment, contributed somewhat to the drift away from useful discussion. There are good arguments against SF. Much of it (and fantasy) is terribly badly written, but John didn't really make the point. Perhaps his heart wasn't in it.

Still in search of controversy, Muriel fastened on the supposed lack of characterization in SF. Where, she asked, are the famous SF characters? Who are the equivalents of Falstaff, Holmes or all those colorful Dickens characters? Thankfully Toby stomped firmly on this one, pointing out that very little 20th Century fiction does that sort of thing, and anyway Falstaff is a comedy caricature, not an in-depth character study.

One area that did provide some useful controversy was the question of just how much acceptance SF wants. This began with a comment from the audience that Justina's complaints about ghettoization sounded very much like comments by writers of color that they were always being shelved separately under "black writing" rather than appearing with mainstream works. Toby added that you could say the same about gay writers and many other minority groups.

China, whose political sensibilities are more finely honed than most other people's, immediately leapt to his feet. He pointed out that there is a huge difference between being an oppressed person who gets beaten up by British National Party thugs because of the color of his skin and being an oppressed person whose novel doesn't win the Booker Prize because it is SF, and he is quite right. However, Toby countered that there is a genuine question of process here that is common to all liberation movements. It works like this.

Initially the oppressed group cries out for special recognition because they are oppressed and they want justice, but eventually they get fed up of being singled out as different and ask to be accepted as just part of society. SF and fantasy fiction is going through precisely that crisis of identity right now. Many people in fandom, publishers who like their marketing to be easy, and less confident authors who are comfortable writing to a formula, would be happy to remain in a ghetto. On the other hand, confident and ambitious people like Justina want a chance to compete on an equal footing with the wider world. What is right for one group will be wrong for the other. (*Emerald City*, you may have noticed, is firmly in the Justina camp.)

Despite the occasional mudslinging, the panel went very well. I would have liked a more forward-looking discussion, and Andrew Butler of *Foundation* who was sat next to me felt the same way. However, as China pointed out later, many of the audience were new to the debate and therefore it was necessary to go over old ground. Also, as Toby said, we identified the old issues, dealt with them, and moved on, rather than getting into an endless cycle of recrimination. It was, therefore, perhaps the best we could have hoped for. At least no one in the audience seemed to share John O'Connell's dismissive views.

More importantly, Antonia expressed herself and the ICA to be delighted with how the events and gone. She said that

they would love to do more stuff with us in the future. That has to be a good thing for British SF, and huge thanks are due to China, Mike and Jon for making it happen.

Awarding the Clarke

On Saturday night we had the grand finale, the Award Ceremony. This took place in the IMAX theatre at the Science Museum and there was an audience of some 200+ invited guests, many of them famous authors. This year there was no pre-ceremony event open to the public. In some ways this was a shame because those sessions were very well attended. On the other hand I'm sure all of the authors involved were grateful to have avoided more 10-person panels and inane questions.

This year's nominees were *Kil'n People* by David Brin (Orbit), *Light* by M. John Harrison (Gollancz), *The Scar* by China Miéville (Macmillan), *Speed of Dark* by Elizabeth Moon (Orbit), *The Separation* by Chris Priest (Scribner) and *The Years of Rice and Salt* by Kim Stanley Robinson (Voyager). Unsurprisingly with three Americans on the list they didn't all make it. Elizabeth Moon was there, but David Brin had a conflicting engagement and sent along his UK editor in his place. The Clarke administrators had heard nothing from Kim Stanley Robinson, which looked rather bad at the ceremony, but I checked up after the event and it appears that the fault lies with Robinson's publishers, not with the author himself. He had sent an apology, but somehow it never got through to the people it was intended for.

As usual, Paul Kincaid opened proceedings with the customary thanks and praise of the field. He then handed over to John Clute to open the envelope. And the winner was…

Chris Priest. Well, I think I said my piece on this last issue. I don't think it is the right decision, but *The Separation* is a fascinating book and as with everyone else in the UK I am delighted that Chris has done so well this year. He has been toiling away almost unrecognized for years (although he did get on that infamous *Granta* list when he was younger, which I guess shows how useful it is) and he deserves some time in the spotlight. This result, along with the BSFA win, should also suitably shame Priest's publishers who withdrew the book from circulation almost immediately after publication. (According to *The Guardian* Gollancz have picked up *The Separation* and will be republishing it in October.)

Our equivalent of the dead dog party was Mike and China's not-quite-a-celebration dinner at a nearby Polish restaurant. The company and the food were excellent, but sadly I had to duck out early, partly because *Locus* was holding the June issue for my report on the Clarke so I had to file it that night, and partly because I was booked on a plane for San Francisco the following day. It would soon be time to change the focus of the SF world from London to Madison.

Gender and Genre

Wiscon is a convention best known for its gender-bending. It is, after all, the home of the Tiptree Award, the prize given to works of SF and fantasy that explore gender roles. This year, however, the convention seemed to be

focused on genre-bending. There were many panels with that theme, of which I got to three. Possibly this theme was a result of one of the two Guests of Honor being that notorious disrespecter of genre boundaries, China Miéville.

Introducing the New Weird

This being China's first GoHship at an American convention, I figured that the Send a Hugo to China Campaign should do something to mark the event. Therefore I produced a special edition of *Emerald City* containing copies of all of the Miéville reviews that I have run. The issue, which is now available on the *Emerald City* web site, also contains a copy of an interview with China that I did a couple of years ago. In it he remarks that he enjoys blending genres in his work and that he likes to call what he does "weird fiction", harking back to the work of people like Lovecraft, Lindsay, Clarke Ashton Smith and William Hope Hodgson.

Since the time of that interview, the "weird" concept has grown somewhat. It is now something of a nascent literary movement called New Weird (although we are all trying hard not to make it a movement), and it involves several other British SF writers. The name is in part a reference to the New Wave, started by M. John Harrison, Michael Moorcock and others back in the 1960s. As Harrison is part of the new (non-) movement as well that seems only appropriate. The "weird" bit comes from Miéville and from Jon Courtenay Grimwood, who is in the habit of describing what he writes as "weird shit".

Right now New Weird is more a statement of intent than a genre. No one who is involved wants it to spawn piles of poor quality, imitative novels. Like the New Wave, the objective is to stimulate adventurous and innovative writing, in particular by pushing back the fixed and sterile genre boundaries that the marketing departments of publishers try to force on fiction. This goes back to what Paul McAuley was saying at the ICA about British writers no longer feeling the need to follow in the footsteps of Asimov, Heinlein and Clarke, but rather feeling free to do their own thing. (This is a rather flimsy definition of New Weird – a more robust version will probably follow in a later issue after I have had a chance to talk more to China, Mike and Jon.)

And there is no doubt that they are doing just that. Miéville's work combines elements of SF, fantasy and horror. Grimwood's latest series (of which the final volume is reviewed below) is a set of murder mysteries set in a near future vision of a world that has a major alternate history event in our past. Gwyneth Jones combines SF and fantasy in her latest series. Al Reynolds has done gumshoe-style work inside a space opera. And of course M. John Harrison's Light audaciously combines an almost mainstream novel, about a modern couple with a dysfunctional sex life, with a parallel and related story set in a stunning far-future, nanotech-based society. Are they having fun with genre-bending? You bet they are.

