EMERALD CITY #99

Issue 99 November 2003

An occasional 'zine produced by Cheryl Morgan and available from her at cheryl@emcit.com or online at http://www.emcit.com

Introduction

Well, this might not be the (as yet mythical) celebratory issue #100, but it has some darn good stuff in it. To start with there are reviews of three novels all of which I expected to be Hugo contenders when I saw them announced. There are also three convention reports. Yes, I have been busy.

Talking of the Hugos reminds me that I need to ask you to start sending me recommendations. Noreascon 4 tells me that they may have the nominations ballot online before the end of the year. That means people will be nominating very soon now, and they will be looking to sites like *Emerald City* to remind them about the good stuff. This is your chance to encourage people to nominate the works and people that you would like to see get Hugos. Start suggesting now, just send me email.

One result of this is that I have been forced into finalizing some of my own Hugo choices. Best Novel for this year has been really hard. I mean, just look at the names I have left off: Dan Simmons, William Gibson, Nalo Hopkinson, to name just three. Not have I found room for such fine books as *The Etched City* by KJ Bishop or *Veniss Underground* by Jeff Vandermeer. Al Reynolds and Jon Courtenay Grimwood, who made my list last year, haven't quite made it this time. Boy it was tough, especially as so many of the good books came in late in the year. But I'm not going to complain about there being too many good books. After all, I get to read them.

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UK Convention Tour

November is a busy time for conventions in the UK. It is not unusual in the US to find a convention somewhere almost every weekend. But to have three conventions on consecutive weekends in the UK is quite astonishing (actually there were four, but they didn't manage to avoid a clash). I suspect that November is a dead period for the UK hotel trade. No one wants to go on holiday because the weather is so bad, and it is too early for the Christmas Party season, so rates are cheap. But whatever the reason, there were cons, so I went to them.

Novacon

First up on the tour was Novacon. This is a well-established, long-running convention now into its 33rd incarnation. It is ostensibly organized by The Birmingham Science Fiction Group, which is the closest thing that the UK has to an American or Australian-style SF club. In practice, however, the con crew gets drawn from the usual suspects. This year hotel and registration were handled by Steve and Alice Lawson, who live in Sheffield. From a US perspective this is rather like having people from Sacramento running a con in San Francisco.

Not that the convention is actually in Birmingham any more either. The current venue is in Walsall. Of course for those of who are not from the area this makes no difference. If a convention is in Birmingham, Walsall, West Bromwich or Wolverhampton it is all Birmingham to us. It is a large conurbation with multiple town centers and a commuter rail system running through it. England's MegaCity Two. The Mordor that we made from Tolkien's beloved green and pleasant land.

The con hotel is a Quality Inn, which I guess is supposed to imply that it is of a rather higher quality than the average Motel 6. This one did actually have the look of a proper hotel. There was a health club, for example. But to a large extent it still had the attitude of a motel. It being quarterfinals weekend at the World Cup, I was anxious to catch some rugby while I was there. The hotel advertised showings of all the games in the bar. So I dragged myself out of bed at 7:00am on Saturday morning to watch New Zealand play South Africa. There was nothing on the TV. I asked the hotel staff. "Oh, it is probably on another channel that we can't get", they said. "So why did you advertise the game?" "Well we thought people might want to know when it was on." <sigh> All I can say is that you get the same desperately inept attitude in London hotels that cost twice as much to stay in. At least this place was cheap and comfortable.

Novacon is a very British convention. This is the first time I have attended one, and at last I understand what British fans mean when they say that Worldcon is an Evil American Convention, quite unlike a proper British con. Of course by that reasoning Eastercon is not a proper British con either. Eastercon at least makes an effort at being an event. Novacon is uncompromisingly relaxed.

It is a meeting of friends, and probably quite scary for newcomers.

Take this for an example. When newbies ask for advice about cons on message boards or mailing lists the standard American advice is that they should not forget to eat, sleep and shower. ConJosé members will doubtless remember the none-too-subtle reminders about personal hygiene in the opening ceremonies. Now compare this from Novacon's Progress Report Three: "The dilettante or part-time fan might have some idea about going to their room to shower and change after an arduous journey on British Rail or across the motorway system, but the true fan finds nothing offensive in natural human musk." One only has to recall that British Rail as an entity hasn't existed for over a decade to realize just how far in the past Novacon lives.

So what about the program? Check this. Novacon lasts for around 2.3 days. It has a single stream of programming, and this year there were a grand total of 19 program items. Scarily I was told that the con had made a special effort with the program this year. But this isn't really the point. You don't go to Novacon for the program. You go there to sit in the bar, drink real ale and talk to your friends.

Actually what program there was seemed quite good. The Jon Courtenay Grimwood Guest of Honor interview was fascinating. Of course it helped a lot that the interviewer was Farah Mendlesohn who knows rather more about Grimwood's work than most people. Jon is rumored to have said, "I'm worried she'll ask me a question I don't even understand," but Farah is perfectly capable of avoiding academic jargon where necessary.

The program could have been even better but for some bizarre scheduling choices. I would have liked to go to the Novas ceremony, the con banquet (North African food in honor of JCG's *Arabesk* books) and the beer tasting. But all of these were scheduled for late on Sunday, well after most people had needed to head for home. Surely Saturday evening would have been more logical.

But the real joy of Novacon is the dealer's room. I can recall at least five separate book dealers, some of them with new stock, some with second hand. There were a number of interesting new books available, none of them novels. Rog Peyton had copies of *He Do The Time Police in Different Voices*, a collection of essays by Dave Langford (to be reviewed next issue). And the SF Foundation stall was carrying two new books, *The True Knowledge of Ken MacLeod* (reviewed last issue) and the *Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction* (edited by Farah Mendlesohn and Edward James, and also to be reviewed next issue). The Langford and Cambridge books both sold out, and the MacLeod sold all but 3 of a stock of 33 copies. What this means is that over 10% of the convention membership purchased three books of SF criticism each over the weekend. That's the sort of purchasing pattern you would expect to see at ICFA, not a fannish relaxacon. OK, so maybe some of the Novacon members might not bother to wash, but they certainly don't forget to read. I was impressed. Farah, having co-edited two of the books in question, was bouncing up and down with delight.

Another good thing about relaxacons is that you get a lot of good conversation, much of it quite bizarre. Quite how Ian Sorensen's breakfast conversation moved onto conversing with fans from Georgia (the former Soviet one, not the US State) in Latin because it was the only language they had in common I am

not sure, but at least it got him off prostate cancer. Harry Harrison regaled a group of us with the tale of how Auberon Waugh came to write an introduction to *A Transatlantic Tunnel, Hurrah!* Apparently being published in December can be really useful.

The Nova results are in the Miscellany section. *Emerald City* is still barred from the contest due to only being available electronically, but I won't lose any sleep over that. I'd rather come third in the Hugos than win a Nova any day. However, this year's top fanzine, *Zoo Nation* from Pete Young, is very good indeed. Go check out Miscellany where there is more information.

Wardrobe

No, this is not a Narnia convention. Wardrobe is the current name for the UK Costume Convention. Last year it was called Closet. It used to be called Masque. Why British fandom has this passion for changing the convention name every year is beyond me, it must be a marketing nightmare. But so it goes. At least next year they are keeping the name the same. And here I was: another weekend, another convention, it must be Birmingham.

Actually it was Walsall again. Believe it or not, there are two Quality Hotels in Walsall, so I was able to say, "it is in the other hotel." To be precise, it was in the slightly less quality of the two Quality Hotels. This one was a real throw-back: old fashioned keys for the rooms, a heating system that kept all of the rooms at a minimum of 80 F plus even with the window open and a gale blowing outside, no health club, no idea that something called the Internet actually existed. They didn't even have a Coke machine. On they other hand, they were reasonably accommodating, and at under 30 people Wardrobe was not exactly in a position to negotiate hard. This is another convention that desperately needs to grow in order to have more negotiating muscle.

So what went on? There was program, of course. In fact there was more program than there was at Novacon. Panels covered a wide range of subjects from a fun quiz to talking about the upcoming Worldcon to workshops on beading and make-up. Costuming is very much a skill-based activity, and it is great to see how willing everyone is to pass on tips and advice.

And of course there were masquerades. Two, to be precise: an SF&F event on Saturday night and an Historical one on Sunday morning. This isn't an ideal schedule. I think it would better if they could do two evening events, but of course that means a longer con and they probably can't do that without more members. Another size issue is that they went with just two judges in order to have more people free to enter, which ran into the usual problem of never finishing the workmanship judging in time for the advertised starting time. In fact in general the timekeeping was a little lax, but with so few people it really didn't matter.

