

EMERALD CITY #104

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Introduction

Oh you lovely, silly people...

Two Hugo nominations? What does anyone need two Hugo nominations for? A balanced diet? An excuse to have more than one pint in celebration? The chance to have one rocket under each wing so that you are more balanced in flight? I guess I shall have to ask Langford. He knows. For now I'm just kind of dumbstruck. Thank you, everyone, you are too kind.

Full details of the Hugo and Retro-Hugo nominees are in the Miscellany section.

Whilst there is quite a lot to this issue it is something of a disaster as far as production is concerned. There are books that I planned to review and didn't. Profuse apologies to Anne Harris and Chaz Brenchley who will be in next issue, promise. And this will almost certainly be late on line. Much of this can be blamed on the fact that I have several days of paid work at the end of this month. Sorry guys, but occasionally I need to pay the rent.

Many thanks to those of you who wrote back about the role of news in *Emerald City*. You will be delighted to hear that the vote was 100% in favor of keeping it, so it is going to stay.

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Blackpool Rocky

Being a report on the 2004 Eastercon, also known as Concourse, held at the Winter Gardens in Blackpool.

The Venue.

So this was Blackpool, frequently a finalist in the prestigious Least Pleasant City in Britain competition. For the benefit of American readers, try to imagine Santa Cruz with the weather of Maine and the people of Detroit. The day I arrived cloud base was at about 20 feet. There might have been a famous tower on the sea front. There might even have been sea. But you could not see either of them unless you were stood practically on top of them. It wasn't raining, so it was a good weather day.

Blackpool is apparently Britain's #1 venue for stag nights and hen parties. It has more lap dancing clubs per square mile than any other city in the world I have visited. Just in case you don't notice the big, illuminated signs saying "lap dancing", some of the clubs have very large windows in which some of their less scantily clad staff can be seen performing. Not that the customers really notice. They seem to be much more interested in consuming as much beer as possible as quickly as possible, then heading out for a fight. As Jeff Vandermeer commented, "it is one step removed from *The Clockwork Orange* out there." After their fight, the happy holidaymakers then take a gentle stroll along the promenade where they deposit little pools of vomit as surprise presents for the morning joggers. Blackpool, it has to be said, is a particularly nauseating place.

The Winter Gardens is primarily a venue for concerts and variety shows. It was proudly advertising appearances by such notable hot acts as Englebert

Humperdink, The Shadows and David Cassidy (who sadly looks nothing like as cute as when I had a teenage crush on him). It does, however, have function space, which is perhaps best described as an amalgam of Brighton Pavilion, Las Vegas and an American "Tudor monstrosity" hotel. Just look at my photos on the web site and cringe.

The function space (decoration aside) was actually very spacious. The program rooms had lots of chairs, there was plenty of bar and relaxing space, even a very nice theatre. Some of it was rather spread out, and because much of the building was open to the public there were probably limits to what could be done with signage, but for the most part we coped.

The main problem, however, was that the Winter Gardens has no hotel space. Not even anything adjacent. Many of the hotels were 20 minutes or more walk away, and even us hardy Brits were leery about walking back in the evening. Blackpool at night is most definitely not a safe place for a lone female. Thankfully there were always plenty of cabs waiting outside the Winter Gardens and the fares were very reasonable (although I'm told that all of the cab drivers beat a speedy retreat around pub closing time).

Against this you have to weigh the fact that there were plenty of reasonably-priced restaurants a very short walk away (and that's a short walk by American standards). It was easy to eat cheaply and tolerably well, which was a welcome relief from Hinckley. But having to carry everything that you needed for the entire day with you to the con was a pain in the butt (or rather the shoulders). As I didn't think it was safe to leave my laptop in my hotel room I had to carry that with me everywhere, and there was no going back to your room to dump the vast pile of books you have just bought. A lot of people claimed

that the set-up was like a Worldcon, but with most US Worldcons there is actually a lot of hotel space on site, just not enough for everyone. In Blackpool we were all stuffed. As I will come back to later, this contributed strongly to the problems with the masquerade.

I should mention here that the issues with the venue cannot fairly be laid at the door of the Concourse committee. When they were elected to run the 2004 Eastercon they offered the bid session a choice of venues: the Radisson at Heathrow or Blackpool. The great fannish public voted for Blackpool, so we have only ourselves to blame. Especially if, like me, we didn't attend the bid session in 2002.

For me one of the worst things about Blackpool was that most people there appear to have never heard of the Internet. My hotel was quite comfortable, but the owners were clearly well prepared for their more usual sort of customer. You have to pay in full on arrival, and there were no phones in the room because that would allow guests to run up a bill that they could then run off without paying. Thankfully the Hilton round the corner had an Internet lounge and I was able to keep my blog updated, though I didn't have the time to check email.

Guests

Concourse had quite a few guests, only some of which I got to see. Chris Priest is, of course, very well known on the UK scene, being the current holder of the Clarke Award. Phillip Pullman is even better known, and I was delighted to get to spend 20 minutes chatting with him about theology. He is a fascinating man. Sue Mason was an excellent fan guest, especially as she had just won her first Hugo.

The other Guests of Honour were Mitchell Burnside Clapp, whom I'm afraid I know nothing about, and artist Danny Flynn who is way too good for me not to have heard of him. The Hay Lecturer was Francis Spufford, of whom more later.

The con also had two unofficial guests, the traveling Two Jeffs show of Vandermeer and Ford. For visiting Americans they showed a remarkable grasp of British fannish culture. They quickly established a pitch in one of the bars and held court from there for the rest of the convention. Vandermeer in particular also worked hard on panels, including a rendition of his famous multi-media Amergris presentation. And of course both of them acquired Hugo nominations during the weekend, which was really rather clever of them.

Program

Probably the best thing that I can say about the program planning at Concourse was that it was better than Torcon III. But only just. And whereas in Toronto the excellent Tammy Coxen in Program Ops steadily got a grip on proceedings as the con went on, in Blackpool the scheduling got more and more chaotic with time. By Sunday the newsletter was being required to print revised program grids and apologies that the program corrections that they had printed in the previous edition were in fact wrong.

Pre-con there were two main faults. The first was that the schedules were not sent out until the Wednesday evening before the con was due to begin. Those participants who were not intravenously attached to their email like I am often didn't find out what panels they were on until they got to the con (or even afterwards if they neglected to study the Read Me in detail). Program sheets for

participants were apparently available at registration, but no one had bothered to tell the registration staff this so most of them were not given out. Just as an example, Gwyneth Jones had no idea that she was on a panel with me until Farah Mendlesohn spotted her in the bar and brought her along.

The other fault was lack of confirmation. A prospective panelist would say something like, "how about I do X." The con committee would then take it that X was set on stone, but say nothing to the panelist who, hearing nothing, would assume that the idea had been rejected and not prepare for it. Edward James discovered on arriving at the con that he would be interviewing Pullman, and all because his partner, Farah Mendlesohn, had innocently remarked, "why don't you ask Edward?"

At the con the biggest failure was the readings. They were not in the Read Me, so no one knew that they were on. And the room they were in was well out of the way and not marked on the map. On Saturday evening the Newsletter staff wrote a brilliantly sarcastic article about this, after which things got better. But by that time at least nine writers, including Ian R. MacLeod, Liz Williams, Gwyneth Jones, Jeff Vandermeer and Jeff Ford had all dutifully turned up to give their readings only to discover that they had no audience whatsoever. The mood amongst the authors was rebellious to say the least. We might conveniently describe them as Lynch Mob #1.

Award scheduling

One of the usual evening attractions at an Eastercon is the BSFA Award ceremony. It isn't quite the Hugos, but it does give us a chance to dress up. The Concourse committee clearly didn't see things this way. They apparently regarded the award ceremony as

something they were being forced to do rather than something that they could use as a big event. In any case there was not room for the event in the evenings because there was something more important going on - two of the con committee were getting married.

Now I should say at this point that I think that the idea of having your wedding at a convention is a very good one. Were I in a position to get married I might do the same thing myself. It would certainly make it easier for my friends to turn up for the party. But I would not do it at a convention that I was also supposed to be running. I saw no evidence that the problems Concourse experienced were in any way the result of committee members being preoccupied with their nuptials instead of focusing on the con. But, as is the way of fannish gossip, I heard plenty of people speculate that they might have been.

Anyway, those of us involved in the BSFA Awards were not especially pleased with the scheduling, but we got even less pleased very quickly. As I will explain below, the convention's masquerade was an on-off affair. When it was back on it got put in the award presentations' slot, with a note that the awards would be presented during the judging interval. Which I think tells you just how much contempt the convention committee had for the awards ceremony, and for those people who were up for awards or had been asked to present them. Just hang around the masquerade for a while, folks. We'll get to you when it is convenient. Is that any way, I ask you, to treat the UK's best authors and artists?

Thankfully John Jarrold, who had been asked to host the ceremony, did a wonderful job of reading the riot act to the convention committee and the award ceremony was duly re-instated, albeit

with a time limit of 30 minutes. And in the end we got the awards presented and we got some very good winners. The results are in the Miscellany section. However, the various people involved with staging, presenting and (potentially) accepting awards can now be categorized as Lynch Mob #2.

Masquerade

So what was it with the masquerade? At almost every convention I have been to there is a small but vociferous lobbying group demanding that the masquerade be cancelled. That is as much true of a Worldcon as of an Eastercon. Sadly costumers don't always help themselves, because they have an annoying habit of making the decision to enter at the very last minute. Indeed, because UK conventions generally have a Chaos Costuming room, many of the masquerade costumes are made on the day. So what happens is that the anti-masquerade crowd goes round bewailing the lack of entries and demanding that Something Be Done.

The Concourse committee was foolish enough to listen to this bitching and with no confirmed entries they cancelled the masquerade about a week before the con. Naturally the people who had intended to enter and had been working on their costumes were furious. And some of their excuses for not having heard "final calls" for entries were believable. Faced with a significant amount of distress amongst their members, the Concourse committee made a last minute decision to re-instate the event, and I believe that they got 8 adult entries, one of which was a very splendid White Rabbit costume that must have taken a lot of work to make. Sadly the scheduling chaos meant that I had to miss the masquerade, so I have no photos.

The costuming fraternity made up Lynch mob #3.

Future of Eastercon

One of the things that happens at a lot of Eastercons is a panel session at which the future of the convention is discussed. This is an opportunity for the ordinary fans to bitch at the conrunners, and for the conrunners to float ideas to see whether they would be acceptable to fandom at large. By far the best idea under discussion this year was that Eastercon should introduce a passalong funds system, just like Worldcon. As with any other convention, Eastercons have budgetary problems due to not having much idea in advance how many members they will have. As each year's committee is self-contained, money cannot easily be passed on from one year to the next. A voluntary agreement between Eastercon committees to always pay a proportion of their profits (should they have any) forward to successor conventions would be a Very Good Thing.

Unfortunately for the usefulness of the debate there wasn't always a lot of sense to the points made. The people who felt that the solution to budgetary problems was to have a cut off date well before the con and not allow people to turn up on the day were not terribly helpful. Doubtless they felt that this would help restrict Eastercon membership to themselves and their small group of friends. As for the idiots who kept loudly and rudely complaining that anything that Worldcons did was Evil and Foreign and Not Relevant to British Fandom, words fail me. It is about time that they grew up.

The partial usefulness of the passalong funds discussion, however, was overshadowed by what very nearly turned into an actual lynching. Some

time ago Hilton hotels had approached fandom with a suggested deal whereby we would agree to use Hilton for 5 out of the next 10 Eastercons. Given that suitable hotels are somewhat thin on the ground, there are certain attractions to this idea. However, most British fans (or at least those that attend panels like this) tend to believe that hotel owners are Vicious Capitalist Swine who are out to exploit defenseless fen wherever they can, and should only be dealt with carefully from distances of several kilometers when dug in behind a phalanx of high caliber howitzers and nuclear-armed cruise missiles. Getting around a negotiating table is deemed way too dangerous.

Nevertheless, last year Pat McMurray was given the job of talking to Hilton to see if he could find out more. Unfortunately Pat's life took one of those exciting U-turns and he was soon rather too busy with personal matters to worry about hotel contracts. So he passed the job on to Jonjo, who did something very, very stupid indeed.

There are lots of dumb things that a conrunner can do, but there is a special place in the *Guinness Book of Records* for the person dumb enough to send an official letter to hotel chains on his own company stationary claiming to speak for a voted fannish convention. For the benefit of American readers, it was as if I had written to a bunch of hotel chains claiming to speak on behalf of WSFS Inc (a company of which I claimed to be an officer) asking them to bid for future Worldcon hotel contracts. Jonjo claims that he only intended the letter to go to Hilton, but somehow it seems to have got around all of the hotel chains in the UK, with the inevitable result that the Hanover International at Hinckley phoned up Paragon 2, next year's Eastercon, asking "who are these people claiming to represent Eastercon - are

they anything to do with you?" Oh dear. How Jonjo got out of that room alive I do not know.