By the way, the next star in the New Weird firmament will be Steph Swainston. Her debut novel is currently not due out until early next year, but Harrison and Miéville are already raving about it and on the basis of the few chapters I have seen they are (as expected) dead right. This isn't quite an *Emerald City* scoop, because there has been some discussion of the book on a British-based message board, but I suspect that many of you will hear of Steph first here. Remember her name.

Going Interstitial

At the same time in the US a group of writers, artists and academics, headed by Ellen Kushner, Delia Sherman and Terri Windling, has set up something called the Interstitial Arts Foundation (http://www.endicott-studio.com/ia.html). This too is a genre-bending project, but one of a subtly different nature and much wider scope. As explained earlier, the New Weird is intended to encourage writers to experiment with their writing. Interstitial, as far as I can gather, is primarily a marketing organization. The founders recognized that works that do not fall within narrow genre boundaries are often mis-marketed by publishers and have set out to do something about this.

In this assault on boundaries they intend to take on all aspects of genre-bending. Thus Interstitial is designed to cover both things like New Weird and Bruce Sterling's Slipstream concept, which attempts to promote works on the boundary between genre and mainstream. Not content with that, the Interstitial people also want to work with artists, musicians, performance artists, and indeed anyone who feels that their work is under-appreciated because it does not fit within narrow marketing boundaries.

All of this, of course, harks back to this discussion of *Conjunctions* #39 at ICFA (see *Emerald City* #91) and Gary K. Wolfe's ideas about genre evaporation. Presumably "New Wave Fabulism" is also an Interstitial movement. It should be noted that this term was not used by anyone during the production of *Conjunctions* #39. It just appeared on the cover, rather to the surprise of most of the contributing authors. It is not used by Peter Straub in his introduction, nor by John Clute and Gary K. Wolfe in their critical essays in the collection. This hasn't stopped other publishers from jumping on the bandwagon and starting to solicit "New Wave Fabulist" stories. Regardless of the authenticity of labels however, there are clearly an awful lot of people with similar ideas here, and consequently there must be a movement of some sort, even if none of the people involved can quite agree on what it is or what to call it. The predominance of genre-bending panels at Wiscon is simply another expression of this movement.

Political pot boils over

I'll get back to the genre-bending stuff in a minute, but first a short respite from the literary stuff while we consider that other great Wiscon obsession, politics. It goes without saying that the average Wiscon attendee is fairly well to the left of center. You don't find many conservatives in favor of feminism and gay rights. So the Wiscon attendees were drawn almost entirely from that part of American society that is thoroughly appalled at what its current government gets up to and is desperately hoping for a bit of regime change.

Now I have nothing against a bit of group bonding from time to time, and quite clearly the Left in America is sorely in need of a bit of it right now. However, the one thing you don't get in such an environment is intelligent political discussion. This was proved fairly conclusively by a panel entitled "American Politics as Science Fiction". There doesn't seem to be much doubt that the White House spin-doctors see their job as presenting politics as a bad fantasy novel. David Gemmell had an article in the *Guardian Review* (a British

Sunday newspaper supplement) a couple of weeks back in which he praised the "purity" of the fantasy vision of good-versus-evil as compared to the moral relativism of modern society. That simplistic vision is precisely the sort of worldview that the White House is trying to encourage. But it was obvious from the panel that the American Left is just as mired in Hollywood. In their case the genre is conspiracy theory. In it, the 2000 Presidential election has become a coup and Senator Wellstone's plane crash an assassination. This sort of fabulation is not useful or practical politics, and it won't get people anywhere except deeper into their own mythologizing.

Perhaps more to the point, silly politics not only dominated political panels, but also threatened to overflow everywhere else. You would have thought that a panel on "The Geography of Fantasy" would have little to do with politics, but once China got on to talking about cityscapes the audience immediately wanted to sidetrack onto discussion of inner city deprivation and racial politics. A little stronger moderating could and should have done something about this.

Genre-bending panels

Thankfully not every panel devolved into a political discussion. However, the panels on genre-bending were not necessarily any better. The one on Slipstream literature was particularly disappointing as several of the panelists seemed to have no idea what Slipstream is. Indeed, much of the discussion was given over to talking about how the panelists would like to redefine the term to be something entirely other than what Bruce Sterling originally intended.

Of course Slipstream itself is no more a real genre than Interstitial. Sterling invented the idea in part to encourage SF&F readers to look outside the ghetto shelves and in part to try to encourage the literary establishment to look more closely at some SF&F works. Doubtless some people now set out to write Slipstream novels, because that happens with any label that people invent, but there are plenty of novels out there that can be defined as Slipstream whose authors may never even have heard of the term. *Emerald City* carries at least one review of a Slipstream book every month, because we have the guest mainstream novel. The panel could have been about encouraging people to try this sort of stuff, but it wasn't.

Having said that, the audience did not exactly encourage such interest. I guess I should not have been surprised to see someone put her hand up and say that she didn't like cross-genre writing because it meant that she could not find the books she wanted easily in a bookstore. I was however deeply disappointed to hear someone say that you should never write cross-genre fiction because you won't be able to get published. Wiscon attracts a lot of wannabe authors, many of whom end up producing good books. But it sounds like some of them are getting seduced by the message that the only way to succeed is to write precisely to the formula that the publishers expect. I do hope that the Wiscon writers' workshops are not promulgating that message.

A panel that was not ostensibly about genre-bending but nevertheless touched heavily on the subject was the one on "The Role of the Border in Fantasy and Folklore". You can see why if you refer back to my discussion of Farah Mendlesohn's taxonomy of fantasy from last issue. Her Liminal fantasy consists of stories that take place at the border between our world and the fantasy

world and, as in the case of many of the *Conjunctions* #39 stories, which may be unclear as to whether the border is actually crossed. Clearly much Slipstream falls into this category.

Moving a little away from the border, we find the symmetrical pair of Portal and Intrusive fantasies. Portal stories are those which involve a relatively mundane character moving into a fantastical world, and Intrusive stories involve the magical world entering our world. In both cases the stories involve a tension between a realistic world and a magical one, and the level of involvement of the magical world in the story can make a story seem more or less Slipstream. The classic example here is the ghost story, which is an Intrusive fantasy, but which when done well will have very little supernatural in it at all.

Mendlesohn's final category is the Immersive fantasy, which takes place entirely in the magical world. Because of the way that we have approached the taxonomy, we can see that there is a missing symmetrical twin here. Mainstream novels (Farah tells me I should use the term "mimetic" rather than "realistic") take place entirely outside the magical world. In both cases we are far away from the border. There is less uncertainty, less danger. Consequently both types of story can be stale and predictable. Clearly this is a very simplistic view of things. For example *Perdido Street Station* and *The Scar* are good examples of Immersive fantasies. But then Miéville is busy crossing a whole bunch of other borders so the fact that he doesn't deal with the one between our world and his does not matter so much. The important point is that to provide tension in a story (any type of story) it is helpful to have borders to cross.