If the organization was a little frayed at the edges, the same cannot be said of the costumes. I was expecting really good stuff from the likes of Teddy, Tom Nanson and Miki Dennis, but I was completely blown away by Paul Curtis and Sadie Logan. These folks must be new on the scene since I went to Masque 6, and I'm longing to see what they produce for Worldcon in Glasgow (um, always assuming they are not too busy with their dealer's table — see http://www.hightowercrafts.com for details). I was also very impressed with some of the novices.

One of the interesting things about costuming is that it attracts people from all areas. Ruth and Jenny Wilcoxon (mother and daughter) came to us from Hornblower fandom. They are part of a group that has just started running Hornblower conventions and they had some very nice and exceedingly well-researched costumes. They did great presentations too — Jenny told me that they are into amateur dramatics. Their con has no web site at the moment but it is in production and I'll let you know when it goes online.

Anyway, there are loads of photos on the *Emerald City* web site, and if you have any interest in costumes (especially if you are an American costumer planning to enter the Glasgow masquerade and wanting to size up the competition) go take a look. All of the competition results are given on the photo pages (they don't mean a lot without pictures).

[By the way, the big photos from my new camera have been chewing up my web space allocation at a ridiculous rate, so I've had to resort to using a lower resolution. If anyone wants high res pictures of themselves, let me know and I can email them.]

The only thing wrong with this convention right now is lack of people. Not that folk didn't come from far away. Me, for example, though I didn't come all the way from California just for the con. But we had one girl come from Germany (hi Stella!). And Flis Brown is from New Zealand, but she's living in the UK now so that's a bit of a cheat. So where are all the Brits? Where are all the people who enter the Eastercon masquerade? I was told that people like the Star Trek and Discworld fans would only go to cons that focus on their specialty. Even the Far Isles, a big medieval re-enactment group that has a fair crossover in membership with Wardrobe, didn't provide as many members as I expected. Come on guys, those of us who did go to Wardrobe had a great time, and there is an awful lot that different groups can teach each other. The UK could do really great costume conventions if only people were a little less insular. The 2004 event will be on November 20/21. For further details see the web site: http://www.britishcostumeconvention.org.uk.

FantasyCon 2003

Stafford is not Walsall. It is about 15 miles north of Wolverhampton and it has clear countryside in between so it is not quite Birmingham. Also the British Fantasy Society had managed to avoid booking me into my third Quality Hotel in three weekends. This time we had a Best Western and it made a difference. I had a room that was at a reasonable temperature and I could collect my email. The hotel staff did seem somewhat caught on the hop, especially over the amount that everyone drank, but otherwise they did a reasonable job.

Just like World Fantasy Con is very different from Worldcon, so FantasyCon is very different from Eastercon. Most of the attendees were either in the SF&F business or wanted to be. Consequently the programming concentrated on things like how to write and get published. There were two streams of programming specifically to enable young writers to talk one-on-one with an editor (Jo Fletcher of Gollancz) or an agent (Dot Lumley). I only attended one panel, but judging from the crowds in the main program room and the happy noises coming from panelists the weekend went very well.

The main event at the convention was the announcement of the British Fantasy Awards. Once again the full results are

in Miscellany. Here I must declare an interest. China Miéville is currently hard at work finishing off his new novel, *The Iron Council*. As no one from his publishers, Pan Macmillan, was able to attend the convention, China kindly asked me to stand in for him at the ceremony. Much to my delight, this led to my being called up to accept the prize for Best Novel, something I am never likely to be able to do in my own right. I'm used to seeing authors tongue-tied at award ceremonies and now I know how they feel. Words cannot express how grateful I am to China for letting me accept his prize on his behalf. Wow!

Of course I now have custody of a small statue of Cthulhu. It has strange eating habits. If *Emerald City* #100 fails to appear you will know why.

Other events at the convention included a 50th birthday party for well-known editor, Steve Jones (he tells me that it is his fourth party for this birthday) and a book launch from Telos Publishing. It so happened that the Sunday of the convention was also the 40th anniversary of the first ever episode of *Dr. Who*. Telos, as you may remember, have been publishing *Dr. Who* novellas by a range of well-known authors. The new one is by Paul McAuley who flew up for the day to join in (he was in a car but from his descriptions of aquaplaning up the motorway he might as well have been flying).

Once again FantasyCon is an event that could benefit from a higher attendance. I'm not quite sure why it doesn't get more people. It seems to be a better con to go to for writers, but very few big names were actually there. Jo, Dot and Steve Jones were the only industry representatives. I think what the convention needs is a US guest of honor: someone like Ellen Datlow, Terri Windling or Gordon van Gelder. But basically it is a chicken and egg problem. With more writers and industry folks the con will have more people to network with and it will be able to afford to be in a better hotel. Without them it will continue to look unattractive.

The best thing about FantasyCon, however, it the number of small press people there. I've been singing the praises of PS Publishing and Telos for some time, but there were several other small publishers there. Andrew Hook of Elastic Press has a very interesting anthology coming up that features stories by K.J. Bishop, Justina Robson and John Grant amongst others. I hope to feature that early in the New Year. Small presses, both in the UK and the US, are producing some of the most interesting material in SF&F at the moment and I'm delighted to have had the chance to meet these people.

Finally a quick word in praise of Christopher Fowler's guest of honor speech at the banquet, which was a rousing defense of horror fiction. As you will see elsewhere in this issue, I'm not a great fan of modern horror, but Fowler sounds like he knows what needs to be done to get the genre back on its feet. I must try to find the time to read some of his work.

Conclusions

Three small conventions, very different subjects, very similar problems. I suspect that no more than 5% of the attendees of each of these conventions even knew that the other two cons existed. And yet all three cons had connections with SF&F and all three groups are people who will have an interest in the upcoming Glasgow Worldcon. The most obvious lesson for me from this month has been that the UK desperately needs a SMOFcon at which the organizers of small conventions like this can get together and help each other, in

particular with respect to finding and negotiating with hotels. There is way too much living in isolation, and way too much re-invention of the wheel.

At the very least we could do with a UK equivalent of the SMOFs mailing list, on which UK conrunners could swap ideas. It would need to be carefully moderated to begin with to make sure that it actually does the job rather than hounding newbies away like the main SMOFs list does. But other than that all it needs is someone with a mailing list server. Possibly the Glasgow Worldcon could set one up. After all, a list full of people who run small UK cons would be a good place to recruit staff, and working on a Worldcon is a good way to learn the conrunning art. Yes?

HerStory

One of these days *The Salt Roads* will be talked about by mainstream critics as the book with which Nalo Hopkinson abandoned the limitations of genre and became an internationally acclaimed literary writer. Those of us who enjoy life in our cozy little ghetto, and in all probability Nalo herself, will see it differently. But there is no doubt that this is a book with which Hopkinson can make the big time.

There has never been any doubt about Hopkinson's skill as a writer. Right from her first novel, *Brown Girl in the Ring*, she has been touted for awards. Her second novel, *Midnight Robber*, was a Hugo nominee. *The Salt Roads* may well see her challenging for even more prestigious prizes, and we should not begrudge her that.

Yet there has been surprisingly little change in the substance of her fiction. All three novels have been about black women struggling to survive in an unfriendly world. All of them have contained elements of magic inspired by Hopkinson's Caribbean background. *The Salt Roads* is different in just two ways. Firstly it eschews much of the Creole speech that made the earlier books so colorful but must also have hurt sales. And second it is drawn on a wider canvass. *Brown Girl in the Ring* was centered firmly on contemporary Toronto. *Midnight Robber* looked wider to an imagined SF future in which Afro-Caribbeans have their own planet. But *The Salt Roads* looks at the whole sweep of black history.

The novel moves between three main characters in very different times. The first and perhaps most important is Mer, a midwife and healer living as a slave on a sugar cane plantation in Haiti shortly before the famous slave revolt on that island. Our second viewpoint is Jeanne Duval, a black actress from 19th Century Paris who became the mistress and muse of Charles Baudelaire. Finally we meet Thais, an Ethiopian slave in Ptolemaic Alexandria who may or may not have been the inspiration for the Black Madonna. They are tied together through myth, and because Mer is the central character that myth finds expression in what we now call Voodoo.

There will be many genre readers who will be disappointed with this book. It doesn't exactly have a plot, though it does tell the lives of the three women characters. Nor does it hang together in a logical fashion. There is no carefully expounded argument that is illustrated in a clear, linear fashion by the story we are told. If it hangs together at all it does so mythically, within the context of a shared history, a shared pain, and a shared wonder at the foolishness and cruelty of *les blancs*.