It seems likely that Chris O'Shea and Marcus Streets, the other two principals of the Concourse organization, are entirely innocent of any involvement in this affair. For Jonjo, however, we have just found Lynch Mob #4.

Clarke Award panel

Still, enough of lynchings, let's roast a few authors instead.

My favorite part of Eastercon is the Not the Clarke Award panel, at which a group of former Clarke Award judges takes a look at this year's contenders and tries to decide who will win.

This year's panel was particularly good in that they had all made a serious attempt to read the six short-listed books. I've seen years were some of the panelists could only be bothered to read two or three books. But of course, as with any judging exercise, just because the panelists had read the books did not mean that they could come to any agreement about them.

Before we go any further I should remind you of the finalists. They are (in no particular order): *Pattern Recognition* by William Gibson, *Quicksilver* by Neal Stephenson, *Midnight Lamp* by Gwyneth Jones, *Maul* by Tricia Sullivan, *Darwin's Children* by Greg Bear, and *Coalescent* by Stephen Baxter.

The first thing that the panel fell foul of was that hoary old chestnut, "what is science fiction". The Clarke is specifically awarded for science fiction (not fantasy, whatever that might mean). Several of the panelists were dubious about the science-fictional credentials of both *Pattern Recognition* and *Quicksilver*. They

are wrong, of course, but I respect their right to hold contrary opinions.

Another issue that came up is that the Clarke is supposedly for a "novel", but of the six books shortlisted only two are actually stand-alone novels. The other four are parts of a series, and two of them, *Darwin's Children* and *Midnight Lamp*, are from the middle of series and consequently don't make much sense as stand-alone entities. In addition, *Coalescent* is essentially a 400-page prologue and 50 pages of introduction to a story that will take place in later volumes of the series.

Then there was the question of the missing books, in particular Jon Courtenay Grimwood's *Felaheen* (which later won the BSFA award but is itself a final part of a series), Mary Gentle's *1610* (which is also only homeopathically SF) and Justina Robson's *Natural History* (most people's pick for the winner prior to the shortlist being published). No one could quite understand why these fine books had failed to make the shortlist when other somewhat less worthy books had.

The one thing that the panel agreed on is that there was one book on the shortlist that suffered none of the problems raised about the others. Tricia Sullivan's *Maul* is quite clearly science fiction and, as far as anyone knows, is a stand-alone book. Not all of the panel liked the book very much, but they were pretty much unanimous in saying that it should win because it was the only one that unequivocally met all of the necessary criteria for the award. As it happens to be my favorite amongst the nominees, I was well pleased with this result.

Unfortunately the panel also agreed with me on one other matter. Given the nature of the shortlist it seems clear that the judging panel is seriously divided in its taste, if not composed largely of

schizophrenics. It seems unlikely that this group of individuals is likely to come to agreement on a winner. In such cases judging panels tend to look for a compromise candidate, and who better for such a role that poor Stephen Baxter who has been nominated more times than most but has never won. Therefore, while *Coalescent* might be one of the weaker books on the shortlist, the panel was fairly certain that it was going to win. I think that they are absolutely right.

As an afterthought, I have received an explanation of Clarke Award procedure that seems to make a lot of sense to me. What tends to happen, I am told, is that the judges come to the shortlist session with a list of books that they really liked. There is little agreement between them, and eventually the process boils down to each judge holding out for their one favorite book of the year to be included. Books that are a second favorite of many judges, but the preferred candidate of none, stand no chance. It is horribly plausible, isn't it.

The Hay Lecture

Another staple of Eastercon is the George Hay Memorial Lecture. Organized by the Science Fiction Foundation, the event has an invited speaker, normally a prominent British Scientist. This year they went for something different. The invited speaker was Francis Spufford, a science writer and author of the recent book, *The Backroom Boys: The Secret Return of the British Boffin*. He was a good choice.

Spufford is an excellent speaker and clearly has a deep understanding of the British scientific psyche. He knows just what our boffins are good at, and just why we have failed so dismally on the world stage. He's also a good entertainer, finishing on a story about a

nuclear warhead stuck in a snow drift on Dartmoor, something that could have come straight out of *The Leaky Establishment* but is scarily true. Spufford is also a fan. He was a splendid guest addition to the Not the Clarke Award panel and contributed well to the debate. I hope we'll see him at future conventions.

101 Programming

When I first saw the program for Concourse my heart sank. Why? Why do people still feel the need for a panel on "Does fantasy need elves?" Kevin commented that it looked like a syllabus for Convention programming 101. All of the panel descriptions were the sort of simplistic material that you put on for people going to their first con. And he was right. It looked awful.

The good news is that knowledgeable panelists can rescue any panel, no matter how bad. Between us John Clute and I can talk about "Modern SF" until hell freezes over. Heck, we could probably talk all day about where to place the dividing line between "Classic" and "Modern" (though for the sake of simplicity we settled on the commonly accepted date of the publication of *Neuromancer*).

There are lessons even there, however. Clute and I did both "Modern SF" and "Modern Fantasy". On the former we were accompanied by Chris Priest and on the latter by Ian R. MacLeod. Both of these gentlemen are fine writers. But being busy and successful writers, neither of them has the time to read much new fiction other than their own. This sort of mis-programming appeared to have been common. Heck, I was invited to be on a panel about Terry Pratchett's novels, despite the fact that I failed to finish both *The Colour of Magic* and *Good Omens*, and haven't read a

Pratchett book since. Probably if Chris and Ian had been on top of the email like I was, and been prepared to be rude to the con committee like I was, they could have got taken off those panels. But they were stuck, and the lesson is that convention programming staff need to know a bit about their guests. Jeff Vandermeer, who had to miss the "Modern Fantasy" panel because he had to get back to London on Monday morning (another scheduling mix-up) would have been fine because he's an editor as well as a writer. But Priest and MacLeod were very obviously poor choices and were badly served by being placed on those panels.

Charlie Stross has been firing a few broadsides at Concourse's programming staff as well. In a usenet posting he raised the issue of moderators. Many British conrunners seem to cleave to the daft view that panels don't need moderators, or even worse that having a moderator is somehow evil and elitist. This is nonsense, and as Charlie says most of the panels ended up appointing someone from amongst the group to do the job. This did involve me having to occasionally ask Mr. Clute if he would kindly let someone else get a word in edgeways, but he took it very well.

Charlie also notes that some potential panelists were under-used whilst others were worked off their feet. He was only asked to do only did one panel all weekend (though he ended up on three). I think I did six (though on one of those I stood in for Farah who had urgent business elsewhere). There's something wrong with the balance there. I'm sure people would rather listen to Charlie than me.

As for scheduling panels at 11:00pm, words fail me. I would simply have refused. I know that there are people who are happy to be awake and

intelligent late into the evening. I'm not one of them.

On a final note, one panel I didn't get to (because I was busy chasing down Internet access) was the "Classic SF" panel. According to the newsletter the panel opined, "a lot of the 'Golden Age' stories are unreadably crap." I think I ought to point out that they were referring to SF published in the 1950's, not to John C. Wright's trilogy.

Dealers' Room and Art Show

If Concourse's programming was a blot on convention running of Toronto-esque proportions, its Dealers' Room and Art Show were not at all bad. The main problem with the Dealers' Room was that not a single new book dealer turned up. This was probably because they didn't fancy the idea of spending Easter Weekend in Blackpool, and who can blame them? There were, however, many second hand book dealers and I picked up a bunch of bargains. Also there was always plenty of space in the aisles, something that is often a major problem at hotel-based Eastercons.

The art show was good too. Danny Flynn, the artist GoH, had some good stuff. Jim Burns was there. And there was a chap called Mervyn Grant who did the cover for Gene Wolfe's *Soldier in the Mist*. Sadly that particular piece was not for sale, which is just as well because I wanted it really badly and I don't have any money right now. I have no idea how the auction went, but I know that at least one British writer went home with a substantial amount of artwork under her arm and a substantial hole in her bank balance. (See what signing a new book deal does to you?)

Conclusions

It is hard for me to be too critical of Concourse because one of the other things that happened during the weekend was that a team headed by Farah Mendlesohn was chosen to run the 2006 Eastercon. Rather foolishly Farah had asked me to run her web site, so I am now on an Eastercon committee myself. Look out for Concussion (name courtesy of Charlie Stross). You can find out more at <http://www.eastercon2006.org>.

I have no doubt that we will make mistakes. The biggest worry I have is that we only got into this mess because there was no one willing to bid for 2006. Farah has been saying for some time that she would like to run an Eastercon, and someone called her bluff. Of course there's no way we'd be stupid enough to go into this without a hotel contract, but the nice folks from Interaction offered to get one of theirs for us. That means that we are stuck in Glasgow, which is not exactly one of my favorite places on the globe. But at least we'll have a chance to see how the hotel (probably the Moat House, maybe the Hilton) works out during the Worldcon and fix any obvious problems in time for our event.

Glasgow aside, I don't know what mistakes we will make. They will probably be new and different mistakes, because one thing I am very firm about is that we are going to be prepared to learn from history. (We do have a wealth of past Eastercon experience on the committee.) But one thing I absolutely guarantee that we will not do is treat the authors as badly as Concourse did. I know several people who went home early, and that was not just because they hated Blackpool.

It is easy to write Concourse off as a bad convention, but in fact most of its problems were a result of the choice of

venue which, as I made clear earlier, was made by the 2002 bid session, not by the con committee. If they had been at Heathrow it would have been a much better convention. I think it is only really the programming that was genuinely bad, and even that was rescued to some extent for the audiences because the panelists worked to make something interesting of the often very dumb topics. But Concourse did seem to be a deeply unambitious event. That and the fact that no one was willing to prepare a bid for 2006 in advance suggests that Eastercon is very sick indeed. I'm sure that Fran Dowd and her crew will do a reasonable job next year, because they have a lot of experience and a proven venue in Hinckley. But the thing that interests me most about 2006 is that it will be a post-Worldcon event in the Worldcon city. That gives us a tremendous opportunity to get a decent sized membership and put on a cracking convention. We already have a great Guest of Honor in M. John Harrison. Here's hoping we can do something spectacular.

Bullion Business

Well, I managed to get the new Neal Stephenson novel in time for this issue. But there is a big difference between owning a book and managing to finish all 800+ pages of it in time for the magazine deadline. Not that Stephenson isn't entertaining, but there are limits to the speed of my reading and 800 pages takes time. So here is an initial report, which should at least give you some idea what *The Confusion* is all about, and whether it is worth investing in.

I very nearly did a strange thing with this book. Stephenson says in an introductory Author's Note that the

book is actually two novels, and that all he has done is interleave the chapters for the delight and confusion of the reader. There is some suggestion that this is where the title of the book comes from. But I'm way too cynical to trust Stephenson when he says something like that. I figured that I would be missing something if I read all of the chapters from one "novel" in sequence and all of the others afterwards. And I was right for the two novels relate the respective continuing adventures of Jack and Eliza, and though they might be many miles apart their lives are inextricably linked by the interactions with the villainous Duc d'Arcachon. First, however, a little background is in order.

William of Orange is now firmly ensconced upon the throne of England and is busy turning the country into a larger and more prosperous version of Amsterdam. Trade is in, natural philosophy is out, much to the disappointment of Daniel Waterhouse and his fellow members of the Royal Society. Isaac Newton has returned to the study of alchemy, and any scientist wishing to further his career with the King is turning his mathematical skills to the new passion for studying the behavior of money, a discipline that will one day become known as Economics.

Though this is not widely recognized, Eliza of Qwghlm, Comptess de la Zeur, is one of the world's foremost practitioners of this science. Unfortunately she is stuck in France, weighed down by her new-born child and hedged in by the suspicions of the Compte d'Avaux. With France having declared war on England in support of the deposed James Stuart (it being the duty of Catholic Majesties to stick together in times of trouble) Eliza finds her not inconsiderable fortune loaned to the French Treasury for the duration of hostilities. Ah well, at least this does soften the feelings of

unhappiness that Le Roi Soleil had developed towards her as a result of her spying for William.