Unlike many of the panels this year, the official Interstitial panel kept firmly to the topic. That is because it was more like a rally than a panel, and Ellen Kushner is superb at controlling a crowd. The panel did little more than explain what the Interstitial Arts Foundation is all about, and ask for help, but given that the whole concept of Interstitial is somewhat unclear this was a good thing. I guess that to some it may seem that Kushner, Sherman et al are trying to set up some industry-dominating organization and will take an attitude of "I don't want to be part of their club". But personally I'm prepared to give most people a chance until they show themselves to be nefarious. If the Interstitial Arts people are prepared to work to get more publicity and recognition for works that do not follow narrow genre boundaries, that seems like a good thing.

There should also have been a panel that looked more closely at New Weird type fiction because the blurb suggested that the panel was going to be about people who write similar stuff to China Miéville. I was on the panel, and I was quite looking forward to it. However, it quickly became obvious that I was the only person on the panel who wanted to stick to the topic. We had people wanting to talk about theatre, opera and Slipstream, but not much interest in China. The panel did do a good job of talking about Slipstream writers, and given that the actual Slipstream panel was so poor this was a good thing. But it would be nice if people could go to a panel and get what was advertised rather than have to select a bunch of related panels in the hope that they got what they wanted.

Feminist panels

What Wiscon is supposed to do best is discuss feminist SF, so a panel discussing academic approaches to this idea should have been worth attending. Sadly someone had got it into their heads that the panel should be about how much fun it is to study feminist SF, and just like any other exercise in enforced jolity it was excruciatingly painful to sit through. The blame for this doesn't necessarily lie with the moderator, Justine Larbalestier. Given who was on the panel, there was the potential for a rather nasty row, and Justine may have been sent in with instructions to keep things from getting unpleasant. Shame.

Thankfully the con did actually click into full gear on Monday morning. I was on a panel on "Gender and Utopia". You might have thought, given the nature of Wiscon, that this would quickly degenerate into another group hug session in which we all agreed that men were the problem in the world and if we got rid of them then everything would be perfect. Nothing of the sort transpired. We began by agreeing that discussing utopian literature is a waste of time, because one person's utopia is inevitably another person's dystopia. The only sensible thing to do, therefore, is to discuss utopian themes in literature.

Moving on from there, the panel was pretty much agreed that the supposed feminist utopias of the 70s were anything but utopian. It is also the case that very few of them are strictly separatist. Joan Haran, whose PhD is on feminist SF, expressed some surprise at how books like Sheri Tepper's *The Gate to Women's Country* and Suzie McKee Charnas's *Holdfast* series could have been viewed as being utopian and separatist by anyone.

Of course there is the question of what a good feminist book that uses utopian themes should be like. The general view was that it should deal well with conflict resolution, and that the society presented should be shown to be capable of surviving change. Charnas's work, of course, is full of stuff like this. However, there were very few other modern works mentioned (and of course Charnas's series started back in the 70s and has only recently been concluded). The one recent book that did get several name checks was *The Fifth Sacred Thing*, by Starhawk. I haven't read it, but I will try to find room for it in a forthcoming issue.

The one area where the panel did get keen on separatism was over the issue of safety. This is understandable. After all, there are still many places where it is unsafe for a woman to venture alone. However, women-only spaces are not a solution to male violence any more than gated communities are a solution to crime. They simply put the problem out of sight.

Interestingly one of the panelists, Diana Rivers, had lived in a women-only community for many years. While she was clearly happy with her home, she also admitted that it was a continual learning experience and that the community had changed a lot since its initial days. I suspect that this experience parallels what has been happening in feminist fiction. Back in the 70s, we all felt that if we could just be free of men than everything would be OK. Now we know that things are by no means that simple.

But if you want the ultimate proof that feminism is not what it was, and evidence that I can be just as tempted to veer off topic as the next panelist, try this. Justine Larbalestier and I spent rather too much of the panel's time

discussing our newly discovered common love of cricket. If we had done that on a feminist panel in the 70s we would have been lynched.

Special events

OK, enough of programming: what else went on? Well to start with this year's Wiscon was the first ever wedding-free event. Given that we did not have to give up masses of ballroom space to a major Saturday-night party, there was room to do something new. That something turned out to be The Gathering. In essence, this was a fund raising event for Broad Universe; the organization devoted to promoting women writers. In practice, however, it was a fairground market. You purchased tickets at the door, and these could be used at a variety of stalls for just about anything. You could get temporary tattoos. You could get collage lessons from Freddie Baer, or have a balloon hat made for you by Pat Murphy. You could get your hair braided or your fortune told. Mary Anne Mohanraj was giving lessons in spice blending for Sri Lankan cookery. It was, all in all, a fun event, and an excellent use of Friday afternoon when half the con is still arriving.

Sunday night saw the Guest of Honor speeches and the second half of the Tiptree ceremony. Carol Emshwiller gave a charming speech about how she came to be a writer, and China expounded on the arrogance of the literary community in the face of real world politics. The latter sounds a little harsh, but was in fact a very well reasoned argument that trod a fine line between the facetious assertion that Art can solve the world's ills and the need to address political issues in one's art. John Kessel was crowned with the Tiptree tiara by last year's winner, Hiromi Goto (quite an achievement given that Kessel is at least twice the height of Goto). He endeared himself to his audience by suggesting that the best thing to do with the current political situation might be to deny men the vote for a couple of hundred years. (Hopefully this was a joke.) Photos are available on the *Emerald City* web site.

The other major event of Sunday night was that Kevin and I threw a party. Ostensibly this was to promote the Calgary in 2005 Westercon bid (http://www.calgaryin2005.org/) being run by our friend, John Mansfield. In practice it gave Kevin something to do while I was going to literary panels, and it gave me an excuse to buy interesting cheeses and summer sausages at the farmer's market. The cheese selection was a bit poor this year, save for the 6-year-old cheddar which tasted pretty good, even if it was orange. However, we did have venison, buffalo and ostrich sausages on offer. Given that this was Wiscon, I'm rather disappointed that we did not get picketed by vegetarians, but other than that the party went very well. Huge thanks are due to Christian McGuire for covering for me during the speeches and late in the evening when I was dead on my feet.

What did it all mean?

Overall I was very disappointed with this year's Wiscon, especially given that some good friends of mine were attending for the first time. Kevin said he was very impressed, both with the organization (which was flawless as ever) and the programming (which I have to admit was far better than, say, the average Westercon). China and Farah also seem to have enjoyed themselves, which is good. But it is very frustrating to see the Wiscon program

drop to merely being better than most other cons. Hopefully things will pick up again next year.

As to all the literary movement stuff, none of this is really new, and none of it will have any earth-shattering effect. However, if we can do a small amount to encourage better writing, and to get more exposure and sales for good books, that is all well and good. Indeed it is precisely why *Emerald City* exists.

And my highlight of the convention? I'm afraid it was nothing to do with the program. It consisted of an evening spent in the lobby discussing books with Gary K. Wolfe and Mike Levy. These guys, of course, get to see the good stuff really early. Later this year we will see new novels from Dan Simmons and Neal Stephenson, and from what Gary and Mike have said both of them are on my Hugo list already. Watch this space.