Don't let this put you off, however. *The Salt Roads* is a very powerful book. It is

also a fascinating introduction to three remarkable women. Much to my surprise, I am not going to put this book on my Hugo list for this year. It is a wonderful piece of writing, but it is certainly not a piece of science fiction and despite the mythic elements I'm having difficulty classifying it as fantasy. But I am very pleased to have read it, and I will be absolutely fascinated to see where Hopkinson's meteoric career takes her next.

The Salt Roads – Nalo Hopkinson – Warner - hardcover

Resolution Space

The new novel from Al Reynolds marks the culmination of what may come to be called the Inhibitors Trilogy. I'm not entirely sure that this was planned from the start, and of course the events of *Chasm City* have some bearing on the plot, but basically this series is the story of the lighthugger, *Nostalgia for Infinity*, than began in *Revelation Space*, continued in *Redemption Ark*, and concludes in *Absolution Gap*.

As the story begins, the *Nostalgia for Infinity* has fled the Inhibitors' destruction of the Resurgam system and has found a home for itself and the refugees on a planet whimsically named Ararat. Nevil Clavain is the only member of the crew who specifically wanted to come here, for Ararat is one of the Pattern Juggler worlds on which the mind of his dead wife, Galiana, may still exist within the aquatic Juggler matrix. When his daughter, Felka, gives herself up to the Jugglers, Clavain loses interest in the colony and to the surprise of many turns its leadership over to the hyperpig, Scorpio, a former crime lord from Chasm City.

Meanwhile Captain John Brannigan has been subsumed utterly by the Melding Plague. If he still lives then he has perhaps become one with the *Nostalgia for Infinity*, but the mighty lighthugger is now nothing more than a great gothic tower poking out of Ararat's oceans. The colony hopes that it is still in some sort of working order, because one day the Inhibitors are going to track them down.

Back at Resurgam, Remontoire and Ana Khouri carry on the hopeless fight against their remorseless machine enemy. But they have a powerful ally. From the depths of the artificial neutron star, the mind that used to be Dan Sylveste realizes that mankind needs help and sends them a gift. It is part baby girl, part supercomputer. The baby, called Aura, helps the beleaguered humans develop new weaponry even before she has left Khouri's womb. But the human forces are by no means united. The extremist Conjoiner faction led by Skade cares nothing for the survival of inferior forms of humanity and covets Remontoire and Khouri's new military asset.

Far away in space and time another lighthugger, the *Gnostic Ascension*, is seeking new worlds with which to trade. Its captain, who calls herself Queen Jasmina, is reckoned eccentric even by Ultra standards. Addicted to pain, she has her surgeon, Grelier, maintain a vast stock of clones so that she can keep in peak mental condition by continually torturing herself to death. She sees the value of pain elsewhere too, and this is no more obvious than to her human servant, Horris Quaiche, the man who is responsible for scouting new worlds.

The star system of 107 Piscium, which they are currently approaching, appears to be unexplored. Its planets have no names in their databases. Quaiche focuses in on a gas giant, which he names Haldora, because it has an ice

moon, Hela, that might just hold life. Much to his surprise, his survey reveals the existence of a huge and clearly manufactured bridge on the planet. But in investigating the anomaly Quaiche discovers something much more valuable. The planet Haldora does tricks. In fact it does something so miraculous that Quaiche ends up founding a new religion. God, it seems, has chosen to show himself through Haldora.

And it is on Hela, Haldora's now inhabited moon, that Aura believes mankind can find salvation from the Inhibitors.

I haven't been able to detect a specific sound track for the novel, but if there was one it would probably be *Karn Evil 9* by Emerson, Lake and Palmer, if only for the superb Geiger cover that perfectly reflects the baroque horror of the Ultras and their starships. The entire book feels as if it should be made into a cartoon strip for *Heavy Metal* (although at 600 pages of novel it would go on forever). The most striking image is that of the great cathedrals of Hela, each of them inching their way around the equator at a stately three metres per second, so that they can always keep Haldora overhead and thereby not miss seeing the next miracle. Many of them travel on caterpillar tracks or similar conventional forms of locomotion, but the largest of them, Quaiche's Lady Morwenna, walks on legs formed from its flying buttresses.

Not that Reynolds has abandoned the cutting edge science in favor of gothic symbolism. It is just that the war with the Inhibitors is driving technological development at such a pace that he is now inhabiting the bleeding edge of theoretical physics. Things like the new cryo-arithmetic engines that make use of loopholes in the laws of thermodynamics to create stealth starships, or the hypometric weapon that appears to cause entire regions of space-time to vanish, are so bizarre that Reynolds can only resort to Lovecraftian descriptions, for all that he probably got the ideas from academic journals. He has also adopted Brane Theory, an eccentric offshoot of String Theory that appears to suggest that not only do other universes exist, but that we can communicate with them using gravitational waves. I do hope that Reynolds produces a book on the background science from the series sometime soon.

The area in which I think Reynolds is weakest is characterization. *Chasm City* failed for me because it was so dependent on its portrait of the main protagonist, and Reynolds is still spending far too many words telling us what us what his characters are thinking rather than making them act consistently with those feelings. Yet he has still managed to produce one of the most interesting SF heroes I have seen.

Scorpio the hyperpig is a wonderful character. A brave and capable leader, he is tormented by the knowledge that his species was manufactured by humans to act as grunt labor and muscle. Pigs are ugly, ungainly, short lived and stupid. Urban legend has it that they don't even taste right. Scorpio knows that he is blunt, prone to violence and short on strategic thinking, but he has always cared deeply about his own people, and his association with Clavain has taught him to extend that caring to humans and to act with honor. Somehow this gets him through the Inhibitor wars when supposedly superior humans, and the superhuman Conjoiners, fail.

I don't expect Reynolds output to date will ever be regarded as great literature, but it is most certainly great space opera. His combination of wild ideas and cutting edge science puts him well ahead of the field. One of the great things about science fiction is that

having the whole of space and time to play with gives you a very big canvass. Nobody paints bigger than Al Reynolds, and yet somehow his stories remain deeply human (or porcine) as well. When it comes down to it, we might be fighting for the future of intelligent life in the galaxy, but on a personal level all that means is that a pig's gotta to what a pig's gotta do.

[Fade out to music from a Clint Eastwood spaghetti western.]

Absolution Gap – Al Reynolds – Gollancz - hardcover

Swords and Hazard

"Truly, monsieur, I don't like it any more than you do that we have to begin by murdering James Stuart. But if we don't, his son Charles will become king in less than twenty years, and then endless civil wars begin."

The year is 1610, and Valentin Raoul Rochefort, master spy to the Duc de Sully, has just been implicated in the assassination of King Henri IV of France. Marie de Medici, the King's scheming Florentine wife, has pulled off a stroke of genius. With her husband dead, she will be regent for the 9-year-old Louis XIII, and with his primary agent implicated in the murder, the late king's first minister is powerless to oppose her.

Not wishing to embarrass his master further by being tortured into a confession, Rochefort flees to London. There, much to his distress, he discovers that his recent actions are well known, at least in certain quarters. The mathematician and astrologer, Robert Fludd, knows everything that Rochefort has been up to recently. Indeed, he claims to have predicted it. Worse still, he claims that the death of Henri was merely a rehearsal for a much more important regicide. Rochefort is to murder James I of England (also James VI of Scotland) and thereby prevent the English Civil War, the French, American and Russian Revolutions, Hitler, Stalin and much worse to come. Fludd has seen it all in the stars. He has the mathematical proofs. There is nothing that Rochefort can do to avoid his fate.

Neal Stephenson and Mary Gentle have both set their latest novels in the 17th Century. Stephenson seeks the true science within the mumbo jumbo of Newton and Royal Society, and his novel is therefore science fiction. Gentle assumes that the astrological mathematics of Giordano Bruno and his pupil, Fludd, is workable science, and her novel is therefore fantasy. Discuss.

(Question from a finals paper in Speculative Literature from the Emerald City University)

The answer, of course, is that it is never that easy. For in seeking to avoid the apparently inevitable predictions of Fludd, Rochefort finds himself in pretty much the same position as someone attempting to fight the prognostications of psychohistory, of the intricate plans of the Bene Gesserit. It is a concept that has a long and honorable science fiction history.