We first meet Eliza in Dunkerque where she is staying at the home of a friendly noble family, the d'Ozoir (or Dozois, as the name is doubtless pronounced). She reacquaints herself with her old beau, the cryptographer Bonaventure Rossignol, and takes under her wing a young French naval hero, Lieutenant Jean Bart. Soon she is back at Versailles, where she discovers that plans are afoot to marry her off to the excessively chivalrous Etienne d'Arcachon (who is widely if mistakenly believed to be the father of her child). Naturally this means meeting the young man's father, and it doesn't take much experience of the smell of rotting fish and the presence of an albino Arab stallion for Eliza to come to the same conclusion that we reached way back in *Quicksilver*: the Duc d'Arcachon is the villain responsible for abducting Eliza and her mother from a beach in Qwghlm and selling them into slavery.

D'Arcachon knows nothing of this. What he does know, however, is that word has reached him that his hated enemy, the villainous English Vagabond, Jack Shaftoe, otherwise known as L'Emmerdeur, can be found working as a galley slave on Barbary Coast. This indeed is true. By miraculous means (for which Stephenson doubtless has a sound, scientific rationale) Jack is recovered from the depredations of the French Pox and is once more in his right mind. He has fallen in with a company of equally adventurous-minded slaves, including a Spanish nobleman who is cursed by God to always say exactly what he is thinking, a younger son of the Armenian coffee trader, Esphahnian, our old friends Yevgeny and Mr. Foot, the Dutchman van Hoek (whom we met much later in life in *Quicksilver*) and a

Japanese warrior-turned-Jesuit called, yes, you guessed it, Goto.

It turns out that the Spaniard, Jeronimo, has certain information about the flow of trade goods across the Atlantic, and together our heroes present this idea to their owner and thence to the Pasha, who thinks that a plan that involves the easy acquisition of a large quantity of Spanish-owned commodities en route from the New World to the coinage mints of Europe is certainly worth investigating. Unfortunately, for the plan to work, said goods will need to be safely conveyed through the Mediterranean without falling foul of the French Navy. And that, the Pasha notes to his aides, involves doing a deal with the Admiral of said Navy, a noble gentleman called d'Arcachon who has recently been making enquiries about obtaining a certain galley slave by the name of Shaftoe.

As you can see, we have two stories, one taking place at Versailles and full of intrigue, spying, double-dealing, poisoning, seduction and other courtly activities, and the other being full of valiant adventure on the high seas. Weaved in with this is a very large amount of historical research and in particular some interesting information about the development of economics, commodity trading, cryptography and so on. Stephenson is clearly having a lot of fun.

Vrej rolled up to his feet and grimaced at the sun. "The wording does not come naturally in this bastard language of Sabir, but Moseh's plan was to synergistically leverage the value-added of diverse core competencies into a virtual entity whose whole was more than the sum of its parts..."

Jack stared at him blankly.

"It sounds brilliant in Armenian."

The only question is, is all of this fun really worth 800 pages of novel (or even two novels) and are we really going to need a similar size volume to finish off the story. I have, after all, told you most of the plot in a matter of about a page and a half. There had better be something else to this novel in the several hundred pages that I have yet to read.

The Confusion - Neal Stephenson - Heinemann - hardcover

Lost in Time

Oh, sweet Goddess, what is it about British men? OK, well some of them are very nice, but others I just despair of. The hero of Stephen Baxter's *Coalescent* is a case in point. George Poole and I are about the same age, brought up on a diet of *Dr. Who* and Gerry Anderson. But while I was dreaming of Steve Zodiac making me his co-pilot and flying me to the stars, Poole was salivating over die-cast metal collectibles of the various vehicles in the Anderson shows. Thirty-five years or so on he wears a duffel coat, says he'll buy a pair of trainers when they go out of fashion, and is only a short step away from descending into cardigans, carpet slippers and a pet Labrador.

This was made all the worse for me because I read Baxter's book on the flight over from the US. On their audio program United had a superb collection from the 1960's, celebrating the BritPop revolution of those days. Not all British kids of my era were dull and boring. Some of us liked a little rebellion. If something dangerous was going to come from Mars we hoped it would be Ziggy Stardust, not the Mysterons, and we took

to punk rock at college. George Poole probably spent his college days reading Asimov, watching football on TV and drinking warm beer.

Still, at least Poole is not as bad as his pal, Peter McLachlan. He's a borderline autistic: zero social skills, an obsession with pattern recognition. He talks endlessly about things such as dark matter and SETI. And he's a member of an online clique called - wait for it - the Slan(t)ers. Aargh! I guess Baxter has met a lot of people like Poole, and a fair few like McLachlan, through fandom, so he's able to draw a really convincing portrait of them. Sadly that is the best part of the book.

Cut with the story of Poole discovering a long-lost twin sister who was spirited off to Rome at an early age is a flash-back some 1600 years to late Roman Britain where a young girl called Regina falls from a comfortable villa lifestyle to scratching a living off the land as the Empire recedes and the Saxons move in to fill the power vacuum. Regina's story is much less convincing than that of Poole and is heavily padded with Baxter's research of 5th Century lifestyles. It also draws in some historical conjecture about King Arthur in which <yawn> Regina gets to play the role of Morgan le Fay. I found it all rather unnecessary and Bernard Cornwell it most certainly was not.

Worse still I found that I just could not believe that Regina would end up founding a secret society in Rome that would last down to the present day. Nor do I believe that an organization founded by an obsessive control freak and with a guiding principle of "Ignorance is Strength" would somehow grow into a functioning anarchist society. As for the collection of vignette chapters showing the history of the society down the ages, well they did show that Baxter had researched the

history of Rome, but they were just more padding.

Then there is the whole gender politics angle. The idea of an all-female secret society that has kept itself separate from the rest of the world for so many centuries that its members are no longer quite human. At times it seems like Baxter is trying to parody the sort of society he thinks Sheri Tepper might want to create, but most of the time it is just weird. There seems to be some sort of obsession with menstruation. I can see the academic papers now: "The Female as Alien: Gender Paranoia in Stephen Baxter's *Coalescent*."

It isn't until around page 430 (of a 500 page book) that we finally get to the SFnal idea that Baxter is playing with, and as for all of the stuff about dark matter spaceships, aliens and monolith-like objects in the Kuiper Belt that McLaclan keeps going on about, well there are another two volumes to come yet. I'm sure that Stephen Baxter must have written much better books than this. As to what *Coalescent* is doing on the Clarke Award short list, I can only assume that one or two George Pooles or Peter McLachlans have infiltrated the judging panel.

Coalescent - Stephen Baxter - Del Rey - hardcover

The Enemy Within

Radio Gaga

Sometimes I can make the most terrible mistakes. I was so disappointed by Greg Bear's techno-thriller novel, *Vitals*, that I neglected to read his next book, despite the good reviews it was getting. There were, after all, lots of other good books around to read, and I didn't want to

waste my time on another sorry attempt to crack the Michael Crichton market. But *Darwin's Radio* is not a techno-thriller. For all that it is set in the present day and is full of stuff about politics and security threats, it is an honest to goodness science fiction novel. For starters, Michael Crichton would never write passages like this:

The SHEVA protease cleaves three novel cyclooxygenases and lipooxygenases from the LPC, which then synthesize three different and unique prostaglandins.

Do you have any idea what that means? I didn't when I read it. But Bear helpfully includes a little primer on genetics at the back of the book just in case his readers are not out on the bleeding edge of bioscience like he is. Here is my feeble attempt to explain the book's ideas simply.

A retrovirus is a type of virus that is able to insert its genetic code into the host's DNA so that the host will unwittingly reproduce the virus. You might call it a cuckoo virus. But the fact that a virus can mess with human DNA is an incredibly powerful concept. Sure it can cause disease, but what else might it do?

The most famous retrovirus in the world is HIV. It causes a virulent disease that kills millions of people (mostly in Africa) every year. Vast sums of money have been spent by governments around the world seeking a cure. One of Bear's viewpoint characters, Christopher Dicken, is a researcher for the Center for Disease Control, a US government body whose job it is to look out for new diseases and try to prevent them from running riot. Dicken would doubtless have been very much involved in the campaigns against SARS and Bird Flu.

But *Darwin's Radio* was written before either of those panics took hold of the popular imagination. And the retrovirus that Dicken helps uncover is a very different kettle of fish indeed. SHEVA, as it is nicknamed, is the root cause of something called Herod's Flu. In men it causes mild cold-like symptoms. In pregnant women it causes a miscarriage. Or at least, that is how things seem until the women with SHEVA infections find themselves pregnant again immediately, despite not having had sex.

At this point I need to introduce a new area of biological debate, the one surrounding the mechanism by which evolution takes place. Ever since Darwin it has been believed that species change was a gradual process brought on by cumulative small mutations and a great deal of natural selection. But opponents of evolution have always asked why the fossil record never shows intermediate species. The missing links, the gradual steps along the way, are still missing. A new strain of evolutionary theory suggests that particular environmental stresses might cause a quantum shift in a species, causing it to flip from one to another very quickly. Clearly this behavior needs a mechanism, something that can significantly re-structure an animal's DNA. Retroviruses, being DNA-based and DNA-manipulating organisms themselves, are an obvious suspect.

This may all sound a little far-fetched until we consider some of the discoveries that modern genetics is making. We used to think that a particular set of genes defined a particular animal. To change the animal, you had to change the genes. Indeed, Bear himself has SHEVA add extra chromosomes to the standard human genetic template. But in my weblog recently I reported on a news story about chimpanzees. As you may know, the DNA of a chimp differs from

that of a human by only 2%. That is a very small gap, and scientists have long wondered why chimps are not more like us.

But the existence of specific genes does not necessarily mean that they will be used. The genetic program has a lot of unused elements in it, almost as if there is a bunch of test code in there that the programmer has switched off before releasing the final version. When you look at how the DNA of a chimp is expressed, as compared to a human, the difference is much higher; around 10%. In other words, nearly all of the code to make chimps more human - to perhaps make them like the creatures from *Planet of the Apes* - is already in place. It just isn't switched on. And if that is true for chimps, what unused portions are there in the human genetic code, and what might they do if we switched them on?

Bear's thesis, then, is that under the right environmental stimulus a retrovirus, SHEVA, might be activated, and it might reconfigure human DNA to turn us into an entirely new species. Here we run straight into mutant story territory: *The Midwich Cuckoos*, *The X-Men*. As regular readers of science fiction we know what comes next. And the fact that SHEVA is a retrovirus, something like AIDS, gives governments every excuse they need to clamp down and insist that the virus be destroyed. That the babies it eventually produces should be isolated or destroyed.

"I have three patients who are pregnant, possibly with Herod's second stage. They won't let me do amino or any kind of scans. They're all churchgoing women and I don't think they want to know the truth. They're scared and they're under pressure. Their friends shun them. They aren't welcome in church. Their husbands won't come in with them to my office."

This in turn leads Bear to recognize that he is creating a feminist novel. Any debate about dangers resulting from sex and reproduction is bound to revive ancient fears and prejudices. And well before the SARS scare Bear knew only too well how the public would react to a potential medical emergency. Men whose partners become pregnant with SHEVA children swear blind that the devil babies cannot be theirs, that some infidelity must be involved. The pregnant women are killed by fearful mobs. Harsh new security measures require women bearing SHEVA babies to register with the government so that they can be tracked and, if necessary, placed in quarantine. It is, as Bear's heroine, Kaye Lang, comments at one point, a bit like being a Jew in Nazi Germany. And that, of course, is a comparison that Magneto knows only too well.

"Mark has no control over the House of Representatives or the Senate. He speaks, they ignore him. We all know the rates of domestic violence are way up. Women are being forced out of their homes. Divorce. Murder."

As well as getting the public reaction to SHEVA spot on, Bear also knows exactly what will happen in government. As the crisis deepens, science goes out the window and policy takes over. Enthusiastic scientists who signed up for the SHEVA task force hoping to help save mankind from a deadly disease soon find out that they are being forced to abandon "unproductive" lines of investigation that might make the public policy debate more complicated and instead are required to provide "proof" that will support whatever action their masters deem it necessary to take. In

many ways *Darwin's Radio* is very like Kim Stanley Robinson's *Forty Signs of Rain*, but it is even better done.

"The President's been talking with Alabama and Maryland for the last two hours, Christopher. They've been arguing with him to delay his decision. I don't think he wants to. Fifteen thousand pregnant women were murdered in the last six weeks."

What we have here then is a very fine example of the hard science fiction writer's art. The plot is based firmly on the very latest developments in a particular field of science. It deals clearly, accurately and honestly with the potential effects of the scientific novum on society. Unlike the techno-thriller, it makes no pretence that science will conquer the danger and make everything right in the end. *Darwin's Radio* is a very good book indeed. Had I read it in time I might have had it on my Hugo list in 2000.

Sorry Greg.

Oh you pretty things

*The Earth is a bitch
We've finished our news
Homo sapiens have outgrown their use
All the strangers came today
And it looks as though they're here to stay*

David Bowie

The reason that I came to read *Darwin's Radio* so late in the day is that its sequel, *Darwin's Children*, is a nominee for the Arthur C Clarke Award. I hate starting any series in the middle, so I had to read book #1 before I could evaluate book #2.