Wrapping up Raf

The book that was disappearing fastest from the tables at Eastercon was the final volume in Jon Courtenay Grimwood's Arabesk series. *Effendi* was always going to be a hard act to follow. Had it not been up against *Light* and *The Scar* it could well have scooped a heap of awards this year. But how do you follow the emotional intensity of a book about child soldiers? The answer is probably that you can't. You just have to settle for being one of those rare people who has done his best work in the middle of a trilogy, the area that is generally viewed as an opportunity for marking time and advancing the plot. The final book of the three had to be reserved for resolving the questions about Ashraf Bey himself: who is he really? Why is he so heavily and extensively augmented? And why does he have a fox in his head? *Felaheen* does just that, and it does it very well. Only in comparison to the magnificent work of *Effendi* is the book in any way a disappointment.

One of the things that is most obvious about Grimwood's work is that he writes just the way he talks. You can hear him reading the book to you as you scan the sentences. Like M. John Harrison, Grimwood has an obsession with economy of language. Of course as a practicing journalist Grimwood has been forced to cultivate that skill. There's nothing like writing to a word count to hone your ability. But Grimwood also talks like that: every word carefully measured, slowly and precisely enunciated, giving the feeling that every syllable is loaded with significance. Which in his fiction it often is.

And so we come to the final chapter. The rumor is that Raf is the son of the Emir of Tunis. His aunt Nafisa clearly believed that when she arranged for him to marry Zara Quitrimala. But just what does the Emir have to say about this? More importantly, what does Raf's supposed elder half-brother, Kashif Pasha, think? And will all of this matter when it comes to the succession given that the Emir detests his heir and showers all of his affection on his youngest son, Murad?

Raf, of course, has far too many problems to worry about such things. Having jilted Zara in the interest of making a statement about the barbarism of arranged marriages, and then fallen in love with her, he has no idea how to makes amends for the social disgrace he has caused her. What was a half-English kid who grew up in public schools and

the slums of Seattle supposed to know about Arabic customs?

Then again there is the problem of his ten-year-old niece, Hani. What does an ex-gangster from Seattle know about raising a gifted but emotionally damaged girl child in Egypt? Perhaps it is just as well that Zara is sticking around, even if she and Raf are not exactly on speaking terms. Hani, of course, is exasperated with the pair of them, and wishes that they would just get on and do that fumbling around and moaning in bed thing that adults are supposed to do when they are quite obviously nuts about each other.

See, Raf has problems. So the last thing that he needs is for his supposed father's chief of security to turn up at his balcony table at Le Trianon and ask him to investigate an apparent assassination attempt on her boss. Nor is it exactly fair of her to offer proof of his parentage as an inducement to taking the job. Raf would be mad to take the job, unless of course he has decided that his problems with Zara and Hani are so insuperable that the only solution is to run away.

Along the way we get flashbacks about Raf's mother and how she came to North Africa. This gives us one of the best portraits of a terrorist I can remember reading. Sally Welham starts out sanctimonious, self-righteous and manipulative, but as her career as an animal rights and anti-capitalist protester progresses she gradually becomes more and more cynical until there is little left but hatred for humanity and greed. Sally is a very nasty piece of work.

Then we come to the end, and it was more or less as I expected, although there was one nice twist in the tail. This has been a very fine series. It does an excellent job of creating a believable and sympathetic North African setting. It manages to combine an Ian Fleming-like obsession with designer labels and flash technology with a strong anti-capitalist sensibility. It has used children and the adult-child relationship very well. In fact the entire series is really about children, and the fact that its author is a single parent is doubtless a significant influence. Jon Courtenay Grimwood is an excellent writer, and one whom the rest of the world needs to discover.

Felaheen – Jon Courtenay Grimwood - Earthlight – hardcover

Flower Power

You must have wondered I am sure, why the people of Faerie stick to their relentlessly mediaeval realm. They must see what we have, all those luxuries and home comforts. But there they are still living in earth mounds and bathing in dew-filled flowers warmed only by the sun. Why shouldn't every fairy family have a comfortable home of its own and its very own magic mirror on which to watch fairy soap operas about the strife-torn love affairs of Oberon and Titania, and the mischievous tricks of Robin Goodfellow?

One of the problems, of course, is power. Science doesn't work too well in Faerie. They have magic instead, which is just as good, but a little problematic to harness. And then of course there is the problem of the mortals. As Tinkerbell said, fairies only live if mortals believe in them. So here we are in Faerie, with all this fabulous modern technology bumping up our demand for power at a fantastic rate, and those pesky mortals go and cause an energy crisis.

Doubtless if they had been a little smarter, the Parliament of Blooms would have passed a law setting up a state publishing house to produce endless 10-volume fantasy trilogies and sneak them into mortal bookshops when no one is looking. Maybe they have. But there are other ways to skin a mortal, if you'll pardon the phrase. The moderates such as Lords Daffodil and Primrose might blanch at such tactics, but Lords Hellebore and Thornapple know what needs to be done and do not lack the courage to carry it out, even if they have to launch a coup to do it. After all, they have a lifestyle to maintain. War is a small price to pay.

The new novel from Tad Williams, *The War of the Flowers*, is squarely in the mould of the slick urban fantasy produced by the likes of China Miéville and Jeff Vandermeer. Most of the story is set in The City (there is only one in Faerie, but there's probably a deliberate San Francisco reference there too) where modern-day fairies go about their business in splendid imitation of mortals. The great Flower Lords have massive mansions, ogre bodyguards, and servants of all shapes and sizes according to their species and fitness of purpose. The middle classes work in the city, running shops and small businesses, the government bureaucracy, or perhaps enlisting in Lord Monkshood's constabulary (fire crews are the exclusive preserve of nixies because of their water magic). And of course to get all of the really dirty jobs done there are always hordes of unemployed goblins that can be drafted in as required. It is not quite New Crobuzon, but the parallels, from "form = nature" attacks on racism to the perceptive treatment of politics, are all there.

"Did it hurt? Having your wings cut off?"

"Hurt? No, no, of course not. This is the modern age. They can cut away your entire life and you'll never feel a thing."

I'd like to make particular note of the removal of wings motif illustrated in the quote above. In *Perdido Street Station* the garuda, Ygharek, has his wings cut off as punishment for a terrible crime. Much of the plot of the book is devoted to his quest to regain the power of flight, and thereby escape from the prison of gravity to which he has been confined. In *The War of the Flowers*, the upper class fairies have voluntarily removed their own wings. Indeed they have bred for winglessness. Middle class fairies often have their children's wings cut off early in life to make it easier for them to climb the social ladder. What Williams seems to be saying here, is that the fairies are voluntarily imprisoning themselves within their new technological society.

"Oh that." Cumber shrugged. "That's not a real forest, that's a rich man's preserve. It used to be part of the Silverwood — in fact, all of Larkspur's lands used to be a tiny section of the Silverwood. It's the same old story, Theo. You must be tired of hearing it by now — I'm certainly tired of telling it. It's gone. They just saved a little piece for Larkspur and his friends to hunt in."

"You people really do *like to imitate my world."*

Into this world is plunged Theo Vilmos: musician, layabout and all round general failure in life. A band to sing with, a few beers, a motorbike, and the occasional compliant girl to warm his bed are all that Theo needs out of life. Or at least they were until, for reasons that are a complete mystery to him, he

becomes an important cog in Lord Hellebore's plans for regime change in Mortalia. Luckily for Theo, some of the more moderate fairy factions get wind of this and manage to snatch him from Mortalia just in time. That, however, is simply a case of out of the frying pan and into the fire, for once in The City Theo becomes a pawn in the battle between the great families, just another objective to be secured in The War of the Flowers.