But the main part of the action takes place firmly in an interesting part of the 17th Century, and Gentle is far too knowledgeable about history to let an opportunity like that pass. Certainly some of the action is invented, some characters too, but there is much there that is real as well. Henri's assassination, the machinations of the Medici, James I and Robert Cecil, even the diplomatic links between Japan and England. There

are a few notables who are missing. William Shakespeare retired to his country estates several years earlier, so Gentle is required to make do with Edward Alleyne of the Rose theatre for her troop of players. But she does also make significant use of Aemilia Lanier, the leading female poet of the time and a prime candidate for the role of the Dark Lady of Shakespeare's sonnets. The other major historical figure whom we might expect to meet, indeed someone who can hardly be omitted from a lace and steel romance, it yet young, but he does make brief appearance near the end of the book.

Beyond this there is much invention, beginning with the miraculous precision of Fludd's mathematics and carrying on through nefarious plotting and high adventure. Rochefort makes his way through the maze of deceit and treachery aided only by his experience as a spy, a traveling samurai and, because this is a Mary Gentle book, a woman with a sword. Like Stephenson, Gentle seems to have been reading Dorothy Dunnett and the deviousness of the plot is matched only by the hot tempers of the participants and their capacity for ruinous misunderstanding.

Which means that along the way it is also one of the best love stories I have read in a long time. Of course it is a love story for girls who see nothing wrong in dressing up in breeches and sticking annoying people with the points of their rapiers, but what did you expect?

I have read an awful lot of good books this year. Yet so far nothing has quite stood out for me they way *Light* did last year, or *Perdido Street Station* and *Ash* did in 2002. That is now changed. Jon Courtenay Grimwood says in his review of *1610* in *The Guardian* that it is a likely Clarke Award nominee. He's absolutely right. It will be on the BSFA shortlist as well. It won't make the Hugo nominees, because a UK publication in November simply doesn't have enough time for the book to be read by enough of the electorate. But I'll vote for it anyway. It is a natural for the Tiptree too, because Gentle spends a lot more time exploring the gender issues and sexuality of her characters than she did in *Ash*. This is my favorite book of the year so far, period. And with only one month to go I shall be very surprised (if utterly delighted) to find anything to touch it.

1610: A Sundial in a Grave – Mary Gentle – Gollancz - hardcover

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A Tale of Two Princesses

I got Kij Johnson's first novel, *The Fox Woman*, as a freebie at a Potlatch some years back, but never got round to reading it. This turns out to have been a mistake. The back cover blurb for the follow-up has this from Jane Yolen about the first book: "God, I wish I had written it!" Well there's blurb and there is blurb, but a comment like that from someone as good as Yolen deserves attention. So now *Fudoki*, which is set in the same world but isn't really a sequel. What have we got?

In the Imperial Palace an old woman is dying. Her name is Harueme and she has been daughter, half-sister, aunt, grandaunt and now great-grandaunt to emperors. She was a feisty and independent little girl, but from the moment she was summoned to the palace her life became constrained into a never ceasing round of poetry, flirting and gossip. Now her life is almost run. She is busy sorting out her belongings prior to leaving for a nunnery so that her death will not defile the palace grounds. Finding some unused notebooks, she

begins to write a story. But this is not some silly, romantic *monogatari* tale. It is as story about a cat. And it is a story about the life that Harueme never had.

The heroine of Harueme's story was orphaned by earthquake and fire when still a kitten. Feral cats in cities tend to form clans that center on a particular territory. Johnson borrows the Japanese word *fudoki*, which originally referred to a set of documents about a province, to indicate how cats might describe this combination of home and family. Our little heroine has lost her *fudoki*, and as much in panic as anything else sets forth on the great Tōkaidō road. There she meets and offends a kami spirit who, in revenge, transforms her into a human woman.

She'd never eaten plant matter before, except the half-digested chyme from preys' bellies, and grass when she needed to vomit. Nothing prepared her for this odd little burst of tart sweetness, so different from the texture of and warmth of animals' blood. But she was not entirely changed: she saw a cricket on the ledge, logy from the cold, and she ate that as well.

Just in case you were wondering, no, this is not a cute cat story. Our heroine is still very much a cat in nature. She is a killing animal. Along her journey she falls in with a noblewoman, Osa Hitachi no Nakara, whom I suspect was also in *The Fox Woman* but you don't need to know that in order to enjoy *Fudoki*. Nakara names her new friend Kagaya-hime, meaning "Princess Glory", for her aloof and elegant manner. But it is Kagaya's martial skills that impress Nakara most, and soon the cat woman is recruited into the Hitachi war band to take part in a raid on an enemy clan.

The horsemen of Takase's war band did not much like their part in this [some cunning but possibly ignoble battle tactics]; but the point of war is not to behave nobly or even well, or in such a way as to make it into war tales of a future day. It is to win. You will seem noble enough once the chroniclers are done with you — but only providing you win.

No, this is not a cute cat story. This is, at least in part, a story of samurai at war, written by someone who preferred the intellectual stimulus of Sun Tzu to the frivolity of love poems. And that is Harueme's choice, because in her last days of life she finds her thoughts ever more drawn to things she could not have. In particular she pines for Mononobe no Dōmei, the handsome guardsman who was once her lover but was far too lowly to have ever been her husband and whose life she could not have shared. Princesses do not have the freedom to marry as they choose. They have everything, and yet they have nothing. Which is why Harueme writes about Kagaya and her great journey north on the Tōkaidō.

I have traveled as much as was allowed. I have gone as far as Funaoka hill, and been on pilgrimage as far away as Ise, Hase, Yoshino mountain, two days travel and more from the capital. I even saw the moon rise over the ocean once. But every night the tortoiseshell woman sleeps under a new sky and a new moon. She has lost everything, and I envy her from the bottom of my heart.

So yes, this is a charming if sometimes bloodthirsty tale of a cat become woman warrior. But it is much more a tale told by an intelligent, passionate and inquisitive woman who has been kept like a houseplant for most of her 70-odd years. It is at times slow, and it is elegant

and minutely observed. It is, after all, a tale supposedly written by a Japanese princess. And it is beautiful and heart-warming and tear jerking and I loved it.

Fudoki – Kij Johnson – Tor – hardcover

Media War

I was somewhat ambivalent about Karin Lowachee's first novel, *Warchild*. It had some great stuff in it, but rather too much boot camp story for my liking and a possible stench of homophobia. Nevertheless I still felt that Lowachee was the best of the bunch in this year's Campbell. And I'm pleased to say that the sequel, *Burndive*, is a significant improvement.

The first thing that Lowachee gets right is not to start where the previous book left off. So for much of the book there is no Jos Musey, no striviirc-na and very little of the war. Instead what we get is Ryan Azarcon, and Ryan is an archetypal Hollywood brat. He's rich, he's sulky, he takes expensive drugs, and he's just been voted Austro station's Hot #1 Bachelor. His is one of the most self-absorbed, self-pitying heroes I have seen. Thomas Covenant apart, that is.

Then again, you can understand where the kid is coming from. Take Grandma, for example. She's from a Chinese family so old and aristocratic that they treat breeding themselves with more care than they would a prize Arabian stallion. She has never forgiven her daughter for marrying beneath herself, and takes every opportunity to rub it in. And Mom is no better. A rebellious youngster, she's now a rich and successful PR flak who seems to never say anything without scripting and rehearsing it first, which means she is completely incapable of honesty or sustaining a normal relationship. Life to her is simply a long succession of manipulations. And as for Dad, well you may remember that Captain Cairo Azarcon is the military hero whom Jos and the striviirc-na finally manage to bring to the negotiating table. The Captain is blunt to a fault, treats everyone the way he treats his crew, and is home for about a fortnight every seven years. Paternal Grandpa Ashrafi is an admiral and a senior member of Earth government. Ryan's only real friend was his bodyguard, Marine Corporal Sidney, and Mom had to go and seduce the guy and mess that up too. No wonder the kid is screwed up.

The real problem with Ryan, however, is that he is a target. Other rich lads have bodyguards to protect them from enthusiastic girls. Ryan has a bodyguard because anti-war activists want to kill him in revenge for his father's supposed war crimes. The media follows him everywhere, wanting to know about the supposed peace negotiations. After a professional assassin narrowly misses killing him, Ryan is secretly whisked aboard the *Macedon* where his father thinks he might actually be safe. Ryan, who has heard nothing about the war except what is broadcast on Earthhub media, "the Send", is not convinced that being on a warship that is the base for negotiations with aliens and their human allies is exactly a holiday camp.

At this point you realize just how relevant Lowachee's book is. For Austro station read America, for aliens read Muslims, and for the Send read Fox News. The people on Austro station are not bad people. They are rich and safe and comfortable, and they are somewhat fearful of aliens. They are also fed a constant diet of pro-war propaganda, and ambitious politicians fan their fears in hope of getting elected on a pro-war ticket. Only by going to the front and

meeting the aliens in person, not to mention getting to know his father for the first time, can Ryan finally start to understand what is going on in his world and begin to grow up.