Sadly book #2 is that dreaded part two of a trilogy, the bit that moves the plot

along without really saying anything. What Bear really wants to do here is get his viewpoint new human, Stella Nova, from the babyhood in which she arrives in *Darwin's Radio* to the adulthood that will allow her and her fellow evolved beings a place in the grand finale. (Bear says on his web long that the third volume, *Stella Nova*, is contracted but not written. His forthcoming novel, *Dead Lines*, is apparently a "high tech ghost story.") In order to get Stella from one point in her life to the other, Bear essentially has to reprise a bunch of themes from the first novel, because there isn't a lot else to say.

Having said that, *Darwin's Children* is still a fine novel about America in the grip of an oppressive regime that uses fear of otherness to persuade citizens to give up their civil rights. The fact that Bear chooses to make the terrifying "others" people's own children rather than a bunch of turban-wearing foreigners is a stroke of genius. America certainly needs more books like this.

Augustine could no longer bear to watch TV or listen to the radio. So many loud voices shouting lies for their own advantage. America and much of the rest of the world had entered a peculiar state of pathology, outwardly normal, inwardly prone to extraordinary fear and anger: a kind of powder keg madness.

There not being a lot of science that Bear can add to the story, he opts for some New Age mummerly instead. We get an extension of Mitch Rafelson's ability to have accurate dreams about things that happened tens of millennia ago, and we get Kaye Lang having conversations with something that she thinks is God. I get really worried every time a science fiction writer introduces God to a story

because it generally means that the plot is about to get very silly indeed.

In addition some of the special powers exhibited by the evolved children sound suspiciously like Sheri Tepper speculating on the benefits of a hive mind. It is a very West Coast thing to assume that the world will be a better place if only some natural mechanism could persuade everyone to go along with the majority. ("No, we are not forcing them, really we are not, we are just developing a natural consensus.") It is deeply scary when this mutates into the idea that social ostracism can be so powerful that rugged individualists will be persuaded commit suicide rather than endanger the community by their independent thinking. Give me John C. Wright's world any day.

I may be doing Bear an injustice here, because it seems clear that he is going to develop this theme in the final book of the series. One of the flaws of *Darwin's Children* is that we are still in a world where the children are all good and the government is largely bad. That's fine when the children are helpless babies. It won't wash when they become adults so I do hope that Bear does make a serious attempt to compare his *homo sapiens* and *homo superior* rather than producing some mystical hand-waving to justify the latter's moral superiority.

There are other good things about *Darwin's Children*. I particularly liked the character of Mrs. Rhine who, thanks to a quirk of nature, starts producing vast numbers of new and deadly viruses. It is quite bad enough to know that, through no conscious fault of your own, you caused the death of your entire family and many of your neighbors. To then be asked to spend the rest of your life in a solitary isolation ward so that scientists can study the viruses that you are producing must be unbearable.

Quite why *Darwin's Children* is on the Clarke Award list I do not know. *Darwin's Radio* is certainly in the right sort of class to be shortlisted. (It wasn't, but it did get a Hugo nomination where unfortunately it ran up against Vernor Vinge's excellent *A Deepness in the Sky*.) Possibly the Clarke judges did not read *Darwin's Radio* and were struck by the quality of the political tale, not realizing that first book was much better. Sometimes that is the way awards work. At least if this one wins I'll be able to point to *Darwin's Radio* as the deserving winner rather than having to say, "well, it was a lifetime achievement award."

Some books, I suspect, should not have sequels. But in this case I shall reserve my judgment until I have read *Stella Nova*.

Darwin's Radio - Greg Bear - Del Rey - hardcover

Darwin's Children - Greg Bear - Del Rey - hardcover

Breaking Glass

When I spoke to Sean McMullen at ICFA he assured me that for the latest book in his Moonworlds saga he had tried to simplify the plot a bit. In the prologue I counted four rival groups of spies, working for five different masters. This is what McMullen calls "simplified".

OK, so I'm teasing him. *Glass Dragons* does contain a fair amount of the usual collection of McMullen plots and counter-plots, but the story is relatively straightforward when you look back on it. And, of course, simple does not mean uninteresting.

The immense, green disk of Miral shone down from nearly overhead, its ring

presented almost directly side-on. Suddenly the summit of the nearby mountain moved. The tinker blinked. Amid a shower of rubble and dust, a head appeared on a long serpentine neck. The summit now stood up and shook itself, sending yet more cascades of dried mud and dust down the mountain's slopes. The thing was glowing faintly as it spread a pair of wings whose span was greater than the length of most ships. Silently, it launched itself into the air, then swooped low over the ancient ringstone site and turned out to sea. The tinker scratched his head, then twisted the spigot of his wineskin again and allowed the remaining contents to pour out onto the grass.

The story of *Glass Dragons* continues events from *The Voyage of the Shadowmoon* with much of the same cast. Laron, the world's most chivalrous vampyre, is no longer a vampyre and is enjoying the chance to progress his age beyond fifteen. But the only way that he could save Velander's life was to make her a vampyre, and she is not coping very well with her new dietary requirements. Terikel is busy trying to rebuild the Metrologans in Scalticar after most of the order was destroyed when Silverdeath laid waste to the continent of Torea. As for Wensomer, the world's fattest sorceress, she's just trying to get on with having fun.

"Did she not understand that we were offering her the chance to become a goddess?"

"She said that gods all had beautiful bodies and narrow waists, and that being a god sounded suspiciously like she would have to diet and exercise."

Yes, there is villainy afoot. Wensomer is wisely staying well clear of it. But others are not so unambitious, and

consequently Terikel finds herself having to save the world, again.

The primary result of the destruction of Torea has been bad weather. With an entire continent reduced to hot, molten slag, wind patterns have been changed and violent storms lash the oceans. Sea trade between Acrema and Scalticar has more or less died out as no captain is prepared to brave the Strait of Dismay. The effect on the economy is so bad that a group of sorcerers decides to revive an ancient etheric device known as Dragonwall. This huge magical artifact is said to be able to control the winds, sucking their energy out of the skies. Building and activating it will calm the storms. But just where will all of that energy go? More importantly, who will control it and what will they do with it?

The hero of the book, Andry Tenner, begins his story blind drunk in an alley in G/l/a/s/g/o/w Alberin. He smells so bad that even Velandar cannot bring herself to drink his blood. This, however, does not save him, because when the vampyre doesn't take him a press gang does. Thus Andry finds himself on board the potentially suicidal voyage that Terikel is taking to Acrema in order to seek a means of destroying Dragonwall. There he falls in with a man who calls himself Wallas but is actually Milvarios of Tourlossen, Master of the Royal Music, who is on the run after having been framed for assassinating the Emperor of Sargol.

Andry and Wallas are the main comedy focus of the story. Wallas is an inveterate lecher with an unswerving ability to talk himself into the bed of any woman he meets. Andry is the sort of guy that women tend to mother rather than sleep with, commenting amongst themselves that he's such a sweet young man and would really be quite cute if he only took a little care over his appearance. As you might guess, Wallas gets his

comeuppance and Andry finally gets a girl. But of course none of this happens in way that you might have the remotest chance of predicting.

The famous McMullen imagination is much in evidence again. The Moonworlds saga has a very scientific air to it for all of the fantasy dressing. Dragonwall is very much an exercise in magical engineering, and the origin of the glass dragons is very neat. However, there does seem to be a definite trend towards the simple and amusing bawdy tale. McMullen spends a lot more time getting his heroes and heroines into farcical situations, often involving sexual complications. It is sometimes a relief to discover that there is a plot and that the world does need to be saved.

One of these days I want to see McMullen and Ken MacLeod on a panel together. Andry has much of the character of a Glasgow drunk (a broken bottle is his preferred weapon), and *Glass Dragons* also features a minor comedy group of student revolutionaries. McMullen is short on Socialist theory and long on satire. It could be an interesting discussion.

As many of you will know, I'm not a great fan of comedy novels. That's why you don't find Terry Pratchett reviewed here. McMullen is starting to skirt the edge of what I find readable. I suspect that this move will prove highly commercially successful for him. At the same time, I do hope that he keeps the ideas flowing. His jokes are good, but it is those "wow, what a neat idea" moments for which I read his books. I hope they will keep coming.

Glass Dragons - Sean McMullen - Tor - hardcover

Down to Earth

Laurie Marks' Elemental Logic series has a well-worked out philosophy of elemental magic behind it. The first book of the series, *Fire Logic*, was all fast-paced action and lots of violence. Book #2, *Earth Logic*, is much calmer and proceeds at a slower pace. *Fire Logic* centered upon the warrior-diplomat, Zanja, and her experiences as a guerilla fighter opposing the Sainnite invasion of Shaftal. *Earth Logic* is more about Karis G'deon, the spiritual leader of Shaftal who rejects Councilor Mabin's guerilla army and instead tries to find a peaceful solution top the conflict, even though that takes years of patient planning and manipulation.

To understand the Carolins – the Sainnites as hey are called here – it is necessary to understand what they mean by honor. To discipline oneself to accept and fulfill one's station and to do it with pride, that is honor. To do as commanded without question or hesitation, that is honor. To want with all your heart and soul for your people, whoever they are, to gain ascendancy at any cost, that is honor. To dishonor oneself, then, is to question tradition, to think for oneself, to desire differently from one's father and mother.

When Marks wrote *Fire Logic* the US-British conquest of Iraq was still a dream in George Bush's eye. Now it is an ugly reality. So, in *Earth Logic*, is the Sainnite occupation of Shaftal. There are barely enough Sainnite troops to contain Mabin and her guerillas. They are totally reliant on the cowed local population for supplies. They are not settlers, but they can't go home. General Cadmar thinks that the only solution is to keep killing Shaftalese until they submit. The plan doesn't seem to be working. Instead a renegade guerilla called Willis turns

religious fanatic and tries to bring death and destruction on the Sainnites in Karis's name. Unlike Mabin, who hopes to one day rule the farmers she hides behind and therefore takes care to avoid reprisals where she can, Willis sees only glory in atrocities, and more recruits.

Of course Willis hopes to force Karis to act. But what really makes a difference is when Zanja decides that the only thing that will save Shaftal is a human sacrifice: herself. A dramatic lot, these fire bloods.

And when Karis does act, the earth moves.

She said at last, "Imagine you've got a tray of food balanced on one hand. And you need to add something really heavy to the tray."

"A steamed pudding?"

"Yes, a steamed pudding. The only place you can safely put that pudding is in the middle of the tray, right above your hand. If you get it even slightly wrong, the entire meal goes to the floor."

Garland could almost see it: the shattered plates, the splattered gravy, the flying peas, the dismayed cook, the ravenous diners startled by the disaster. "I'd be very careful where I placed that pudding," he said.

"Well, I'm the pudding."

It is an ambitious thing to do, in this time of enemies and hatreds, to suggest that a conflict can be resolved by peaceable means. Laurie Marks believes that it can be done, and she relies relatively little on magic to make it work. Doubtless many people will think her an idle dreamer. But I think that they should read her book first before they dismiss her out of hand. At the very least they should come to realize that violence is not a solution either, and atrocities only breed more atrocities.

There is another aspect to Marks' books which I mentioned in my review of *Fire Logic*. They treat same-sex relationships as a perfectly ordinary part of society. This is a very different thing than writing a story about being gay or lesbian. It would have been so easy for Marks to have had the Shaftalese happily bisexual and the invading Sainnites horrified by their "unnatural" practices. But that has been done way too many times. So Marks makes absolutely everyone in the books totally comfortable about same-sex relationships. That's rare, and I don't think that the Tiptree Jury in the year *Fire Logic* was published really understood what I was getting at when I recommended the book to them. They seemed to think that it was "just another gay novel". Maybe this year's jury will follow my reasoning. I hope so.

Earth Logic - Laurie Marks - Tor - hardcover

Science, Myth and Reality

Given the amount of SF&F published these days, spotting good new authors is really difficult. Sometimes there is a real buzz associated with a book, as was the case with Steph Swainston's *The Year of Our War*. But mostly I have to rely on agents and editors, and then it comes down to whose judgment I trust. On the US side of the Atlantic David Hartwell is usually a good guide - if he has bought someone they will at the very least be thought provoking. Here in the UK one of the editors I trust the most is Peter Lavery of Pan Macmillan (and now of Tor UK as well). After all, anyone with the good taste to sign up the likes of China Miéville and Justina Robson has to know what they are doing, right?