There are a number of excellent things about this book, not the least of which is that it is a single-volume Tad Williams novel so we don't have to wait another three years to get to the end. On the other hand, having spent a fair amount of time lately talking to M. John Harrison about writing technique I am finding Williams's wordiness a little hard to swallow. Did this book really need to be 675 pages long? I am reminded of the scene in Amadeus where the Emperor tells young Mozart that his opera is very nice but that it has too many notes. Then again, Mozart was the artist, and was right to insist that in his view he had used precisely the correct number of notes for the work he had in mind.

Of course if the writing in *The War of the Flowers* is a little flabby in places I know one of the reasons why. *Shadowmarch* and ConJosé ate up a lot of Williams' time when he was supposed to be working on this book, and I am as much to blame for that as anyone.

In summary, then, *The War of the Flowers* is a fine exercise in using classic fairy tropes to tell a very modern tale. It lacks some of the literary exuberance of *Perdido Street Station*, but it is more accessible, makes more concessions to its audience, and may therefore get its message to a wider market. Above all, it is fashionably urban, politically aware, and determinedly experimental. Tad Williams, welcome to the New Weird.

"We enter a perilous country when we decide that because we mean well, or because we are largely good, that we are thus allowed to do something we know is wrong."

Caradenus Primrose

If only more fantasy books exhibited that level of understanding of the world.

The War of the Flowers – Tad Williams - Orbit – hardcover

Red in Gun and Claw

Something has gone very badly wrong here. The first Neal Asher book I reviewed, *Gridlinked*, was limited but interesting. The second, *The Skinner*, was very good. So I bought his next book expecting at least something of *The Skinner*'s quality, and hopefully further improvement. What I found was a disaster.

The new book, *The Line of Polity*, Is pretty much a direct sequel to *Gridlinked*. It features the same cast of characters; starting with secret agent, Ian Cormac, and adding in most of his team from *Gridlinked* and, of course, the gigantic alien, Dragon. From *The Skinner* Asher takes the idea of an alien world crammed full of really dangerous and hideously violent critters. And that's it. He takes all these old ideas from stuff he has done before, sticks then in a linear and predictable plot, and gets very, very lazy.

Well, maybe that's a little unfair. There is some stuff about advanced alien

nanotech, but it isn't really developed at all. It is just an excuse to provide a totally over-the-top bad guy. And there is some supposed satire on religious societies, but whereas Sheri Tepper does that sort of thing with elegant and precise rapier thrusts, Asher is more like a brain-damaged troll beating at the enemy with a torn up tree stump. If you want to make a case against someone, starting off by portraying them as irredeemably nasty and horrible is not a good way to start.

All of which is very sad. Asher proved with *The Skinner* that he has talent. He can do comedy. He can raise serious issues. But in *The Line of Polity* all he has done is create a monotonous and tedious spatter-fest. I suppose that if you are into hugely powerful weapons, hideously violent predators, and reading about people being killed by the above in increasingly bizarre and bloodthirsty ways, then you will love this book. If you are not into that sort of thing then I'm afraid that *The Line of Polity* has no redeeming features whatsoever.

The Line of Polity – Neal Asher - Tor – softcover

Hour of the Beast

Everyone agrees the world is coming to an end. But are you prepared for it? Welcome to Know Your Messiah! *The only show on the LINK that helps you decide who might be a false prophet, an agent of the Beast!*

So here's the set up. Armageddon is here. The prophet Elijah has turned up in New York and has identified Deirdre McManus's daughter as the new Messiah. Satan and the rogue Inquisitor, Emmaline McNaughten, are trying hard to be nefarious but wondering all along whether they are not being duped into doing God's will. The Archangel Michael has finally turned his back on Heaven and has sworn to do all he can to prevent God from including his and Deirdre's daughter in whatever scheme he is cooking up. Page is, of course, still doing penance for various crimes, real and imagined. And Mouse is just trying to survive as the world goes crazy around him and he, as the most notorious cyber-criminal in history, gets blamed for it all. Lyda Morehouse, meanwhile, has to navigate her way through all of this complex plot that she has built up and somehow produce something that is morally and theologically satisfying. Can she work her way out of it?

Well, I'd like to tell you, but almost anything I say about the book along those lines is liable to turn out to be a spoiler. You just have to get on and read it for yourselves and see if you can work out where it is going.

In the meantime I can say that it is an excellent read. I was up half the night finishing it. This one is perhaps a little lighter on the comedy than previous volumes, because things do start to get very serious as people on Earth start to realize that the End really is nigh. Morehouse handles this largely through news extracts at the end of each chapter, which I am pleased to say sound much more like real journalism than the ones in *Archangel Protocol*.

Other than that, all that I can say is that the series is really good stuff and you should be reading it. Totally off-the-wall ideas like this don't come along every day.

Messiah Node – Lyda Morehouse – RoC – Publisher's proof

Rootless Fantasy

I was very impressed with James Lovegrove's *The Foreigners*, so when I saw a new book by him available at Eastercon I snapped it up at once. Sadly I think that *Untied Kingdom* is a mistake on many levels. Here's why.

Firstly I think that on purely tactical grounds it is a mistake to try to write a near future Matter of Britain novel when Gwyneth Jones is doing such an amazing job of that same thing. Obviously Lovegrove may have come up with the idea for *Untied Kingdom* before *Bold as Love* was published, and I have to add that the Arthuriana sections are the best part of the book. But comparisons are inevitable, and the rest of the book is so limp that Lovegrove suffers badly by them.

Next up, if you are going to write a near future novel about social breakdown you really do have to make it believable. Lovegrove didn't even try. He mutters occasionally about the "Unlucky Gamble" that the British (English?) government was supposed to have taken, but he also tells us that they are now in exile in the Caribbean. So why is the International Community still engaged in random bombing raids? There is clearly no central control. Scotland, Wales and Cornwall seem to be perfectly stable countries. The IC has control of the skies. It makes no political, military or economic sense to allow England to simply wallow in anarchy.

Technically I suspect that it is a mistake to write a novel in which vast swathes of the narrative are the introspective musings of your two principal characters. This may be just me having spent too much time talking to M. John Harrison over the past couple of weeks, but it would have been nice to see a bit more telling it with action and a bit less spoon-feeding of the reader. It would also help to have a plot that relies somewhat less than 100% on authorial intervention. *Untied Kingdom* has way too many instances where the characters are moved on by convenient external events.

It also helps to do your research tolerably well. I'm going to let Lovegrove off the point about different methods of motive power on London's railways because he knows he did it, he apologized for it in the Afterword, and it is something that only train geeks and people who live with them would know. But vast numbers of people will know that you can't see the runways of Heathrow from the train like you can at Gatwick. Most Brits (and probably a fair number of Americans) will also know that a Duke is a Really Important Nobleman, and not the sort of guy who just has a small country house in the Home Counties. It is sloppy work, and it grates.

Back to believability again. Let us suppose that a gang of skinhead thugs from London descend upon a sleepy downs village for the purposes of capturing females. I'm prepared to accept that they may leave the women that they choose untouched until they get back to base, in case they need to be shared out or something. What I can't believe is that they didn't rape every other woman in the village before they left. They'd already beaten up all of the men and murdered the mayor. What's stopping them?