For the most part it is very well done. I wasn't too impressed with how Ryan's initial racism was handled — I'm not sure that Lowachee managed to successfully get her head into a racist mindset. But I can't really blame her for that, who would want to? And for the most part the book is thought provoking and entertaining in equal measure. It thrums along at a cracking pace. You won't find much in the way of fabulously elegant prose, but Lowachee is a perfectly competent writer who is clearly getting better at her craft. I'm even getting more comfortable about the possible homophobia, although I won't be truly happy until I see an openly gay couple treated as normal people in one of Lowachee's books. Anyway, here's looking forward to the next one. If it shows an equal degree of improvement it will be stunning.

Burndive – Karin Lowachee – Warner Aspect – softcover

Back with the Pack

I have had Wen Spencer's follow-up to *Alien Taste* sitting around on my bookshelf for ages. The first book had a lot of promise, and now that Spencer has won the Campbell it really is time to see how her talent is developing. Book #2 in the Ukiah Oregon story is called *Tainted Trail*, and it fills in some of the background on Ukiah's mysterious life.

As you may recall, the series is basically a *X-Files* plot with body-snatcher aliens taking over people and giving them super-human powers and plotting to take over the world. Ranged against them are renegade human/alien hybrids who have similar powers but think that mankind should be left to live in peace. Our hero, though he didn't find it out until near the end of Book #1, is part of the latter group.

Perhaps the most important thing about the books is that it is hard not to love a 200-year-old alien/Native American kid who has spent most of his life as a teenager running with wolves, was rescued and domesticated by lesbians, and whose blood congeals and turns into mice when it leaves his body. As a trainee private eye he reminds you of Holmes, though he works more by smell than deduction: that man has been running hard recently and about two hours ago rested up against a type of pine tree that only grows in one area of the mountains — that sort of thing. As a human being he is lost and vulnerable, desperately worried about his relationship with the FBI agent, Indigo Zheng, and about his ability to fit in with human society. It is Ukiah's character that carries the books. And occasionally they need carrying.

One thing that Spencer hasn't got the hang of yet is how to include the background without making it sound like infodump. The book is full of this sort of thing, and given that it is an *X-Files* plot it sounds even more silly when stated baldly in flashback than it does when you find it out for the first time. I suspect that Spencer would have been better advised to have just assumed that everyone had read *Alien Taste* and not bothered to explain anything.

Once you get past this, the story chugs along at a fine pace. The niece of a friend has gone missing on a student geology field trip in country Oregon. Ukiah and his partner, Max, head off to investigate. The area in question is also close to where Ukiah was first found and

domesticated, and he hopes to find some clues to his lost childhood while he was there. It soon becomes clear that the missing girl, Alicia, had hit upon some clues to Ukiah's background while she was there, and this is almost certainly why she was kidnapped. But if she has been taken by the aliens for that reason, they will almost certainly try to turn her into one of them, and that is rather more serious than being dead.

So, a nice little adventure story with some good emotional impact and great deal of sympathy for the Native American community. If only the background wasn't quite so silly, and there was less infodump, this could have been a really great book. Still, Spencer is still learning and still shows plenty of promise, so I'm going to stick with her. There is a third Ukiah story, which I suspect may resolve much of the main plot, but there is also a new book out soon that I think is outside the series. I will be interested to see where that goes.

Tainted Trail – Wen Spencer – RoC - softcover

Psychic Mystery

Jay Caselberg has been a regular feature of the British SF writers circle for some time now, but he has only just produced his first novel. *Wyrmhole* is a fast-paced SF crime thriller with an unusual twist to it. The hero, Jack Stein, is no ordinary investigator, he is a psychic.

When I first encountered the book I thought is was an interesting innovation, but the more I read the more cunning the whole idea became. You see if your hero works on the basis of hunches, and has Teela Brown-style luck, it is much easier to write detective fiction. You can dispense with all of the careful analysis of clues and have your hero dream the answer instead.

At this point you start to question the basis of the book. After all, the point of crime fiction is to give the reader a reasonable chance of solving the crime. If the hero works by psychic hunches the reader doesn't get left any clues. So perhaps it would be more accurate to label the book as a far future thriller. It has a lone wolf hero, it has an evil corporation, and it has evil rich people, so I guess it fits the bill.

Unfortunately it also has flaws. I didn't understand, for example, why when Stein is beaten up and left for dead by street punks they do not steal his palmtop. Nor did I understand why, when he is arrested by the police and they confiscate said palmtop, they don't bother hacking into it and downloading the contents. In short, I suspect that the lack of need to be rigorous about clues has led Caselberg to be less than watertight about the plot as well.

That is a shame, because he does have some nice ideas. The concept of a city that continuously renews itself, with the rich forever moving into newer homes at the front end while the poor occupy the decaying buildings that they leave, is perhaps not unique but is very nicely done. Also the way in which Caselberg ties the entire mystery in with alchemical and Cabalistic symbolism is particularly impressive.

It was interesting reviewing this book alongside the Wen Spencer novel. Both are from RoC, and they share certain features. Both books are by new writers, are fast-paced and have some interesting ideas, but both are perhaps a little lacking polish. I'm delighted to see RoC taking new people on in this way when other publishers might hold out for the next Hopkinson or Miéville. But I also hope that RoC will encourage its young

stable to stretch themselves and produce works that are more controlled, intricate and ambitious. I'm sure that both Spencer and Caselberg can and will get better, and I look forward to watching them do it.

Wyrmhole – Jay Caselberg – RoC - softcover

Lost Genre

Peter Straub, as some of you may remember, was the editor of the highly rated *Conjunctions* #39 anthology. He's a horror writer, so I'd not read any of his work before, but I liked his contribution to the anthology and when I met him at ICFA I found him to be a very charming man. So when I got a chance to look at a proof of his new novel, *Lost Boy, Lost Girl*, I decided that it was time that *Emerald City* took a look at the horror genre.

The first thing that was obvious to me on starting the book is that Peter Straub can write. His prose is elegant and his characters are lively. Here is somebody who really knows what he is doing with words. But I didn't have to go much further into the book to discover that I was in the middle of a very traditional, very predictable horror novel plot. If I wanted to make a case for proving how limiting genre fiction can be, I would use this book as an example. And given that Straub is pretty much at the top of his profession (he has collaborated with Stephen King) this does not bode well for horror fiction as a whole.

The basic story is very simple indeed. In a small, mid-western town, a serial killer is picking off teenage boys. Our hero's sister-in-law commits suicide, and shortly afterwards her son goes missing, presumably another victim of the killer. As you can see, this is part detective novel and part horror. The detective part of it is pretty flat, and gets solved almost as an aside. It is simply an excuse for Straub to give structure to the story. The real meat of the book is all about a creepy guy who likes killing people and a creepy house in which he does his bad deeds and which might be haunted as a result. It is about as frightening as a carnival ghost train.

All of which is a real shame because the setting for the story is much more interesting than the plot. Straub does a lovely job of painting small town prejudice and the inability of the old to communicate with the young. It is entirely predictable that the people of Millhaven think that the young men who have gone missing have got mixed up with drug dealing: they ride skateboards and listen to Eminem don't they? Straub's baddie is quite creepy when we finally get to meet him, but by far the most horrific character in the book is Philip Underhill, the father of the missing boy.

Philip is the vice principal at a local high school. He's utterly obsessed with social class (quite a revelation for those of you who didn't think America had such things), is an unashamed racist, views women as some sort of strange aliens that you can't communicate with let alone understand, and has a very similar view of teenage boys. Straub brilliantly describes Philip as someone who reads the local paper every morning in search of new things to be outraged about. Yet although his wife's suicide and his son's murder scar Philip deeply, and prove to have explanations far from his imaginings, they utterly fail to change his view of the world.

The true horror of the book is that a bunch of small-minded bigots are so set in their ways that even being preyed on by a vicious serial killer can't shake them out of their rigid complacency. Indeed,

the very terror of it just causes them to sink deeper into the myths through which they view the world. It seems entirely likely that it is the very closed and narrow-minded nature of Millhaven society that allows serial killers to exist there. Men like Philip Underhill would rather have unsavory young men quietly disappearing ("run away from home") occasionally than admit that anything untoward could actually happen in his town.

I'm going to give Straub the benefit of the doubt and assume that this is what he actually wanted his reader's to take away from the book. All the stuff about ghosts and creepy houses is hopefully just there to keep his genre readers happy. But it is kind of sad that he had to do that, especially when so many SF and fantasy writers are producing exciting and innovative work that warps their genre tropes. I'm sure that Peter Straub can produce much better books that this if he can just free himself of the need to do something predictable.