The latest new name in the Tor UK stable is Jon George whose book, *Faces of Mist and Flame*, is due out in June. Be careful with the cover blurb. Someone has written, "Will appeal to readers of Neal Asher and Richard Morgan." By this they mean that lots of people get killed. But George's book is by no means a straightforward thriller. It is something much more ambitious - possibly too ambitious.

Having multiple storylines in pretty commonplace in SF books these days, but very few of them take the idea as far as George has done. The main thrust of the book is actually not SF at all. It is a gritty and realistic story about the American re-capture of Guam during WWII. The book's hero, Phoenix Lafayette, is a journalist working alongside a platoon of marines. This is not a Hollywood war story. It is straightforward, stomach-churning, pants-pissing, life-terminating ugly reality.

We instinctively move backwards, unintentionally providing an open stage for what is happening. The burned and shriveled remains of the plants surrounding the doorway are thrust to one side, and a fireball, with the rough outline of a man, staggers outside. Somewhere inside this blaze, inside this fierce flowering heat, inside this Halloween dance of spluttering inferno, is a single Enemy. This man inside the fire makes a sound no human might recognize. He takes another step towards us, bending down into a crouch, his burning hands still clasping his rifle. The face I glimpsed for a split second, as he emerged from the bunker, melts into the mist of enveloping flame, and he begins to blacken and crackle.

That, Phoenix tells his readers, what war in the Pacific is like, though he suspects that his material will be thoroughly

sanitized before it reaches its intended targets.

Soldiers are a superstitious lot, and marines more than most because they are so often sent into the teeth of enemy defenses. Phoenix's colleagues have invented a game to pass the time on the beachheads. It is called Dead Pool Poker. You deal the cards before the assault. Each man puts his hand in his breast pocket. If he dies, the first man to reach him can take the dead man's cards and use them to enrich his own hand.

Jon George could probably make a good living as a war novel writer. But he wants to write science fiction.

So "Nix", as he is known to his comrades, has his own piece of superstition to get him through the assault. He imagines himself re-enacting the Labors of Hercules: kill a snake here for the hydra, clean out a bunker there for the Augean stables. It all seems to work out. And while he is completing Labors he can't be killed, right?

George relates the original tale of each Labor in a separate storyline, taking a McMullen-like amusing view of the whole Greek myth scene. Fans of a certain TV series will love what he has done with Hercules and Iolaus, and these sections make a pleasant reprieve from the all-too-real violence on Guam.

But where exactly does Nix get his strange idea from? Little does he know that the nymph who haunts his dreams is actually a 21st Century mathematician called Serena who has invented a means of casting her mind back in time and observing historical events. She chooses Nix because he has a close connection to the house in Cambridge where she lives. She has no idea what she will end up seeing through his eyes.

The SF strand of the story is by far the weakest of the three. It is full of clichés and tends to drag down the other

elements. But it does allow George to set up a debate. On one side is the cartoon heroism of Hercules, on another the awful reality of grenades, machine guns and flamethrowers. And thirdly there is innocent and pampered Serena, safe in her modern home and full of moralizing views about the evils of war. Somehow Nix has to navigate all of this lot and maintain his humanity.

"You may think that life is easy," he said, "but it's the other way round. It's death that's easy, Phoenix, and it's the living that's hard. I know there may come a time when you'll think back and consider that what I've said to you today is so much grandpa nonsense, but don't forget this lesson. Never kill anything without a reason. If it's for sport, instead of the pot, so be it, but never lose sight of what you are doing. It's a life you are taking, so ask forgiveness afterwards."

Does it all work? I'm not sure. I think maybe that George has stretched himself a little too far. But it is one heck of a brave attempt, and fascinating to watch unfold. If he can go on getting better from here then Jon George has a fine career ahead of him.

Faces of Mist and Flame - Jon George - Tor UK
- publisher's proof

Interview: Mark L. Olson of NESFA Press

Perhaps the most unusual small press in the science fiction industry is that run by the New England Science Fiction Association (NESFA), a Massachusetts-based fan club. NESFA runs the annual Boskone convention in Boston. Members of the club are also heavily involved in

Massachusetts Convention Fandom Incorporated (MCFI), the organization that runs the successful Noreascon series of Worldcons. Mark Olson, who spoke to *Emerald City* on behalf of NESFA Press, was also the chair of Noreascon 3, the 1989 Worldcon.

CM: How did the world's largest science fiction fan club come to be running a small press publishing company?

MLO: It started before I joined the club - in 1972 Bill Desmond, a NESFA member talked the club into doing a small hardcover book for that year's Boskone Guest of Honor, L. Sprague de Camp, (and Bob Wiener, who now runs Donald M. Grant Publisher, honchoed the printing). It was a collection of fiction, poetry and essays called *Scribblings* and with about three exceptions we've done a Boskone Book every year since.

MLO: Now that I think of it, that's only the start of the *fiction* publishing. In the late sixties, years before that first Boskone Book, NESFA wound up purchasing the copies of Filthy Pierre (Erwin Strauss)'s *MITSES Index to the SF Magazines* which had been seized by the printer. NESFA sold them and then published annual indexes for the years after the Strauss Index. I suppose *those* should be considered the real start of NESFA Press.

CM: Unlike other small presses you are officially a non-profit organization. So any proceeds are ploughed back into making more books, correct?

MLO: Yes - though all the club's earnings from the NESFA Press, Boskone, membership dues, etc., are dumped into the club's general fund and money is spent from it to run the club and print books, etc. We don't ring-fence the publishing income, but to a decent approximation NESFA Press' profits turn into books in inventory. We're

much better at generating books than we are at generating cash...

CM: All of your staff are volunteers. Roughly how many people do you have working on the company, and what sort of time do they put into the business?

MLO: Oh, boy, that's hard to answer. Most active members of the club contribute in some way or another, so 20 people? 30 people? When a person volunteers to edit a book this can be a commitment of many, many hours. Other people simply volunteer now and then to proofread stories and may only do an hour or two of work on a particular book. The person who is mainly responsible for editing a book usually spends a fair number of hours on it, though.

CM: What other commitments do the volunteers have to make? Do they take correspondence course in editing, for example?

MLO: Not really - we're pretty much all self-taught, though Tony Lewis is a technical writer and George Flynn a professional proofreader. I'm a chemist-turned software development manager, and if anything it worked the other way. In my last job I also wound up running our technical writing department since my NESFA Press experience (small though it was) made me far more experienced than anyone else in Engineering.

CM: Given that you are all volunteers, how do you come to decisions about what books to publish?

MLO: It's not terribly systematic, but in the end the club votes on each project. As you'd expect, that's just the tip of the iceberg.

MLO: Our basic policy is that for a project to be approved, we need a willing, competent volunteer who wants to be the editor and is willing to do the

work and lead the project, and we also need a general feeling amongst the membership that the project is a good one for NESFA to put its resources into.

MLO: We've found that if no one is eager to do the project - if it lacks a champion - then it will probably not be successful. This is partly because if no one in the club passionately wants the book to happen, then probably there aren't many people out there who passionately want to buy it, either. Our market is people like us, after all. Additionally, if no one is eager to do the work, it tends not to get done and the project drags on and on and never gets done.

MLO: So when a member comes up with an idea (we rarely do things initiated by non-members, because that usually means that no member is eager to do it, but often a non-member's suggestions have the effect of crystallizing a notion that's been kicking around the club for a while) we usually talk about it for a while ...weeks, months, more... and if the idea sparks enthusiasm, it will easily be approved when it's brought before the membership for approval.

CM: What parts of the publishing process do NESFA staff get involved in: editing, layout, production, distribution?

MLO: Pretty much all of it. We negotiate the contract, select the stories, find copies, scan and OCR them, proof the result, typeset it and design and lay out the book. Similarly for the dust jacket, we find the cover art and design the dust jackets. That all goes off to a commercial printer to be printed and bound, and then the books are shipped back.

MLO: We handle all the sales of the books, but only some of the packing and shipping. We use a company in central Massachusetts which stores the books and then packs and mails them when we send them a shipping list. (For many

years we did all the packing and shipping ourselves, but about five years ago it got to the point where it was beyond what volunteer labor was willing and able to do, so we hired out the least interesting part of the job.)

CM: You have a very clear business plan with three types of book on which you concentrate: convention Guest of Honor books, reprints of classic works, and reference books. How do those choices relate to your being a volunteer organization?

MLO: Well, it's not like we've got a Master Plan or anything. We do what we like that people will buy, and those three classes are what fit the pattern.

CM: With respect to convention books, I understand that other fanish organizations, including some Worldcons, have begun to outsource their book production to NESFA. Can you give some examples?

MLO: It's not new - we did a GoH book for Chicon IV in 1982 and for Confederation in 1986. But it's not something we seek out - most of the time we've got so many projects going that we're not eagerly looking for additional projects. But when people we know ask us and there's a club member who wants to do it, we go ahead.

CM: NESFA members are heavily involved in Noreascon 4, this year's Worldcon. You have already produced a two-volume collection of the complete works of William Tenn. What other Guest of Honor books do you have planned?

MLO: Four of them! We're doing a third volume of Tenn, his non-fiction. It's titled *Dancing Naked* and should be wonderful. He's a great storyteller and raconteur and a big chunk of the book is him telling about his life in SF and the people he knew. We're 99% sure of a Pratchett collection of short fiction and

non-fiction (title to be decided). Peter Weston has written an excellent history of British fandom, *With Stars in My Eyes*, from the 60s through the early 80s, and Fred Lerner is editing a collection of Jack Speer's fannish writing.

CM: How do Guest of Honor books get defined? Do you go to an author as suggest some ideas, or do they come to you and tell you about something they really wish they could get into print?

MLO: Yes. Both. Sometimes it's trunk stories, sometimes it's a collection of essays and stories that were published but are out of print, sometimes it's a collection. There's really no pattern other than that we want a book which shows off the guest.

CM: On the subject of classic works, you have just released a new edition of John Myers Myers' famous fantasy novel, *Silverlock*. Can you tell us a little about the new material in the book?

MLO: There's not anything strictly new other than an introduction and an essay, but what we've done is pull together a big chunk of interesting stuff about *Silverlock* which is very hard to find. *Silverlock* is about a very mundane man's adventures in The Commonwealth, a large island populated by characters from fiction of all eras. (Some of the fun is recognizing the people *Silverlock* runs into.) One of the pieces we collected is *The Silverlock Companion* written by Fred Lerner and Anne Braude, which appeared in Ed Meskys' wonderful fanzine *Niekas* some years back. The *Companion* identifies the characters used in the book for you.

MLO: Additionally, there are things like a sketch of Myers by one of his daughters, music for some of the songs in *Silverlock* (Bruce Pelz, Gordy Dickson, Poul Anderson and others wrote the music), short essays (some written as introductions to other editions) on

Silverlock by Karen Anderson, Poul Anderson, Jerry Pournelle, Larry Niven, Darrell Schweitzer, and a number of other items.

MLO: It's a real feast for people who love the book (and for people who don't yet know that they love it.)

CM: A rather more unusual recent publication is a collection of science fiction musicals. What is the story behind that?

MLO: These musicals were written by Rhode Island fans Mark Keller and Sue Anderson and were performed at Boskone in the late 70s. When Mark died a couple years ago, we were reminiscing about him and decided that it would be fun to get them back into print.

CM: Do you ever accept submissions, for example if someone has an idea about a reference book they want to write?

MLO: Not really, though I suppose there are exceptions to every rule. Maybe the best way to explain it is that NESFA Press does not accept submissions, but that sometimes people manage to interest members in a project who then convince the club to do it.

CM: What are the most successful things that NESFA Press has done?

MLO: If you're talking about sales volume, it's probably *The Rediscovery of Man* by Cordwainer Smith, *Ingathering: The Complete People Stories of Zenna Henderson*, and *Dreamweaver's Dilemma* by Lois McMaster Bujold.

CM: What production technology does NESFA press use, conventional or Print-on-Demand?

MLO: Strictly conventional. I've never seen a PoD book that I thought well made and we try to make sure all our books will last indefinitely.

CM: I have seen NESFA books on the shelves of bookstores as far afield as

Australia. You guys seem to have cracked the distribution problem where other small presses have failed. What is the secret?

MLO: There isn't any as far as I know - it probably a combination of longevity and a fairly large backlist.

CM: I see from your web site that you are now distributing books for two other small presses. How did that come about?

MLO: Well, Advent happened because many of us wanted to buy Advent books and never could find them, so we decided we'd stock them, and then we sold them at cons at our table, and then we put them on the web site when we set that up.