And finally, Lovegrove has tried to create a fantasy centered on English nationalism, and has run badly afoul of

the vacuousness of his material. I'm often critical of the Americans over the Disneyfication of their culture, but I suspect that it is a disease of any major world power. The nation's apparent invulnerability leads to a citizenry that is unwilling to accept nastiness in any walk of life. The same thing happened to England in the 19th Century, with the result that while, say, Irish nationalist myths are full of pagan fury and grandeur, English nationalism is a wet cabbage of naïve romanticism. Imagine *The Lord of the Rings* if it had just been a story about day-to-day life in The Shire.

It is all very sad, especially as there is a good book in there somewhere trying to get out. Lovegrove's vision of Arthur as a skinhead gang leader trying to restore some semblance of law and order while having to rely on an "army" that Wellington could rightly describe as "the scum of the earth" is imaginative and innovative. If only Lovegrove had just written that book and dumped all of the rest.

Untied Kingdom – James Lovegrove – Gollancz – softcover

Dawdling Through Time

One of the common themes of SF literature is the immortal character who lives through all of human history. In his debut novel, *The Meq*, Steve Cash applies this idea to fantasy, but with an innovative twist. The Meq, the people of the title, are an ancient race from the Basque region of Spain. For reasons as yet unexplained, they are able to delay puberty until they meet their ideal life partner (whom they will recognize on sight). The delay can even continue until the couple decides to have children. But prior to making that choice, Meq physical development is frozen at the age of twelve. They be a thousand years old or more, but they look just like kids.

That is an interesting idea, because it makes the immortals uniquely vulnerable. Heinlein's Lazarus Long has no trouble fending for himself during his passage through (future) history. For a kid things are a little different. They do have advantages. They quite often go unnoticed by adults, or are able to charm their way out of trouble. But in a physical confrontation with an adult human they are completely outclassed. It also makes it difficult for the Meq to do the usual immortal's trick of investing money and leaving it for several centuries. Kids have trouble with owning property. Cash gives his characters some help in the form of "stones" that allow their bearers to hypnotize humans, but only five such stones exist.

The other perceptive thing that Cash has done is start his story at the end of the 19th Century. He has rightly recognized that the creeping bureaucracy and surveillance of the 20th Century will make it much harder for the Meq to hide in the world, so this period is crucial to their continued existence. It is precisely the right time to be following their story.

Of course you need a little more than that for a novel. Cash therefore has his hero, Zianno, orphaned shortly after his twelfth birthday, forcing him to discover his Meq ancestry along with the readers. And he has Zianno befriend a pair of orphan human girls before he really knows what he is, giving him emotional ties outside his own people. And of course there is the obligatory evil Meq who uses his powers in selfish and crazy ways.

For a first novel, *The Meq* is a very creditable attempt. There are places

where it could be better. The story of the Meq's betrayal by Phoenician traders in their early history is particularly weak, and in general Cash could have done with using flashbacks rather than have characters relate what happened in the past. My main complaint, once again, is that the plot is driven by things happening to the characters. The hand of the author moving them about is all too visible. And of course with this type of book there is always the temptation to involve the characters in major historical events. Cash fails to resist that.

Two things that shine through very clearly are Cash's love of baseball and music. This gives him the opportunity to drag in well-known historical figures such as Ty Cobb and Scott Joplin. Writers such as T.S. Elliot also get cameo roles. The baseball stuff works well, giving Zianno interesting contacts at different levels of society, and is a refreshing contrast to the middle-class sentimentality of Michael Chabon's *Summerland*. The music doubtless has something to do with Cash having spent many years as the lead singer of the Ozark Mountain Daredevils.

Being a big fantasy novel, *The Meq* is of course only the first part of a continuing series. So far we have followed Zianno as far as the end of the First World War. I'm interested to see what Cash makes of the rest of the 20th Century. If he continues to develop his writing this could get quite good. My only real doubt is that I don't see what the book is about. It is a story, and there are some good people and some nasty people in it. But there doesn't seem to be a lot more than that. At least not yet.

One final, parting point. Even if you don't want to read this book, take a look at its cover on the *Emerald City* web site. Then go back to last issue and look at the cover of Justina Robson's *Natural History*. They are both by a guy called Steve Stone, and he is on my list for the Best Professional Artist Hugo for next year. You can find more of his work here: http://www.metrodreams.co.uk/nexus-dna/main_index.html.

The Meq – Steve Cash - Macmillan – softcover

Waters of Strife

My review of Kay Kenyon's previous novel, *Maximum Ice*, described it as a good idea poorly executed. That gives me hope for the writer, and so I sought out Kenyon's next offering, *The Braided World*. Once again, this starts out dismally, but it does reward perseverance and once again you are left with the impression that Kenyon could be really good if only she thought a bit more carefully about her plots.

The book starts as a vague follow-on from *Maximum Ice*. Having been rescued from the Ice, Earth has been struggling along in a permanent state of infirmity. The lack of biological diversity caused by the attack of the information-eating dark matter cloud (yes, you did read that right) has resulted in general malaise and decline. Then, out of the blue (well, out of deep space actually) comes The Message. "Come and find what you have lost, " it reads. Naturally the torpid government can't be bothered, but an enterprising wealthy individual (can you guess that this is an American book?) finances a deep space expedition. Conveniently, and entirely against the picture of Earth that has been painted, someone has recently invented a hyperspace drive, so off we go to the planet Neshar.

Unfortunately the crew manages to take some nasty bacteria with them and the captain dies shortly after they arrive at their destination. The expedition sponsor has neglected to define an order of succession beforehand and has only two young and inexperienced lieutenants to choose from for a new captain. Inevitably her choice leads to resentment, conflict and bad leadership. Then the sponsor, both of her senior officers, and one scientist, travel down to the planet where they are captured by the natives.

No, this is not a *Star Trek* plot, I promise you, though I did spend quite a while trying to work out which one of them was wearing the red shirt.

So, after this sequence of convenient disasters, we get to the interesting bit. We have an alien civilization to meet. The first question has to be, "who sent The Message?" and indeed our heroes find satellites busily transmitting. But the natives are nowhere near sophisticated enough to have built such a system. More to the point, the natives are human, almost…

A little bit of anthropology soon discovers the legend of the Quadi, a mysterious race who are supposed to have created the people of Neshar and then disappeared. The Quadi must therefore have had access to human DNA, and have presumably hidden a bunch of useful stuff somewhere on the planet. All our heroes have to do is find it.

But of course there are the natives to deal with first. They are relatively primitive (have rifles and electricity but are close to nature) and they don't put much store by tales of lost genetic diversity. More worryingly, they are disturbingly different in the one way that is bound to upset humans: sex. The Dassa, it seems, do not give birth. They enjoy recreational sex with anyone who is willing, often very publicly, but for reproduction they swim in sacred pools after which, by some means too holy to divulge to visitors, babies are produced. Maybe they are discovered hiding under lily pads or something like that. Unfortunately, whatever genetic manipulation the Quadi performed to make the Dassa from basic human stock sometimes goes wrong. Every so often a girl is born with a womb. This is unclean, and when she is discovered menstruating the girl has her tongue cut out and becomes a "hoda" - a slave.