By the way, Straub is by no means a young man, but he is passionate about music. It is a pleasure to find a contemporary novel about teenagers by someone who actually knows who bands like the *White Stripes* and the *Yeah, Yeah, Yeahs* are. These days I'd be terrified of doing that sort of thing because I'm so far out of the scene. Straub has probably got their albums. Good for him.

Lost Boy, Lost Girl – Peter Straub – Random House – publisher's proof

Paws for Thought

The 2000 convention of the Modern Language Association, held in Washington DC, included a panel of papers providing in-depth examination of one of the world's most loved canons of literature, the Pooh Bear stories. The academic treatments were varied and imaginative, and provided a whole raft of new views of everyone's favorite bear. They have now been collected for publication under the title of *Postmodern Pooh*, edited by Frederick Crews.

The immediate issue here is whether the Pooh animals realize that they constitute a de-facto nudist colony. If not this can only mean that Milne himself must have banished that awareness from his unconscious.

Well, yes, some of the academics do seem a little sex-obsessed. But who knows what subliminal messages might be lurking beneath the seemingly harmless children's tales? Text, after all, can be understood in a multitude of different ways. Carla Gulag provides an insightful Marxist analysis of social life within the Hundred Acre Wood and its influence on the infant Christopher Robin. Sisera Catheter discusses the problem of raising Kanga's consciousness above the feeble motherliness into which it has been entrapped by the oppressive patriarchy, and discovers a hidden analogy of castration fear in the story of Eeyore's missing tail.

By caking himself in dirt, Piglet is reasserting his class identity and thus preserving himself from social castration by the whitening, starching, homogenizing influence of that sylvan soccer mom, Kanga.

Elsewhere, Orpheus Bruno sees echoes of Shakespeare in the Falstaffian attitudes of the portly bear, and shows how Piglet's passion for dandelions parallels Wordsworth's love of daffodils.

Professor Bruno also expounds the fascinating theory that a work of such intricacy and complexity as *Pooh* could not have been written by a hack like Milne but was in fact secretly authored by Virginia Woolf.

Das Nuffa Dat discovered echoes of colonialist, imperialist exploitation in Pooh's attempts to steal honey from the unsuspecting bees. And Renee Francis uncovers a whole syllabus of hidden physics lessons within the text.

Some of you probably think that there's no relation between, say, halodiploidy and Hipy Papy Bthuthudy, you couldn't be more wrong.

Perhaps the most harrowing presentation at the conference was that by Dolores Malatesta, an expert on child abuse and recovered memories. Drawing on her own recently remembered experience of cruel and unbearable treatment by her own parents, whom she has since disowned and reported to the authorities, Ms. Malatesta finds incontrovertible evidence of abuse in the nervous and socially maladjusted Piglet. The Heffalump, after all, has a long and hairy snout, and we all know what <u>that</u> symbolizes. Nothing can be more damning than Piglet's inability to remember his Heffalump dreams with any clarity, a sure sign that unpleasant memories are being suppressed.

The Heffalump incubus is a sign of early molestation that has been repressed or dissociated in the deepest compartment of Piglet's fractured mind.

Nor did the organizers of the event neglect that most modern aspect of literary theory, the much-maligned Cultural Studies. BigGloria3, formerly known as Herbert L. Dribble, gave a fascinating presentation on the current status of textual criticism in online communities and encouraged the audience to expand upon Milne's staid and rather boring text by producing Pooh/Piglet and Roo/Tigger slash fiction.

Much to the distress of some of the attendees, the organizers invited a contribution from the well-known moral crusader, Dudley Cravat III. Mr. Cravat railed against the various sexual obsessions of the preceding speakers and poured scorn upon the pretensions of their theories. At one point he even said:

In all candor, they read like parodies of academic literary criticism at its worst.

Gosh, they do, don't they. Do you suppose Mr. Crews was aware of that when he collected the papers? And isn't it odd that all of the speakers have such weird names. You don't think that someone could be having a joke upon us, do you?

Then again, each one of the papers is carefully written, logically argued and crammed with references to well-known experts in the various critical disciplines being used for the analysis. Those people, and the books that are quoted from, are all real.

It may be, as the panel chairman, N. Mack Hobbs, has it, that everyone is simply talking out of their fundament in new and creative ways in order to further their notoriety and thereby their chances of lucrative tenure at some ambitious school. It may be that Mr. Crews has made all of this up and is perpetrating some vicious satire upon

his fellow academics. And then again the sheer plausibility of the various arguments expounded by the supposed authors may be all of the proof that we need that Postmodernism is right and that there can be no such thing as an authoritative reading of a text.

There are enough fairly obvious jokes in this book to make it perfectly accessible to any *Emerald City* reader. But I suspect that it will mean more to those of us who take an interest in literary criticism, and infinitely more to the genuine academics amongst my readership who will be familiar with the various schools of thought that are being spoofed. *Postmodern Pooh* should be suggested reading for anyone attending ICFA, and an absolute requirement for anyone attempting a literary analysis of Harry Potter. Beware, there may be a Heffalump trap ahead.

Postmodern Pooh – Frederick Crews – Profile Books - paperback

Village Life

We hear a lot about magic realism in the SF&F industry. Everyone is probably familiar with the allegation that magic realism is "fantasy written in a language other than English". And then there is the Terry Pratchett definition that magic realism is "fantasy written by someone who went to the same university as me." Is this fair, or is magic realism genuinely something different? I have read a fair number of Borges short stories, and they seemed just like fantasy to me. But until now I had not read a genuine magic realist novel. *One Hundreds Years of Solitude*, by Gabriel García Márquez, is supposedly one of the classics of the magic realist genre. It is a fascinating book, but as far as I can see it is most definitely not fantasy.

The book is centered on the Buendía family. The patriarch, José Arcadio Buendía, was one of the leaders of a group of people who headed off into the South American jungle sometime in the 19th Century and founded the village of Macondo. The book follows the fortunes of the family over the next 100 years or so as they and the village meet with triumphs, disasters and the 20th Century. Much of this is standard South American stuff. The villagers have a love-hate relationship with the Catholic Church and with their government. The most famous member of the Buendía family is the revolutionary, Colonel Aureliano Buendía, who started 32 wars and lost them all but nevertheless became a national hero. There are lots of scenes with firing squads in the book.

Yet this is not an ordinary history, and it is most definitely not the *Forsyte Saga*. The men of the Buendía family are generally taken with unreasoning passions. And I don't mean train spotting or science fiction fandom. Early in the history of the village it is visited many times by a group of gypsies lead by the mysterious Melquíades. They introduce the villagers to all sorts of magical devices, including flying carpets, and they give José Arcadio a taste for alchemy, which becomes a lifelong passion for him. The women of the family are given to excessive stubbornness and occasional saintliness brought on by the need to suffer their men folk's enthusiasms. One character, the stunning but clueless Remedios the Beauty, ascends bodily to heaven. No one finds anything unusual about this. The Buendía women worry about the sheets that Remedios was hanging out to dry when she ascended, and the rest of the village assumes that some lucky man finally managed to bed her and that the Buendías have shipped her off somewhere else to hide her shame.

This then, is the classic definition of magic realism. It is a style of writing in which all sorts of fantastical things happen, but they are accepted as a normal part of life by the characters in the story. It is very different from a fantasy story, in which magic may be accepted but it is still magical. What Márquez appears to have done is to write a book in which magic exists but is NOT magical.

Now there are certain problems here. After all, the book is translated from Spanish, and it bears the characteristic stiffness of prose that I associate with translated works. This is not necessarily the fault of the translator — someone as famous as Márquez can get the best possible translator available. But a translator is always caught between the Scylla of conveying the feel and lyricism of the prose, and the Charybdis of accurately translating what is written. It may well be that in the original Spanish the book would feel much more mythic in style than it does when read in English. Sadly the chances of my learning Spanish well enough to find the truth of this are not good, but I would be interested to hear from any Spanish-speaking readers who might care to offer an opinion.

One of the blurb comments on the back of the book stated that the book has a dreamlike quality, and so it does. This is not dreams as in Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* series, but dreams as in "weird stuff is happening and I know it is weird so I must be dreaming." This even extends to the apparently "normal" parts of the book — for example I never quite understood the economics of life in Macondo or how the Buendía family came to be so rich. All of which leaves the reader wondering quite what Márquez is getting at with the book. Certainly he makes some valid points about revolutions: no matter who wins the fighting, politics and money always win in the end. He also makes valid points about American economic imperialism during the episodes about the banana company. But as for the rest, and why it has all that magical stuff in it, well…?