MLO: The Hyperion story is more amusing. Sam Moskowitz was associated with Hyperion Press, and it brought out the last edition of his great history of early fandom, *The Immortal Storm*. NESFA wanted to bring it back into print - Hyperion disappeared many years ago - and Elisabeth Carey was trying to track it down. She walked into a general bookstore in Concord, NH, where she was living at the time and asked the owner who she knew slightly if he'd help her locate copies of *The Immortal Storm* from Hyperion. He told her that that was easy because all of Hyperion's stock was in the store's basement - he was a relative of one of the other Hyperion partners and had inherited the unsold stock.

MLO: Thousands - tens of thousands - of Hyperion books were there on a dozen or so large skids of mixed books. We arranged to go through them and found at least a few copies of many Hyperion SF titles (SF was just a tiny fraction of their out-of-copyright reprint program) and bought them and offered them for sale. We've actually dropped the Hyperion books now that the bookstore owner is selling them himself

on Amazon, though we do have essentially all of the remaining copies of *The Immortal Storm* and still sell that. (The few others still listed on our web site reflect remaining copies yet unsold.)

CM: You always have a big sales presence at Worldcons. How successful is selling at conventions for you?

MLO: It's quite significant - Boskone and Worldcon between them typically are 20% of a year's sales.

CM: Would it still be profitable without the volunteer labor?

MLO: Nope. I did an analysis once and worked out that our annual profit from NESFA Press would pay us about \$4 an hour for the labor we put in. (That's one of the main reasons we're relatively successful and many other small presses aren't. We subsidize NESFA Press heavily with our own time.)

CM: What does the future hold for NESFA Press? Do you think the fannish model is sustainable, or will you have to become a business once the current generation of volunteers retires?

MLO: We're always tinkering and trying to find ways to avoid doing the boring stuff while still doing the fun stuff. Hiring out the packing and mailing has helped a lot, but if we wanted to grow beyond the 6-8 books/year we're doing now, we'd have to slough off even more of the un-fun parts - and that's not easy. And we just started selling on our web site, which should prove to be an interesting experiment.

Found in Translation

I owe my discovery of this particular book to reader Mike Kingsley who wrote to me suggesting a translated story as a potential Hugo nominee. The story in

question was "Gray Noise", by Pepe Rojo, and it appears in *Cosmos Latinos*, an anthology of science fiction from Latin America and Spain, edited by Andrea Bell and Yolanda Molina-Gavilán. Given Mike's enthusiastic recommendation of one of the stories in the book, it seemed that I really should cover it in this column.

If *Cosmos Latinos* has a flaw, then it is that it is trying to be two different things. Rather than simply pick the best of current Latino SF, the editors have gone all the way back to the 19th Century and have produced a history of Latino SF from then to the present day. (By the way, I'm using the US term Latino here, in part because of the title of the book, but whenever I use that term it should be taken to encompass Spain as well, and not to include other "Latin" European countries except possibly Portugal. There are works translated from Portuguese in the book, but they are all Brazilian.) So on the one hand we are looking at an historical document, and on the other a cross-cultural comparison. That's not necessarily a bad thing, except that the development of Latino SF seems to have closely paralleled English SF. There is obviously less influence from the American pulps, and more influence from the likes of Borges, but in terms of history it is very recognizable.

We start out in the 19th Century with absurdly optimistic faith in science and an earnest support of a "feminism" that would have most modern-day women gagging in horror. From there we move forward to a more rigorous view of science, on into a period where most of the stories sound like scripts from Classic Trek, and finally into a grimy cyberpunk era. It is all very familiar.

Culturally, however, there are differences. There is perhaps more of an emphasis on religion than in English SF.

But by far the most characteristic feature of the stories is their fascination with living under dictatorships. There is, of course, a very good reason for this, namely that many of the stories were written by people who actually have lived under dictatorships, as opposed to us lucky Anglos who have largely avoided that fate. Needless to say, the whole thing sounds much more real when written about by someone with practical experience of the subject.

The most important question, however, is whether these stories are worth reading. Are Spanish and Latin American SF writers any good? And the answer to that is an unequivocal yes. Some are obviously better than others, and I'd like to highlight a few of the stories.

The funniest piece in the book dates all the way back to 1952. "Baby H.P." by Mexican writer, Juan José Arreloa, is a mock advertising brochure for a special harness that you can put on your toddler and have the little darling generate electricity as it rushes about the place. The power generated is stored in a battery, which can later be used to power household appliances. It is probably even funnier now than when it was written because to us the style of 1950's advertising is hilarious all by itself.

You can foster individual ambition in the wee ones by rewarding them with little prizes when they surpass their usual production records. For this purpose we recommend sugar treats, which repay your investment with interest. The more calories added to a child's diet, the more kilowatts saved on the electricity bill.

"Baby H.P.", Juan José Arreloa

Argentina's Angélica Gorodischer is one of the acknowledged stars of Latino SF. Her novel, *Kalpa Imperial*, recently translated into English by Ursula Le Guin, will find its way into this column before too long. *Cosmos Latinos* features her story, "The Violet's Embryos" from 1973, a disturbing tale about the crew of a spaceship marooned on a planet that will grant almost any wish they desire, except escape and women. Back in 1973 writing feminist SF was tough enough for the likes of Russ and Le Guin in the USA. Goodness only knows what it was like in Argentina, but Gorodischer does a great job.

I was pleased to find that the book contained a story by Cuba's Daína Chaviano, probably the only work of hers to appear in English thus far. "The Annunciation", from 1983, is about a young woman called Mary who received a visit from an angel and discovers the delights of heaven. Goodness only knows what the Catholic Church made of this one.

The star of the show, however, is Mexico's Pepe Rojo. "Gray Noise" is a fabulous piece of cyberpunk about a reporter with an implanted camera. The story dates from 1996, long before the explosion in reality TV. Rojo has his finger firmly on the sick tastes of the TV audience, and boy can he write. If he were working in English he'd be a big name by now. "Gray Noise" won the Kalpa, Mexico's top SF award, and it deserves to be much wider known.

The whole world is on TV. Anyone can be a star. Everyone acts, and every day they prepare themselves because today could be the day that a camera finds them and the whole world discovers how nice, good looking, friendly, attractive, desirable, interesting, sensitive, and natural they are. How human they are.

"Gray Noise", Pepe Rojo

The editors of *Cosmos Latinos* provide a fair amount of background information about the writers and the places where they get published. There is actually a lot of online activity in the Latino SF community. I'm familiar with the Spanish site, BEM (<http://www.bemonline.com/>). Indeed I think it has got me a few subscribers of late (hi guys!). What I didn't know is that Argentina has a top-rated online SF fanzine, Axxon (<http://www.axxon.com.ar/axxon.htm>), and what is more it has been going a lot longer than *Emerald City*. Wow.

And one final point. There are a bunch of good stories in the book by Spanish writers. I know that I have readers in Spain. There is a Worldcon in Europe next year, and it is as much for the benefit of people on the Continent as for us Brits. To date *Interaction* does not have a single Spanish member. Come on guys, get with the program. We want to meet you.

Cosmos Latinos - Andrea L. Bell & Yolanda Molina-Gavilán (eds.) - Wesleyan University Press - softcover

Infamy! Infamy!

Once upon a time there lived a man called Jorge Luis Borges. Later in life he would become very famous as a writer, but at the time of our tale he was just starting out on his career. He had landed a job writing a humorous column for a local newspaper in Buenos Aires. The subject of the column was what Borges described as "falsifications and distortions". The articles were biographies. Biographies of people who had never lived, but who perhaps

should have lived, and might certainly have made the world a more colorful and memorable place had they lived. When Borges became famous these columns were collected together into a book called *A Universal History of Infamy*.

Now if there is one thing that you can say for us Welsh it is that we have a habit of being so stupid that we are not afraid of anything. Thus it is for my compatriot, Rhys Hughes. Let's face it; no one in their right mind would decide to write a book that was a pastiche of Borges. But Rhys Hughes is not in his right mind. To say that Hughes is mad is like commenting idly that the surface of the sun is a little warm. To say that you read his work for its innovative qualities is like announcing that you take your morning shower under Angel Falls. No, Rhys Hughes is absolutely barking bonkers, and therefore is precisely the sort of idiotic young gunslinger who might try to take on the great Borges himself. And he has just the sort of deranged mind to succeed.

He is, of course, also precisely the sort of person whom you would expect to see being published by the Ministry of Whimsy Press.

Anyway, my copy of Borges' *Complete Works* is sat at home in California and I'm here in Somerset. I can't really judge how well Hughes has done vis-à-vis the master. I can, however, report that Hughes's book, cunningly titled *A New Universal History of Infamy*, is possessed of an introduction by the inestimable Mr. John Clute. Now, unlike me, Clute is not the sort of person to be writing an essay without all of the necessary reference works to hand, so he does comment on the Borges comparison, and he does not complain. Indeed, he is rather complimentary.

Clute, however, does not talk entirely about Borges. He spends much of his

introduction talking instead about the inimitable J.B. Morton, otherwise known as "Beachcomber", and the rather under-sung hero of much of 20th Century comedy. He was a major influence on Spike Milligan. Dave Langford has been known to praise him highly. And I am sure that I can trace a large proportion of my own propensity for insane invention back to my father having introduced me to Beachcomber's works at an impressionable age. I can even detect a strong dose of his famous wonder-product, Snibbo, in the works of the Firesign Theatre.

If you want to know more about Morton and his works, there is a nice little web site [here](http://www.edwards.care4free.net/beachcom.htm) (<http://www.edwards.care4free.net/beachcom.htm>) that can tell you a little about Dr. Strabismus (Whom God Preserve) of Utrecht, Captain Foulenough and the Twelve Red-Bearded Dwarves (one of whom was called Rincewind - see what I mean about influences), not to mention Lord Justice Cocklecarrot and the Ministry of Bubbleblowing. In the meantime, however, back to a small corner of Argentina that shall be forever Welsh.

The first half, approximately, of Hughes's book is given over to precisely the sort of inventive fictional non-fiction of which I have already spoken, namely biographies of non-existent persons, or at least persons whose existence is somewhat dubious. You can read an except, Hughes's biography of the highwayman, Dick Turpin, online at Rick Kleffel's Agony Column http://trashotron.com/agonny/fiction/hughes-the_worst_hero.htm. It is not, I suspect, laugh a sentence material, but only because Hughes is so deadpan that you can read several paragraphs before your brain starts saying, "hang on a minute, what did he write back there?"

And then collapsing in a fit of logical inconsistencies.

The biographies are followed by "Streetcorner Mouse", a pastiche of Borges famous short story, "Streetcorner Man". I'm not going to say much more than that it is set in a pub in Cardiff, it is very strange, and it works much better if you read it in a Welsh accent.

After that there is a series of fragments and ultra-short pieces of the type for which Borges became justly famous, except that these are infused with the characteristic Hughes view of the world that is not so much warped as curled in on itself in all twelve dimensions of space-time and liable to drop your mind, screaming, through the event horizon of possibility. You have been warned.

A New Universal History of Infamy - Rhys Hughes - Ministry of Whimsy Press - hardcover

Short Stuff

Video Geek Stories

I'm the wrong person to be writing this review. If I were still in Melbourne I would give the book to Terry Frost and he would come back with a fabulously erudite piece praising the book to the skies and providing lots of fascinating background detail about the stories that the reader might not be aware of. Me, I'm just clueless. I have Midge Ure going round and round in my head. "It means nothing to me." Howard Waldrop's *Dream Factories and Radio Pictures*, is a short story collection about the history of film and television.

It is obvious that Waldrop knows his stuff. I'm not so clueless that I can't spot a story so full of dropped names that you can't see the floor for the fame

draped across it. I'm suspicious enough that when Waldrop writes about famous movie people having mysterious dreams I guess that he is prefiguring scenes from their most famous productions. If had seen just about every famous movie ever produced, and most of the rest besides, I would know all this. Of course I would need to be something of an expert on early 20th Century history as well, in particular that of the United States. But if I knew all of those things then I would be happy with this book.

As it is, however, I'm clueless. Which is sad because there is no doubt that Waldrop can write good stuff. And furthermore there is proof, because one of the stories is sufficiently obvious to get through even to a media-ignoramus like me. "Heirs of the Perisphere" stars three automata who were built to work in a big theme park in Japan. Their names are MIK, DUN and GUF, and they represent well-loved cartoon characters. Of course they speak mainly Japanese, but they have a library of other languages as well, and GUF was designed to welcome visitors from the east so he is well versed in dialectics and Maoist thought.

The trouble is that our heroes were put to sleep when they passed testing and have only just woken up. A friendly satellite tells them that they have been asleep for several thousand years, and the reason that the Park is so quiet is that all of the humans have vanished. MIK, DUN and GUF are the last intelligent beings left on Earth.

"I didn't notice anyone at the factory," said GUF. "Even if it was a day off, you'd think some of thuh workers would give unceasingly of their time, because, after all, thuh means of produckshun must be kept in thuh hands of thuh workers, hu hyuk!"

