

EMERALD CITY #107

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

Introduction

Don't forget to vote!

Hugo balloting closes at the end of July, so you only have another week to get your votes in. I have reviews of all of the short fiction nominees that I haven't covered previously in this issue.

Those of you who have been following the blog will also know that I'd also like you to vote in the BBC *Restoration* program. You'll need to be quick on this as voting closes at midnight on Monday (UK time). For full details see the article on The Concrete Casbah in this issue.

And finally, huge thanks to everyone who voted for *Emerald City* in the Locus Poll. I was just hoping for a reasonable showing. To be the top-rated non-fiction magazine is just stunning. Thanks again!

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Land of Lakes

This being a con report from the 2004 Finncon, held in Jyväskylä in early July.

The Guests of Honor were: Robin Hobb, Gwyneth Jones, John Clute, yoshitoshi

ABe, Toni Jerrman and Jonathan Clements. Someone called Cheryl Morgan was also there and the Finns were very kind to her, despite the fact that she wanted to be on lots of panels. This report will make frequent reference to the very wonderful Irma Hirsjärvi, without whose help and advice I would have had a much more difficult time during my visit.

A Sense of Belonging

For me possibly the strangest thing about Finncon was the sense of belonging which surrounded it. Finland, for reasons that I have not yet fathomed, seems to have accepted science fiction in a way that English-speaking countries have not. This year's Finncon was not an isolated event. It formed part of the weeklong Jyväskylä Arts Festival. I mean, where else in the world would you find a science fiction convention listed in the program of an arts festival, alongside a string quartet, stand-up comics, theatre groups, opera singers, Australian Aboriginal dancers and Mexican Wrestlers? Can you imagine that happening in Edinburgh or Brighton? The luvvies would cut their own throats rather than admit that SF was in any way art. Yet there I was, very kindly being put up in city-owned accommodation for visiting writers, asked to attend a press conference with the local media, and anticipating a convention with an expected attendance of over 2,000 and no membership fee.

Yes, you did hear that aright: no membership fee. More on that later. In the meantime, further belongingness. Finncon is not a stand-alone convention in more ways than one. Yes, it is part of the Arts Festival. It is also two conventions in one: a traditional SF convention, and an anime con. One of the Guests of Honor (Mr. ABe) is from

Japan. And there's another British guest (Mr. Clements) who is an anime and comics expert. Personally I'd be very happy to see such things happening at an Eastercon, but I can imagine the howls of protest from traditionalist British fans if it were to happen.

So, three cheers for Finland for getting rid of (or perhaps never acquiring) some of the idiotic prejudices that surround SF conventions in the English-speaking world. Meanwhile, on with the show.

Introducing Portti

On arrival at Tampere airport I was met by Raimo Nikkonen, one of the most important people in Finnish SF. Raimo is the editor of *Portti* (<http://www.sci.fi/~portti>), a very impressive magazine. With a circulation or around 2,000 I guess that *Portti* classes as a semi-prozine, but it is beautifully produced on glossy paper with some very fine covers and a fair number of colored interior pages. It looks more professional than anything I have seen in the UK or US. And it is, I believe, in its 23rd year of publication. Of course most of it is in Finnish, which makes it rather impenetrable for us linguistically challenged English speakers, but you might like to seek out the special English language edition published in 2003, with its very informative 21-page history of Finnish SF.

In any case, you have to love a magazine whose email address, quite legitimately, is portti@sci.fi.

By the way, Raimo has a very impressive collection of SF books. You know when you are with friends when you discover that every room in their house, bar the bathroom which doubtless gets steamy, is wall-to-wall with bookcases.

Introducing Tähtivaeltaja

And if having one superb SF magazine wasn't enough for the Finns, they've gone and produced a second one, *Tähtivaeltaja*

(<http://www.tahtivaeltaja.com>) is edited by Toni Jerrman (hence his being a GoH at Finncon) and has more of a youthful feel than *Portti*. It covers film and TV, comics, horror, anime and manga in pretty much equal depth to its coverage of literary SF. More to the point, it is right on the cutting edge of modern SF and fantasy.

The latest issue contains a length article by Jukka Halme on new developments in fantasy. It covers just about everyone from China Miéville to Jeff Ford to K.J. Bishop to Mary Gentle to Jeff Vandermeer to Steph Swainston to, well, everyone. Obviously I can't read a word of it, but unless Jukka is panning all those people (which he assures me he isn't) then he's produced a really good guide to what is currently hot in the fantasy genre. Michael Swanwick, who was a GoH at least year's Finncon and has subscribed to *Tähtivaeltaja* reportedly emailed Toni to say that Jukka's piece was the best article he had ever read that he couldn't understand a word of.