Here is a possible explanation. What I think Márquez is doing is talking about what people believe. In a 19th Century village it is, I suspect, entirely plausible that many people will believe in the magical devices that the gypsies brought. In contrast when the village gets a movie theatre some of the inhabitants think that the pictures are real and don't understand how a detective who was killed last week can be alive again and living as a pirate this week. Hot air balloons were deemed clumsy and inelegant compared to the flying carpets of the gypsies, and no one believed in telephones at all.

During the war, some people believed one thing and some another, in much the same way as some people believe everything that they hear on Fox News and CNN while others believe that the news broadcasts are secretly scripted by the White House and shot in Hollywood. People believe all sorts of strange things, and the more isolated that they are (for example in a remote village like Macondo) the more likely it is that what they believe will be out of step with what the rest of the world believes. Yet there is no guarantee that the people of Macondo are not right. How do we know that it is them that are living a dream and not us?

Of course if I were right then I think I would class *One Hundred Years of Solitude* as a science fiction novel.

One Hundred Years of Solitude – Gabriel García Márquez – Penguin - softcover

Short Stuff

Literary Magic

Selling short fiction in book form is by no means an easy task. The standard tactic is the Big, Thick Anthology, which has the advantage of a) seeming like good value for money and b) giving enough variety to pretty much guarantee that the reader will like some of it. PS Publishing appears to be taking a different tack. They do smaller anthologies and collections, and even stand-alone novellas, but they are often limited editions. A classic example of this is their latest offering, *Bibliomancy*, a collection of four novellas by Elizabeth Hand. I got the cheap version, which set me back a cool £35 for just under 300 pages. The slipcase version is a lot more expensive. Is it really worth it to pay quite so much for a book? Read on and find out.

To begin with let's stick with the book. It is a nicely produced hardback with a rich, purple cover and a dustsheet illustrated with a magnificent piece of art, "The Stuff that Dreams are Made of", by John Anster Fitzgerald. My copy is 91 of 500 and it is signed by Hand. There is an introduction by Lucius Shepard, which is highly assuming as you might expect. So far, so good.

One of the novellas, "The Least Trumps" was also in *Conjunctions* #39 so I have already reviewed it once. I won't waste space doing so again except to remind people that it was one of my Hugo recommendations for last year. I'll also skip briefly over "Cleopatra Brimstone", not because I have nothing to say, but because saying anything could easily give away the plot. It is about butterfly collecting, sort of. All I'm saying is that Hand has caught the atmosphere of Camden Town perfectly — not bad for a visiting American.

This brings us on to "Pavane for a Prince of the Air". This is another 2002 publication and I'm now rather annoyed that I missed it because it is better than "The Least Trumps". It tells the tale of an old hippy couple whose lives are thrown into confusion when the husband is diagnosed with brain cancer. No amount of herbs, incense or praying to ancient gods seems to help. That sounds a little trite, but the story is beautifully told and pulls no punches. My own father died of brain cancer and I can testify from what my mother has told me of his last weeks that Hand has got it absolutely right. The story won the International Horror Guild Award and by far the most horrible thing in it is the fact of someone you love dying in a slow, painful but entirely natural way when there is nothing you can do about it except feed them morphine to relieve the pain.

Which leaves us with the final story, "Chip Crockett's Christmas Carol." This is going to sound scary to many of you, especially those of you who expect Disneyesque schmaltz from every American who mentions Christmas. Let me reassure you. Liz Hand does not do schmaltz. What she does do is a very modern version of Dickens that works superbly.

The trouble with *A Christmas Carol* is that these days characters like Ebeneezer Scrooge and Bob Crachit seem like caricatures. They would not have been such in Dickens' day. The Victorians had one view of Christmas horror — that of poor people dying of cold and hunger while the rich celebrate in luxury and ignore their Christian duty. We have a very different problem. Financial poverty of the type suffered by the Crachits is much rarer, but the emotional poverty of Scrooge is still very much with us. Worse still, Christmas has ceased to be a religious duty and become

a social one. Where once Christmas was a time when people genuinely celebrated the turn of the season, now it is something that we are required to celebrate for fear of seeming Scrooge-like.

Hand introduces us to Brendan Keegan, a Washington lawyer who is divorced from his rather more successful lawyer wife, Teri. Their young son, Peter, is autistic. Guilt over Peter's condition and the stress of looking after him have had a lot to do with the couple's separation. Both of them are full-time Scrooges on the workaholic and emotional poverty scales. Fortunately for Brendan he is currently providing a temporary home for an old school friend, the briefly famous but now utterly failed rock star, Tony Maroni. Tony is someone who still enjoys Christmas because it is fun, rather than because he knows he is supposed to. Indeed, Tony still knows how to have fun. His adult contemporaries regard him as hopelessly irresponsible.

The part of the ghosts is taken by Chip Crockett, a famous children's TV presenter from Brendan and Tony's youth. He dies just before Christmas, but there can be no celebratory retrospective because every tape of his programs has been lost or destroyed. Somewhere in the backs of their minds, Brendan and Tony remember being happy kids watching Crockett's zany programs, but only Tony accepts that he is allowed to acknowledge that remembrance.

In her story notes at the end of the book Hand says that writing this story broke her heart, more than once. If it doesn't break yours reading it I will be most surprised. It breaks mine just thinking about it. More than that I can't say, except that if Charles Dickens were alive today and had the chance to study the way that we live, I think he would have been honored and delighted to have inspired such a story.

So is this book worth £35? Actually I think it is worth that much just for "Chip Crockett's Christmas Carol", though of course I would rather see the book being cheaper and the story getting more distribution. The irony is that Hand had great difficulty selling the story to begin with. It was finally picked up by Ellen Datlow and serialized on Sci-Fiction, which means it was available for free. Unfortunately for you guys it is no longer in the archive. So go on, buy the book. Or at least ask Santa to put a copy in your stocking.

Bibliomancy – Elizabeth Hand – PS Publishing - hardcover

Who Gets Hard

Sadly Telos Publishing has lost the right to produce *Dr. Who* novellas, but they still have a contract to fulfill and consequently there are new books to appear. The latest of these, *The Eye of the Tyger* by Paul McAuley, has just been published. In previous issues I have reviewed *Time and Relative* by Kim Newman, who is perhaps best known as a horror writer, and *Nightdreamers* by Tom Arden, a fantasy writer. McAuley, in contrast, is very much a science fiction writer. He has worked as a university lecturer in Botany and has written books that are heavy on nanotech, artificial worlds and bacterial invasion. The science in *Dr. Who* has never been particularly rigorous. So what would someone with McAuley's background make of the time-traveling Doctor?

As it turns out the book works very well. The story begins in colonial India where the Doctor rescues a British policeman, Edward Fyne, from an alien that uses a nanotech virus to turn humans into weretigers. However, the Doctor is unable to cure Fyne completely and the pair set off in search of a far future hospital in the TARDIS. From here on in

McAuley produces a perfect rendition of a *Dr. Who* plot that just happens to give him the excuse to talk about black holes, generation ships and the end of the universe. Fyne behaves in the classically idiotic manner of a first-time companion, the Doctor is his usual off-hand and resourceful self, and the TARDIS is as unpredictable as ever. Even the inhabitants of the generation ship (who are, of course, having a war amongst themselves) behave in exactly the manner you would expect for supporting characters in a *Dr. Who* story.

We have seen many different approaches to the *Dr. Who* novella. Kim Newman chose to fill his story with social commentary on 60's Britain. Tom Arden produced a deliciously camp Shakespeare pastiche that could only have suited Jon Pertwee. McAuley has produced a classic action adventure story that is eminently filmable (even down to having much of the action in tunnels). He chose to use Paul McGann's Doctor, presumably because as the most recent incarnation he is also the most high tech, but I think the story could have fitted almost any period. Certainly when Fyne asks whether the TARDIS can be fixed and the Doctor replies, "Yes, yes, of course," you can imagine any Doctor saying that. McAuley has been so true to the show that fans may well find this novella their favorite from the series.

The book also has an introduction by Neil Gaiman and the collector's edition has a frontispiece by Jim Burns. What more could you ask for?

The Eye of the Tyger – Paul McAuley – Telos - hardcover

Seeing the Invisible

I recall finding Mark Chadbourn's first novel unreadable, which is unusual for me. But he has kept on producing books and when Pete Crowther told me that Chadbourn's novella is one of the best PS Publishing has produced I figured I should take notice. So I bought a copy, and lo and behold a few hours later it went and won the British Fantasy Award for short fiction, beating out China Miéville's *The Tain* in the process.