All of this is clearly designed to outrage the readers. Not only do the Dassa keep real humans as slaves, but they have sex in public! How terrible. And just in case we don't realize quite how terrible this is, Kenyon keeps having her characters tell us just how disgusted they are by the whole set up. What Kenyon seems to have forgotten is that her readers are, in fact, science fiction fans. So while her characters are becoming more and more outraged, her readers are thinking Prime Directive, First Contact Protocols and genome sequencing. They may also be noticing that the Dassa king, Vidori, has far more brains that the whole of the human expedition put together. In his review in *SF Weekly* John Clute described Kenyon's humans as "unprofessional, moralistic, whingeing and torpid." He was being generous, of course. Clute goes on to talk about "consensual verisimilitude" and "deracination", all of which is critic-speak for saying that it is unwise for an SF writer to make her characters significantly more stupid than her expected readers.

Meanwhile, back with the plot. The Dassa turn out to have a complex political structure based on three castes: the military, the bureaucracy, and the midwives (who tend the sacred birthing

pools). Each group lives on a particular river, all of which feed into a main waterway forming the "braid" of the title. Conveniently the system is under stress at the time of the humans' arrival and, being utterly clueless, they manage to end up as pawns in a local power struggle. And this is actually where things get interesting. The political intrigues of the Dassa are, for the most part, far better plotted than the affairs of the humans. Also the Dassa characters, even the obnoxious and bigoted chief midwife, Oleel, are far more interesting and, dare one say it, human, than the members of the Earth expedition. Once you get into the second half of the book and Dassa society begins to unravel, the pages fair fly by and Kenyon proves that she has something worth saying.

In the end, therefore, patience was rewarded. But it would have been very easy to give up. I will continue to watch what Kenyon does, because she shows so much promise. But I do hope that she thinks a little more about the plot of her next book.

Braided World – Kay Kenyon - Bantam – softcover

Heart Search

The back cover blurb describes *Finding Helen*, by Colin Greenland, as "the first mainstream novel by one of our most celebrated writers of fantastic fiction." Which is why a review of it has turned up here as this month's guest mainstream novel. At first sight, what the blurb says is absolutely believable. After all, as tradition has it, mainstream novels are all about neurotic people with unsuccessful love lives and nothing much else, right? *Finding Helen* is precisely in that mould.

Christopher Gale, the narrator, is a middle-aged man who is a failure at work and has fallen out of love with his wife. The only part of his life that seems to have any meaning for him was the few years he spent as the personal assistant and aspiring biographer of the famous 70's singer-songwriter, Helen Leonard. These days, of course, no one plays Leonard's work. But one morning Gale chances to hear a song he knows on the radio. The DJ cuts it short, talking over the magnificent ending. The song is called "Nobody no more", and to Gale it seems to encapsulate his life.

In reality, I knew I was one of those people. I had never aspired; never planned. I lived as I always had, by pure inertia. By rights I should have gravitated to a tower block, to subsist on takeaways and Blind Date. *Instead, somehow, here I was with a wife, a job, nice clothes, a decent car. I couldn't think how it had happened. God must have mistaken me for someone else.*

And so, rather than go to work, Gale gets in his car and sets off in search of Helen. He knows all of the places that she used to live. He still has keys for most of them. She might still be around somewhere. Along the way he reminisces about how he met her and about their relationship. And along the way the façade begins to slip. Helen Leonard, it seems, was less a person and more of a force of nature, attracting followers like a magnet, chewing them up and then discarding them, spent, to flounder back in the real world beyond her aura.

And then there is the Beagle Man. The Beagle Man is a decrepit old fellow whom Gale used to see in the park. He

was a Dogwalker. Gale would be there with bouncy, irrepressible Jody, and the Beagle Man would be there with his smelly, obese, garbage-obsessed, flatulent beagle, Gobbo. So what precisely are the Beagle Man and Gobbo doing in Gale's car with him? He hasn't picked them up, and anyway they are not always there. They seem to turn up at inconvenient moments, just when Gale is speculating on the futility of something or other, just when the Beagle Man's homespun, commonsense philosophy and Gobbo's effortless crudity are what is required to comment on the absurdity or desperate nature of the situation.

Along the way, Gale, the Beagle Man and perhaps Gobbo as well, although of course he never says anything but merely snuffles and farts at significant moments, reflect upon the sordid state of Britain and the idiocy of middle-class domesticity. It is, perhaps, a book that will not mean much to people who are not British. It may not even mean much to people who haven't lived through the same decades, the same fashions and obsessions, as Greenland and I and others of our generation. But if you do happen to be in the target market it is calmly, quietly devastating.

Behind the gardens of Damascus Road lies the great green lake of the playing field, property of some nearby public school. On summer mornings when the mist lifts the groundsmen go sailing out across it, stately miniature figures on their mowers and rollers. In the afternoon the pupils convene in blazers and flannels, to be educated in the gentlemanly art of chucking a red leather ball about. Cheerily their voices float up on the sun-warmed air, like the cries of some endangered species unaware its pasture is only a nature reserve, in the cold heart of an indifferent city.

Eventually, of course, the pretence drops away. Indeed, given that the Beagle Man makes his appearance fairly early on, there wasn't much of a pretence really, was there? I guess to get the book accepted and marketed as mainstream everyone had to pretend, and maybe those readers who are not as sensitive to the clues as we are will miss them. But the fact is that Colin Greenland is a great writer of fantastic fiction, and he is not going to waste all that talent by doing something entirely ordinary. And of course the same idiots who look at *Conjunctions* #39 and claim that stories in it are not fantasy because they are not full of dragons and wizards will be happy to accept *Finding Helen* as mainstream.

But, as it turns out, *Finding Helen* is beautifully written, deeply moving, and absolutely spot on in its observations of British life over the past few decades. It also bears a back-cover recommendation from M. John Harrison. That is a rare and precious thing, and a sure indicator of quality. The book is also by no means as mundane as it pretends. After all, there is magic in music, isn't there.

But the drum-beat strains of the night remain
In the rhythm of the new-born day
You know sometime you're bound to leave her
But for now you're going to stay…

Al Stewart

Finding Helen – Colin Greenland - Black Swan – softcover

Short stuff

British SF magazines

Being in London for a while I figured I should go and pick up the latest editions of the British SF magazines to see what was going on. Sadly this now only amounts to *Interzone* and *The Third Alternative*, because 3SF has disappeared along with Big Engine, but at least it is something to have two.

The first thing that you notice about the British magazines, as compared to American ones, is the size. The British stuff is done full magazine size and, in the case of *TTA*, on the slightly bigger A4 paper (anyone know why *Interzone* is on US Letter paper?). American magazines are in digest format with poorer quality paper and very small type. Typically a British magazine is 60-70 pages long, an American one nearer 150. The British also go for more artwork, which leads me to believe that the Americans get more words per issue. I can't see a British magazine having space for a novella.

The next point of comparison is that while American magazines are full of stories by big name novelists, the British mags mainly carry the work of new writers who have yet to make their names. I'm not sure why this should be. Possibly it is money. But it certainly makes the British magazines less obviously attractive.