The story was apparently a Nebula finalist, and quite right too.

Sadly, most of the other stories go right over my head. They might just as well be about pigeon fanciers. You know, that classic tale about how old Norbert Bracegirdle invented the first ever clockwork and steam powered automatic dovecot door mechanism. And how the rest of the North Yorkshire Society was so impressed that they clubbed together and bought him a season ticket to Headingley, and he got invited into the members' bar and had a pint or two with Fred Truman himself.

I mean, who cares?

And somehow I can't stop thinking about Kim Newman. Because he knows more about movies and TV than anyone I know. His books are full of references, just like Waldrop's stories. But you don't have to get the references to enjoy Newman's fiction. They are an added extra. *Dream Factories and Radio Pictures* left me shut out. I hope it doesn't do the same for you, because I'm sure that the stories are wonderful if only you have some idea who Waldrop is writing about.

Dream Factories and Radio Pictures - Howard Waldrop - Wheatland Press - softcover

Anytown USA

When I interviewed Peter Crowther of PS Publishing one of the more interesting-sounding novellas that he talked about was *In Springdale Town*, by Robert Freeman Wexler. Copies of old PS books can be hard to come by (try buying a second hand copy of *The Tain*, for example) but I was lucky enough to pick up a copy of Wexler's book at Eastercon. I'm glad I did.

Richard Shelling is a jobbing actor who tires of LA and decides to head out east

to look for the quiet life. He ends up in a little place called Springdale, which is a common enough name for an American town. It resonates with Shelling because he once had a bit part in a daytime soap called *Blake's River* that was set in a town called Springdale. The character he played was called Patrick Travis. Shelling doesn't think any more of it. He buys an old farmhouse and settles down.

Meanwhile another character arrives in Springdale. He is a returnee. Years ago he married a Springdale girl called Caroline Miller. At her request he set up a law practice in the town, but three years later she was having an affair with a local man and he was on his way to the big city. Now he has come back, a wedding invitation from one of the few couples who had remained friendly with him after the divorce. He is not exactly looking forward to the visit. Small towns can be pretty tight-knit communities and most of the townsfolk had sided with Caroline. Some sort of drama may be in the offing. The man's name is Patrick Travis.

From there on things get more and more strange. This is a very good story, made even more weird by the numerous asides that Wexler adds to the text. In a recent interview in *Fantastic Metropolis* (<http://www.fantasticmetropolis.com/s/how.html?w.wexler,1>) Wexler says that he had originally intended them as footnotes but Crowther had suggested inserting them into the body of the text in much the same way as I insert quotes into my reviews. These serious-sounding asides that treat Springdale as a real place (that is real outside both *Blake's River* and outside Wexler's book) add wonderfully to the strangeness of the novella.

Wexler has a novel due out this year from Prime Books. The *Fantastic Metropolis* interview (conducted by the very excellent Rick Kleffel) says that it is

called *Circus of the Grand Design* and that it was inspired by various stories by Angela Carter, in particular *Nights at the Circus*. This is a book I think I need to read. And probably you do too. But in the meantime see if you can get hold of a copy of *In Springdale Town*.

In Springdale Town – Robert Freeman Wexler
– PS Publishing - softcover

Miscellany

Hugo Nominees

Best Novel (462 ballots): *Paladin of Souls*, Lois McMaster Bujold (Eos); *Humans*, Robert J. Sawyer (Tor Books); *Ilium*, Dan Simmons (Eos); *Singularity Sky*, Charles Stross (Ace Books); *Blind Lake*, Robert Charles Wilson (Tor Books).

Best Novella (215 ballots): “Walk in Silence”, Catherine Asaro (*Analog*, April 2003); “The Empress of Mars”, Kage Baker (*Asimov's*, July 2003); “The Green Leopard Plague”, Walter Jon Williams (*Asimov's*, Oct.–Nov. 2003); “Just Like the Ones We Used to Know”, Connie Willis (*Asimov's*, Dec. 2003); “The Cookie Monster”, Vernor Vinge (*Analog*, Oct. 2003).

Best Novelette (243 ballots): “The Empire of Ice Cream”, Jeffrey Ford (*Sci Fiction*, scifi.com, Feb. 2003); “Bernardo’s House”, James Patrick Kelly (*Asimov's*, June 2003); “Into the Gardens of Sweet Night”, Jay Lake (*Writers of the Future XIX*, ed. Algis Budrys, Galaxy Press, 2003); “Hexagons”, Robert Reed (*Asimov's*, July 2003); “Nightfall”, Charles Stross (*Asimov's*, April 2003); “Legions in Time”, Michael Swanwick (*Asimov's*, April 2003).

Best Short Story (310 ballots): “Paying It Forward”, Michael A. Burstein (*Analog*, Sept. 2003); “A Study in Emerald”, Neil

Gaiman (*Shadows over Baker Street*, ed. Michael Reaves & John Pelan, Del Rey, 2003); “Four Short Novels”, Joe Haldeman (*Fantasy & Science Fiction*, Oct.–Nov. 2003); “The Tale of the Golden Eagle”, David D. Levine (*Fantasy & Science Fiction*, June 2003); “Robots Don’t Cry”, Mike Resnick (*Asimov's*, July 2003).

Best Related Book (243 ballots): *Scores: Reviews 1993–2003*, John Clute (Becon Publications, 2003); *Spectrum 10: The Best in Contemporary Fantastic Art*, Cathy & Arnie Fenner (Underwood Books, 2003); *The Chesley Awards for Science Fiction and Fantasy Art: A Retrospective*, John Grant, Elizabeth L. Humphrey, & Pamela D. Scoville (Artist’s & Photographer’s Press Ltd., 2003); *Dreamer of Dune: The Biography of Frank Herbert*, Brian Herbert (Tor Books, 2003); *The Thackery T. Lambshead Pocket Guide to Eccentric & Discredited Diseases*, Jeff VanderMeer & Mark Roberts (Night Shade Books, 2003); *Master Storyteller: An Illustrated Tour of the Fiction of L. Ron Hubbard*, William J. Widder (Galaxy Press, 2003).

Best Dramatic Presentation – Long Form (363 ballots): *28 Days Later* (DNA Films/Fox Searchlight). Directed by Danny Boyle; written by Alex Garland; *Finding Nemo* (Pixar/Walt Disney Pictures). Directed by Andrew Stanton & Lee Unkrich; screenplay by Andrew Stanton & Bob Peterson & David Reynolds; story by Andrew Stanton; *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (New Line Cinema). Directed by Peter Jackson; screenplay by Fran Walsh & Philippa Boyens & Peter Jackson; based on the novel by J.R.R. Tolkien; *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl* (Walt Disney Pictures). Directed by Gore Verbinski; screenplay by Ted Elliott & Terry Rossio; screen story by Ted Elliott & Terry Rossio and Stuart Beattie and Jay Wolpert; *X2: X-Men United* (20th Century Fox/Marvel). Directed by Bryan Singer; screenplay by Michael

Dougherty & Dan Harris and David Hayter; story by Zak Penn and David Hayter & Bryan Singer.

Best Dramatic Presentation – Short Form (212 ballots): “Chosen”, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Mutant Enemy Inc./20th Century Fox). Written and directed by Joss Whedon; “Gollum's Acceptance Speech at the 2003 MTV Movie Awards” (Wingnut Films/New Line Cinema). Written and directed by Fran Walsh & Philippa Boyens & Peter Jackson; “Heart of Gold”, *Firefly* (Mutant Enemy Inc./20th Century Fox). Directed by Thomas J. Wright; written by Brett Matthews; “The Message”, *Firefly* (Mutant Enemy Inc./20th Century Fox). Directed by Tim Minear; written by Joss Whedon & Tim Minear; “Rosetta”, *Smallville* (Tollin/Robbins Productions/Warner Brothers). Directed by James Marshall; written by Al Gough & Miles Millar.

Best Professional Editor (319 ballots): Ellen Datlow; Gardner Dozois; David Hartwell; Stanley Schmidt; Gordon Van Gelder.

Best Professional Artist (241 ballots): Jim Burns; Bob Eggleton; Frank Frazetta; Frank Kelly Freas; Donato Giancola.

Best Semiprozine (199 ballots): *Ansible*, ed. Dave Langford; *Interzone*, ed. David Pringle; *Locus*, ed. Charles N. Brown, Jennifer A. Hall, and Kirsten Gong-Wong; *The New York Review of Science Fiction*, ed. Kathryn Cramer, David G. Hartwell, and Kevin Maroney; *The Third Alternative*, ed. Andy Cox.

Best Fanzine (211 ballots): *Challenger*, ed. Guy H. Lillian III; *Emerald City*, ed. Cheryl Morgan; *File 770*, ed. Mike Glycer; *Mimosa*, ed. Rich and Nicki Lynch; *Plokta*, ed. Alison Scott, Steve Davies, and Mike Scott.

Best Fan Writer (260 ballots): Jeff Berkwits; Bob Devney; John L. Flynn; Dave Langford; Cheryl Morgan.

Best Fan Artist (190 ballots): Brad Foster, Teddy Harvia, Sue Mason, Steve Stiles, Frank Wu.

The John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer (192 ballots – not a Hugo, presented by Dell Magazines): Jay Lake; David D. Levine; Karin Lowachee; Chris Moriarty; Tim Pratt.

The Best Novel list is depressing. *Blind Lake* is a very good book and I hope it wins, but I doubt that it will. *Ilium* is also good, but it is only half of a good book (it only being half a book). *Singularity Sky* is clever and good fun, but is not a Hugo nominee. I talked to Charlie Stross about it at Eastercon and while he is delighted (as we all are) to be nominated he says he's surprised he got in given the quality of some of the books that did not. Normally I do try to review all of the Hugo nominees, but I so disliked *The Curse of Chalion* and *Hominids* that I really can't bring myself to read *The Paladin of Souls* or *Humans*. Nevertheless, I'm pretty sure that one of those two will win.

I'm not really competent to comment on the short fiction yet because I haven't read most of it. But I do expect Jeffrey Ford to win Best Novelette. Everyone else is saying he will too. My first guess that the other two winners will be Kage Baker and Neil Gaiman.

Best Related Book is fascinating. Personally I love Clute's work, but it is not exactly mass-market appeal stuff. The Herbert biography will get a lot of interest, and of course art books normally win the category. But personally I suspect that the *Lambshead Guide* has a very good chance, given that it will appeal to an awful lot of people who do not normally vote in this category. It will probably have to win on first preferences, but it could make it.

Not much to say about the Dramatic Presentations, except Vote Gollum! You know it makes sense, my preciousses.

The rest of the Hugos are mainly a case of the usual suspects and the usual people will win (including *Mimosa* and Langford). I am, however, very pleased to see *The Third Alternative* get into Best Semi-Prozine. Well done, Andy! Also Best Fan Artist could be close between Sue Mason and Frank Wu. *Plotka* undoubtedly deserves to win, but sadly I think they'll have to wait until Glasgow.

The Campbell is another interesting category. There are several people in the frame whom I would love to see win. They can't all do so. I can't call this one at all.

Those Silly Retro Things

Best Novel of 1953 (113 ballots): *The Caves of Steel*, Isaac Asimov (*Galaxy*, Oct.-Dec. 1953); *Fahrenheit 451*, Ray Bradbury (Ballantine); *Childhood's End*, Arthur C. Clarke (Ballantine); *Mission of Gravity*, Hal Clement (*Astounding*, April-July 1953); *More than Human*, Theodore Sturgeon (Ballantine).

Best Novella of 1953 (67 ballots): "Three Hearts and Three Lions", Poul Anderson (*Fantasy & Science Fiction*, Sept.-Oct. 1953); "Un-Man", Poul Anderson (*Astounding*, Jan. 1953); "A Case of Conscience", James Blish (*If*, Sept. 1953); "The Rose", Charles L. Harness (*Authentic Science Fiction Monthly*, March 1953); "...And My Fear is Great...", Theodore Sturgeon (*Beyond Fantasy Fiction*, July 1953).

Best Novelette of 1953 (66 ballots): "Sam Hall", Poul Anderson (*Astounding*, Aug. 1953); "The Adventure of the Misplaced Hound", Poul Anderson & Gordon R. Dickson (*Universe*, Dec. 1953); "Earthman, Come Home", James Blish

(*Astounding*, Nov. 1953); "The Wall Around the World", Theodore Cogswell (*Beyond Fantasy Fiction*, Sept. 1953); "Second Variety", Philip K. Dick (*Space Science Fiction*, May 1953).