The book has an introduction by Neil Gaiman in which we discover, if we did not know already, that *The Fairy Feller's Master Stroke* is not only the title of the novella, but also the title of a very famous painting. It is in Tate Britain, if you want to go and see it, and you can find reproductions on the web (try http://www.artmagik.com). It is also the cover of the book, and it is so awesome and so fanatically detailed that Pete Crowther decided not to sully it by putting text on the cover as well. It was the right decision.

The picture shows a vast crowd of fairy folk relaxing amongst the grass and daisies while one of their number prepares to split a chestnut with an axe. It is, as I have said, fantastically detailed. You can look at it time and time again and notice new things, and wonder how you never noticed them before. It is a truly amazing piece of art, and it is the work of a madman.

Richard Dadd was a child prodigy and made his name as an artist in his early twenties. But on a tour of Europe and North Africa he lost his mind. On returning home he murdered his father. He spent the rest of his life in asylums, first Bedlam and then the newly opened Broadmoor. There he continued to paint, but now he painted things that no one else could see: The Invisible Country.

Chadbourn's novella tells the tale of a brilliant young man who becomes obsessed with the painting and sets out to find what it was that sent Dadd crazy.

It has shades of Umberto Eco's conspiracy theory novel, *Foucalt's Pendulum*, and of Dion Fortune's novels about lurking ancient gods. It is very good indeed, and a worthy winner of the BFS award. Mark Chadbourn, it seems, has arrived, and I will be taking a lot more interest in his output in future.

Which leaves me with this thought. In 2002 PS Publishing produced at least three absolutely standout novellas: *The Tain*, *A Year in the Linear City*, and *The Fairy Feller's Master Stroke*. This year they have produced *Bibliomancy*. What else have they been producing that I might have missed? I think I need to find out.

The Fairy Feller's Master Stroke – Mark Chadbourn – PS Publishing - softcover

Visions of Coffee

With the year coming to an end people are starting to talk about "best of" lists. In search of stories to nominate for the Hugos I have been reading some of these. It seems that there is enormous support for the best story on *Sci-Fiction* this year being "The Empire of Ice Cream" by Jeff Ford. This is a wonderful tale about synesthesia and coffee ice cream. I have no idea yet whether it is the best story on *Sci-Fiction*, but I have no hesitation in adding it to my Best Novelette list. Even better, as it is online, you can all read it for free and make up your own minds. http://www.scifi.com/scifiction/originals/originals_archive/ford4/.

Miscellany

World Fantasy Award Winners

And the names in the envelopes were:

Best Novel: tie, *The Facts of Life*, Graham Joyce (Gollancz); *Ombria in Shadow*, Patricia McKillip (Ace);

Best Novella: "The Library", Zoran Zivkovic, from *Leviathan #3* (Ministry of Whimsy Press);

Best Short Story: "Creation", Jeffrey Ford (*F&SF* 5/02);

Best Anthology: tie, *The Green Man, Tales from the Mythic Forest*, Ellen Datlow & Terri Windling (eds) (Viking), *Leviathan* #3, Jeff Vandermeer & Forrest Aguirre (eds), (Ministry of Whimsy Press);

Best Collection: *The Fantasy Writer's Assistant and Other Stories*, Jeffrey Ford (Golden Gryphon Press);

Best Artist: Tom Kidd;

Special Award: Professional: Gordon van Gelder for *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction;*

Special Award: Non-Professional: Jason Williams, Jeremy Lassen & Benjamin Cossel for Nightshade Books;

Lifetime Achievement: Lloyd Alexander & Donald M. Grant.

I'm always kind of uneasy when I see ties for judged awards. It makes it sound as if the judges had to agree to disagree and that therefore there was a substantial proportion of the judges who didn't want the award to go to each of the winners. On the other hand, both *The Facts of Life* and *Ombria in Shadow* are very good books. I'm much happier with this result than with the Hugo.

Winning Best Novella is a stunning achievement by Zoran Zivkovic given that the competition was so stiff. I've read three of the other nominees, *Coraline* by Neil Gaiman, "A Year in the Linear City" by Paul Di Filippo and "The Least Trumps", by Elizabeth Hand, and they are all really good. But then so is "The Library". Well done, Mr.

Zivkovic. And well done the entire *Leviathan* #3 team.

I'm not sure about the Short Story prize. I really didn't like "Creation", but I did really like "The Weight of Words", also by Jeff Ford and also a nominee, so I'm pleased that Ford won the prize, and the one for Best Collection as well.

Profuse congratulations are due to the Nightshade Books team, who have published some great stuff over the past year. I note also that other winning works come from small presses such as Ministry of Whimsy and Golden Gryphon. Is there a trend here?

Novas Results

Here, with thanks to Dave Langford who was able to stay late on Sunday and forwarded the information to me, are the results of this year's British fanzine awards, the Novas, as presented at Novacon by Jon Courtenay Grimwood.

Best Fanzine: *Zoo Nation*, Pete Young (ed.);

Best Fan Writer: Claire Brialey;

Best Fan Artist: Sue Mason;

Best Fan: Ina Shorrock.

Special mention was made in the Best Fan Writer category of American visitor, Jae Leslie Adams, for not having grasped that the category means, "writing by fans, not on them". Many of the attendees at Novacon, including Ken MacLeod, were proudly displaying samples of Jae's superb calligraphy on various parts of their bodies.

Best Fan is an occasional category that is not always awarded. The presentation was made by Harry Harrison.

I picked up a copy of the latest edition of *Zoo Nation* (#4) at the con and I was very impressed. Firstly it is very well put together. I think that Pete Young is in the graphic design business. Certainly he seems to know rather more about fonts than is healthy for ordinary mortals, and is much better at using them than the average fan. The zine is 32 pages of A5 booklet format and is crammed with text. Most impressively, much of the content is book reviews. There are six of them altogether, plus an article on the relationship on SF and real space travel, and a critical piece on Taoist imagery in Le Guin's *The Lathe of Heaven*. When I first started *Emerald City* I was sneered at mightily by fanzine fandom at large for daring to carry book reviews. Apparently I represented a return to the evil days of SerCon fandom, whatever that meant. And yet now a 'zine that actually cares about SF can win a Nova. In small but important ways, the world is becoming a better place.

If you would like to take a look at *Zoo Nation* the contact address is: Pete Young, 62 Walmer Road, Woodley, Berkshire, RG5 4PN, England. It being a paper 'zine, it is presumably available for "the usual". The email address is zoo-nation@macunlimited.net.

British Fantasy Awards Results

Best Novel: *The Scar*, China Miéville (Macmillan);

Best Short Fiction: *The Fairy-Feller's Master Stroke*, Mark Chadbourn (PS Publishing);

Best Anthology: *Keep Out the Night*, Stephen Jones (ed.) (PS Publishing);

Best Collection: *Ramsey Campbell, Probably: On Horror and Sundry Fantasies*, Ramsey Campbell (PS Publishing);

Best Artist: Les Edwards/Edward Miller;

Best Small Press: PS Publishing (Pete Crowther);

The Karl Edward Wagner Award: Alan Garner.

I have to say that I'm greatly relieved that *The Scar* has won another award. After all of the things it was nominated for and failed to win I was beginning to think that poor China was going to have one of those years. As it turned out, he ended on a high note, which in my humble opinion is justly deserved. Not that this should in any way diminish the achievement of Graham Joyce: *The Facts of Life* is also a wonderful book and I would have not been at all surprised to see it win.

A few other things to note while I am here. Les Edwards, a.k.a. Edward Miller, was the cover artist for the UK editions *Perdido Street Station*, *The Scar* and *The Light Ages* (amongst many others), so if you didn't know of his work beforehand you can now seek him out. Alan Garner is perhaps best known for *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen*. Steve Jones had no less than three nominations in the Best Anthology section, which may be a record but is also one he's liable to break any year now. And finally, huge congratulations to Pete Crowther for the fabulous showing of PS Publishing. It might only be a small outfit, but it has produced some of the best books of the past two years. Remember what I said earlier about the best work coming from small presses? While I was at FantasyCon I did an interview with Crowther that will appear in the next issue.

Footnote

If my arithmetic serves me correctly, the next issue of *Emerald City* will be #100. For obscure numerological reasons this is an event of great import, and you can expect something unusual to happen. Suffice it to say that you are not going to be stuck with just me next issue. There will be guest articles, and some of the contributors will include Candas Jane Dorsey, Ken MacLeod, Sean McMullen, Farah Mendlesohn, Justina Robson and Gary K. Wolfe. The odd interesting thing might happen on the web site as well too. See you then,

Ciao,

Love 'n' hugs,

Cheryl