Comparing *Interzone* and *The Third Alternative*, you can easily see who is the weary veteran and who is the brash young kid. *Interzone* seems to be just the same as it has always been, whereas *TTA* obviously has some radical design ideas and wants you to sit up and take notice. On the other hand, *Interzone* is much more of a traditional SF magazine. *TTA* is liable to carry several articles on visual arts, and its fiction tends more towards horror and slipstream than genre work.

For several years now I have found the fiction in Interzone stagnant and dull. All of the writers seem to be obsessed with having a twist ending and with being obscure without actually having anything to say. There wasn't any story in the March 2003 issue that I would recommend reading. On the other hand, it did contain an interesting essay by Bruce Gillespie about the novella as an art form and how PS Publishing is reviving it. I suspect that *TTA* would find such a piece too old-fashioned and stuffy, and would prefer something on short art house movies instead. There was an interview with Martha Wells, which didn't tell us much but hopefully gave her some well-deserved publicity. And *Interzone* has Nick Lowe. While I hardly ever go to movies I'm always happy to read Mr. Lowe's opinions of them.

Contrariwise, some of the fiction in the Winter 03 issue of *TTA* was excellent. Brian Hodge's story, "With acknowledgements to Sun Tzu", is a creepy evaluation of the life of war photographers. I don't think it is genre at all, but it is very good. I also loved Simon Avery's "Leon is dead". Avery is trying very hard to write an M. John Harrison story, and while he explains rather too much and has a suspiciously happy ending, much of the style is very familiar. The non-fiction in *TTA* is less good, in particular the pointless "comment" column, "The Dodo has Landed." If people are going to be given a whole page in which to sound off about nothing in particular they should at least be funny.

Overall I think I am more likely to buy and read *TTA* because I think I can rely

on quality fiction there. But it would be boring if both magazines were the same.

Hugo nominees

I am slowly working my way through as many of the short fiction Hugo nominees as I can get hold of. Huge thanks here are due to Fictionwise who are making as many of the nominees as they can get permission for available for free. You can find them here: http://www.fictionwise.com/Hugo2003.htm. It is a bit irritating that the PDF files are hobbled so that you can't print them, but thankfully it is only short stories so it isn't too much pain on the eyes.

Up for review this month is Ian R. MacLeod's novella, "Breathmoss." This is primarily a story about adolescence, but it is set in a future world in which women have developed the means of reproducing without men and have consequently given up producing them. Male children only occur by accident or through perversity, and they tend to be shunned because of their legendary fondness for violence and rape. So of course our heroine grows up in a town in which there is — shock! horror! — a boy!

I'm really not sure what to make of this one. It is very nicely written, but many of the SF elements seem to be there purely to allow MacLeod to exercise his imagination, and if there was a message in the story I am afraid I missed it. I suspect that any point MacLeod was trying to make was sacrificed in deference to the need for a shock ending. It is a nice tale, but not up to the standard of *Coraline*.

Cracks in the Walls

Even if you knew nothing about the various SFnal events going on in London this month, you might well have realized that something was up if you happened to take *The Independent* for your newspaper. Sunday supplements for broadsheet newspapers are supposed to contain things like fashion shoots, luxury car ads, and recipes for meals that always look better on the plate than in your mouth. They do not generally contain short stories, and if they do those stories would not be by (gasp) fantasy writers.

China Miéville makes a living out of defying convention.

The story, *Foundation*, is centered on a building inspector with a rare genius for listening to and diagnosing buildings. Got a crack in your wall? Call this guy in and he can tell you whether you should fill it and forget it, or whether you should start moving out now. He is never wrong, and the question, of course, is how can he do this? As you might expect from a fantasy writer, the answer is not to be found in engineering.

I think this is the most Harrison-like piece of work that I have seen Miéville produce. In particular the lead character is most definitely a person who is afraid of what he knows, and becomes irrational because of it. That is a very Harrisonian theme.

I should also say that, as printed, this is not one of Miéville's best pieces. Thanks to some rushed production schedules, Miéville's final version of the story did not make it into the magazine. The version that was printed is a bit flabby. Miéville has kindly send me his final version, which is about 800 words shorter and much tighter. I hope it sees publication somewhere. However, wrong version or not, the publication of

this story represents another huge crack in the curtain wall of the British literary establishment. Battleship Miéville strikes again.

<SPOILER WARNING>

By the way, the story is based on an actual event from the first Gulf War in which the American forces dealt with the enemy by the simple expedient of attaching ploughs to their tanks, rolling up the trenches, and burying the enemy alive. You can read more about the story here http://www.rcreader.com/display_article.php3?index=1&artid=1170. As per the interview above, Miéville's other life is as an expert in international law. He has seen academic papers debating whether or not this classes as "cruel and unusual punishment". Who needs horror stories when you have real life?

</SPOILER WARNING>

– *We are full but hungry*

– *We eat only sand*

Foundation - China Miéville – The Independent on Sunday - softcover

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Miscellany

Hugo Corrections

Visitors to the web site will have noticed that there was a fairly significant error in the Hugo nominations list. The story, "A Gift of Verse," by John Flynn was discovered to have been first published two years ago in a primarily non-fiction work that received several Hugo nominations in that year. The publication eligibility rules being very clear, the Hugo Administrators were forced to remove Flynn's story and replace it with the next most popular nominee, "Lambing Season" by Molly Gloss (*Asimov's* 7/02). Thankfully John Flynn has been very gracious and reasonable about the whole affair. There were a couple of minor typos in last issue's list as well. The list of nominees on the web site is accurate as far as I am aware, and there is now a link to a PDF of the ballot, so you can get on and vote.

By the way, if you are planning on voting, don't forget to use your preferences. *Emerald City* is likely to be eliminated from the ballot early, and therefore what you put as your minor preferences will have a major impact on the result. Personally I'd like to think that you are all putting *Plokta* second.

Bike out of Africa

OK, maybe you have to be a little odd to read *Emerald City*, but sometimes my readers do totally off-the-wall things. In this particular case I am talking about my tax accountant and long-time friend, Geoff Challinger, who has decided to cycle from North Africa to his home in Nottingham to raise money for Oxfam. That is a 900-mile trip, which Geoff is planning to cover at over 60 miles a day. Now that's what I call dedication. The ride is due to start on June 20th, so there is plenty of time for you all to pledge support. Geoff's web site is http://www.bikeoutofafrica.co.uk/, or you can just go to his section of the Just Giving web site (http://www.justgiving.com/pages/?id=GGG/1514) where you can donate money by credit card. Note that the 28% extra Geoff mentions applies only to UK tax payers.

What the Martians saw

Ever wondered what Earth looks like when viewed from Mars? Now, thanks to NASA's Mars Global Surveyor mission, you can find out. National Geographic have pictures up on their web site: http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2003/05/0522_030522_earthmars.html.

Footnote

Wow, that went on a bit, didn't it? As far as I know there are no conventions I am due to attend in June, so the next issue should be a little smaller. But hopefully that won't mean a let-up in quality. We will, for example, have new books from Ian R. MacLeod, Robert Reed, L.E. Modesitt, Storm Constantine, Linda Nagata, Gregory Frost and Martha Wells. The featured mainstream novel will be this year's Booker Prize winner, *The Life of Pi* by Yann Martel.

See you next month,

Ciao,

Love 'n' hugs,

Cheryl