Best Short Story of 1953 (96 ballots): "Star Light, Star Bright", Alfred Bester (*Fantasy & Science Fiction*, July 1953); "It's a Good Life", Jerome Bixby (*Star Science Fiction Stories* #2, Ballantine); "The Nine Billion Names of God", Arthur C. Clarke (*Star Science Fiction Stories* #1, Ballantine); "The Seventh Victim", Robert Sheckley (*Galaxy*, April 1953); "A Saucer of Loneliness", Theodore Sturgeon (*Galaxy*, Feb. 1953).

Best Related Book of 1953 (21 ballots): *Conquest of the Moon*, Wernher von Braun, Fred L. Whipple & Willy Ley (Viking Press); *Modern Science Fiction: Its Meaning and Its Future*, Reginald Bretnor (Coward-McCann); *Science-Fiction Handbook*, L. Sprague de Camp (Hermitage).

Best Dramatic Presentation, Short Form, of 1953 (96 ballots): *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* (Mutual Pictures/Warner Brothers). Directed by Eugène Lourié; screenplay by Louis Morheim and Fred Freiberger; based on the story by Ray Bradbury; *Duck Dodgers in the 24 ½ th Century* (Warner Brothers). Directed by Chuck Jones; written by Michael Maltese; *Invaders from Mars* (National Pictures/20th Century Fox). Directed by William Cameron Menzies; screenplay by Richard Blake; story by John Tucker Battle; *It Came from Outer Space* (Universal). Directed by Jack Arnold; screenplay by Harry Essex; story by Ray Bradbury; *The War of the Worlds* (Paramount Pictures). Directed by Byron Haskin; screenplay by Barré Lyndon; based on the novel by H.G. Wells.

Best Professional Editor of 1953 (49 ballots): Anthony Boucher; John W.

Campbell, Jr.; H. L. Gold; Frederik Pohl; Donald A. Wollheim.

Best Professional Artist of 1953 (68 ballots): Chesley Bonestell; Ed Emshwiller; Virgil Finlay; Frank Kelly Freas; Richard Powers.

Best Fanzine of 1953 (36 ballots): *Hyphen*, ed. Chuck Harris & Walter Willis; *Quandry*, ed. Lee Hoffman; *Science Fiction Newsletter*, ed. Bob Tucker; *Sky Hook*, ed. Redd Boggs; *Slant*, ed. Walter Willis; art editor James White.

Best Fan Writer of 1953 (38 ballots): Redd Boggs, Lee Hoffman, Bob Tucker, James White, Walter A. Willis.

It is very easy to look at the Best Novel list and say, "wow, wasn't the quality of SF high in 1953." But one of the problems of the Retros is that there is no guarantee that they will produce the results that would have occurred at the time. With hindsight we know that we have five wonderful novels to choose from. But there were plenty of wonderful novels published in 2003 and not one of them is on the ballot.

A similar situation may apply in reverse to the fannish categories. Two of the best know fan writers of 1953 were Harlan Ellison and Robert Silverberg. Had there been Hugos at that time, they might have won. Today they don't get nominated. All very odd.

As for the Dramatic Presentation Hugos, goodness only knows what is going on. The Administrators are apparently claiming that they didn't have enough nominees, which is why there is only one category. But I have this awful feeling that this supposed lack of nominees is because they have arbitrarily assigned all of the movies to short form thanks to an idiotic interpretation of the Hugo rules. Oh well, it could be worse, they could have done something like that with the important awards.

Nebula Results

Best Novel: *The Speed of Dark*, Elizabeth Moon (Ballantine); **Best Novella:** *Coraline*, Neil Gaiman (HarperCollins); **Best Novelette:** "The Empire of Ice Cream", Jeffrey Ford (*Sci Fiction*, 26 Feb 2003); **Best Short Story:** "What I Didn't See", Karen Joy Fowler (*Sci Fiction* 10 Jul 2002); **Best Script:** *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*, Fran Walsh, Philippa Boyens, Stephen Sinclair & Peter Jackson (New Line Cinema; based on the novel by J. R. R. Tolkien).

Other awards presented at the Nebula ceremony: the Damon Knight Memorial Grand Master Award was given to Robert Silverberg, and the Service to SFWA Awards were presented to Ann Crispin and Michael Capobianco.

Given the paucity of the novel short list I'm pretty pleased with the winner. The short fiction winners are all great pieces of work and I'm very pleased with the results.

Philip K. Dick Award

A huge Hooray! For Richard Morgan, whose *Altered Carbon* is a thoroughly deserved winner. Kudos to for Jane Jensen who got an honorable mention for *Dante's Equation*. Many commiserations to Chris Moriarty who I thought was in with a really good chance. *Spin State* is a really good book.

BSFA Awards

Oh well, can't expect to win first time out, especially against such a good field. The BSFA winners are: Jon Courtenay Grimwood for *Felaheen* (Best Novel), Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean for *Wolves in the Walls* (Best Short Fiction),

Colin Odell for the cover of *The True Knowledge of Ken MacLeod* (Best Artwork) and Farah Mendlesohn for the introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction* (Best Non-Fiction). And a magnificent set of winners they are too.

Now if we could just get a few more winners to turn up at the award ceremony. Farah was there, of course, and Jon is kind of disappointed because this was the first Eastercon he's missed in some time, but 1 out of 3 was kind of embarrassing.

Magazine Awards

Both *Analog* and *Asimov's* have released the results of their annual readers' polls for 2003. The results are available at *Locus Online* (http://www.locusmag.com/2004/News/04_AnalogAsimovsWinners.html). It would be nice to think that these awards might give some guidance to likely Hugo winners, but in fact only Catherine Asaro's novella, "Walk in Silence", is both an readers' poll winner and a Hugo nominee. And this despite the fact that between them *Analog* and *Asimov's* have 11 of the 15 short fiction nominees. Verily, people's tastes in short fiction are very varied. When the nomination figures come in I expect that we will once more see a very wide spread in the voting.

Aurealis Awards

The Aurealis Awards results are not online yet but *Locus Online* has heard rumors and I can therefore congratulate Jon Blum and Kate Orman for winning Best Science Fiction Novel (*Fallen Gods* - a Dr. Who novel from Telos Publishing, no less!) and Garth Nix for Best Fantasy Novel (*Abhorsen*). I'm disappointed for K.J. Bishop but I'm sure she won't mind

being beaten by someone as good as Garth Nix. I'm stunned that a book from a small press publisher in the UK can win a major literary award on the other side of the world. Well done Telos!

Ditmar Awards

Australian fandom is rather more efficient. The Ditmar awards were online almost immediately after they were announced. Here are the winners:

Best Novel: *The Etched City*, K.J. Bishop; **Best Novella:** "La Sentinelle", Lucy Sussex; **Best Short Story:** "Room for Improvement", Trudi Canavan; **Best Collected Work:** (Tie) *Agog! Terrific Tales*, Cat Sparks and *Forever Shores*, Peter McNamara & Margaret Winch; **Best Artwork:** *Agog! Terrific Tales*, Cat Sparks; **Best Fan Writer:** Bruce Gillespie; **Best Fan Artist:** Les Petersen; **Best Fan Production:** Elsewhere Launch, CSFG; **Best Fanzine:** *The Australian SF Bullsheet*, Edwina Harvey & Edwin Scribner; **The William Atheling Jr. Award** (for SF criticism): Bruce Gillespie; **Best New Talent:** K.J. Bishop.

Gee but it is nice when people vote the way you want them to, isn't it. Congratulations in particular to Bruce and Kirsten, both of whom picked up two awards. And of course to all the others winners, several of whom I am honored to know.

International Horror Guild Awards

The fiction winners are as follows: **Best Novel:** *lost boy lost girl*, Peter Straub (Random House); **Best First Novel:** *Jinn*, Matthew B.J. Delaney (St. Martin's); **Best Collection:** (Tie) **The Two Sams**, Ghost Stories by Glen Hirshberg (Carroll & Graf), *More Tomorrow & Other Stories* by Michael Marshall Smith (Earthling Publications); **Best Anthology:** *The Dark:*

New Ghost Stories, edited by Ellen Datlow (Tor); **Best Long Fiction:** *Louisiana Breakdown*, Lucius Shepard (Golden Gryphon); **Best Medium Fiction:** "Dancing Men", Glen Hirshberg (*The Dark*); **Best Short Fiction:** "With Acknowledgments to Sun Tzu", Brian Hodge (*The Third Alternative* #33).

Congratulations to the winners, only one of which I have read. Commiserations to whole bunch of people who had really good entries in the short list, including Jeff Vandermeer, K.J. Bishop, Jeffrey Ford, Elizabeth Hand, George Martin and Lucy Sussex.

All Change Editors

They are changing guard at *Asimov's* and *Interzone*. Both Gardner Dozois and David Pringle are stepping down after ludicrous numbers of years as editors of those publications. Both men cite a need for a change and a desire to take up a writing career. Pringle will probably be doing non-fiction. Dozois has a couple of short fiction Nebulas to his name so it is to be hoped that he'll be hunting a few more.

As for the magazines they have left, Dozois is being succeeded by his long time colleague at *Asimov's*, Sheila Williams. Also he'll be staying on as a consultant. He says he doesn't expect the tone of the magazine to change. *Interzone*, on the other hand, is being sold to Andy Cox's TTA Press, the publishers of the very excellent and Hugo-nominated dark fantasy and horror magazine, *The Third Alternative* (also *Crimewave* and *The Fix* which are crime and mainstream respectively). Andy has already announced his intention to revitalize *Interzone* (which, let's face it, was badly in need of a boost). Here's hoping for good things.

New Home for Clarke Award

Much to the relief of all concerned, The Arthur C. Clarke Award has found a new home in time to keep to the traditional May schedule for the award ceremony. I'm afraid you don't get to go without an invitation, so there's no point in my publicizing it now, but I'll be reporting on the event for *Locus* and *Emerald City*.

Concussion is Coming

As I mentioned in the Eastercon report, I am part of the committee that is organizing the 2006 Eastercon, Concussion. Most of the information that we have right now is available on the web site (<http://www.eastercon2006.org>). Please bear in mind that the committee was thrown together at the last minute so we are a little behind what normal Eastercons would have in place by now. There will be more to come in due course. Expect some major announcements at Novacon.

What I will commit to now, because it is entirely down to me, is that there will be a special edition of *Emerald City* for the convention. It will be devoted to M. John Harrison, and any other GoHs we happen to acquire in the meantime. With the caveat that it only happens if I am still alive and publishing at the time.

London Enters the Shift

Earlier this week I attended one of the British Science Fiction Association meetings in London. The meeting featured Steph Swainston who read briefly from *The Year of Our War* (the fun passage in *The Shift* where she introduces Jeopards and Fibre-Toothed Tigers) and was then interviewed by

Farah Mendlesohn. There were a number of interesting matters arising.

Perhaps most memorable was the amount of work that Steph has put into her world building. This is by no means obvious from reading the novel because, unlike most fantasy writers, Steph does not devote whole chapters to infodump so that she can prove how much world building she has done. Most of what she talked about is not written directly into the book, although it can be inferred from some of the conversation and Jant's reminiscences. Nevertheless, Steph has put a huge amount of thought into the economics and politics of her world, and she talked very intelligently about why certain types of technological advances have occurred but others have not, give the set-up of the world that includes an immortal Emperor and the ongoing war against the insects.

Of course having done all of this work Steph does want to use the world again, and the good news for us fans is that there will be at least two more novels. Both of the planned books are also narrated by Jant. The first one takes place five years after *The Year of Our War*. The exact date of the other has not yet been fixed. So although all both new books feature many of the same characters and the same setting, they are not sequels as such and are certainly not the rest of a trilogy.

Much to the surprise of many of the audience, including myself, Steph had also brought along a set of sketches that she had done of the various characters. She was quick to deprecate her skills as an artist, but they were way better than I could ever aspire to. Steph has an idiosyncratic style that reminds me a lot of Egyptian and Mayan art, but there is no question that she has talent. Hopefully some of the sketches will see publication at some point.

All in all it was a good evening. The room seemed pretty full, and audience range from young fans who I didn't know to Steph's agent and editor, and when I left everyone was getting on with the important job of ensuring that the pub was happy with the bar takings.

Footnote

Next issue will be available for Wiscon and will include a report of the Clarke Award ceremony. It will feature *River of Gods*, the new novel from Ian MacDonald. It will have the books by Anne Harris and Chaz Brenchley held over from this issue, and further thoughts on *The Confusion*. It will have a 19th Century French SF novel by Albert Robida. There will be mainstream fiction from David Mitchell, and an academic study of feminist SF from Brian Attebery. And I'm not going to make any more promises than that in case, as with this issue, I am too busy to fulfill them.

Ciao,

Love 'n' hugs,

Cheryl