Like *Portti*, *Tähtivaeltaja* is what we would call a semi-prozine and what the Finns still call a fanzine. The production quality is excellent, and it is commercial (€5.90 an issue). The obvious comparison is with the UK's *SFX*, which is really quite pitiful in quality of content. *Tähtivaeltaja*, as far as I can see, manages the difficult task of combining a populist approach with a genuine sense of artistic quality. That should be applauded.

I'm told that Toni does very funny movie reviews. I wish they were available in English. I see from the latest issue that he liked *Hellboy*, hated *Troy* and really, really, really hated *Van*

Helsing. I suspect that he is probably right.

The Arts Festival

Being in Jyväskylä a few days early, I was able to attend some of the arts festival, and very impressive it was. There did seem to be a small lack of planning in that Jyväskylä airport decided to close for construction work for the whole of July, right when large numbers of tourists might be expected to be flocking to the city. Nevertheless, the festival organizers seemed very happy. The 35,000 people who partook of the events were doubtless happy too, or at least they should have been if the whole event was as good as the bits that I experienced. (By the way, see the end of this article for comments on how the festival calculates attendance, as compared to how a convention does so.)

The only major event that I attended was a concert of kantele players. The kantele is a traditional Finnish instrument that is like a very small piano or harpsichord but is plucked rather than played with keys and hammers. The concert took place in the rather splendid local church, which added to the ambience, especially as one of the two acts on show was singing hymns. Fortunately religious music is far less offensive when it is sung in Finnish and you can't understand a word that is being said.

The other two acts that I had experience of were both in the business of musical comedy. Auprès de ma blonde are a group of French street musicians with brass instruments and drums. They did their thing out in the town center, splendidly dressed in voluminous culottes, and also performed for the opening of the civic reception. (Yes, seriously, civic reception. Can you imagine me getting presented to the Mayor of Jyväskylä? Absurd, isn't it.)

Also at the reception was Pluck, a British string three piece who play classical music but give not a fig for decorum. Many of you will have seen Torvill and Dean giving Ravel's "Bolero" the elegance and grace treatment. Now imaging the same piece of music being played by three lunatics in evening dress who are continually pulling funny expressions and getting in the faces of the audience. I can see from their web site

(<http://www.pluck.me.uk/home.html>) that Pluck play a lot of private functions, and I can see why. They are really good with a small audience that they can work.

Indeed, both of these acts reminded me of the planet of Eurydice in Ken MacLeod's *Newton's Wake*. In a society where drexler machines are commonplace, live performers such as *Auprès de ma blonde* and Pluck, whose acts cannot even be successfully captured on DVD, would be in enormous demand.

In addition to the civic reception, we were also asked to attend a press conference for Finncon. No, seriously, we were. It was a little quiet. The main local paper seemed to have already sorted out its coverage (which was excellent and extensive), the Helsinki paper was ignoring us because the festival wasn't in Helsinki (they ran a series of articles on Harry Potter and Satanism instead), and the one print journalist present apologized that she wouldn't be able to get us any prompt coverage because her paper was on its summer break. On the other hand, I did get interviewed by the local cable TV station. Goodness only knows what will happen if that ever gets broadcast - TV sets will explode all over Jyväskylä, I expect.

I'm kind of sorry that I didn't get to see the Mexican wrestlers. The act in

question was "Women Wrestlers v The Aztec Mummy." From the look of their publicity the women wrestlers seemed like refugees from a 1950s SF movie - Soldiers from the Planet of Women or something like that. But they were due on stage on Saturday night and by then Finncon was in full swing and I had duties elsewhere.

An Academic Conference

Thursday and Friday saw an academic conference on science fiction and fantasy taking place at Jyväskylä University. Much of this was, of course, in Finnish, which made it hard for me to participate, but I did get a summary of some of the papers being presented and they sounded much like what you would get at ICFA or SFRA or any similar event. For example, one paper discussed the role of the mirror in fantasy stories, another looked at how magic is portrayed in the Harry Potter books. Another was concerned with the image of female witches in movies, while a fourth looked at themes of sex and violence in X-Men comics.

Friday afternoon saw Gwyneth Jones and Robin Hobb address the conference. For this event the venue moved from the compact meeting room in the Research Centre for Contemporary Culture to a lecture theatre in one of the main university buildings. There was an excellent crowd: mainly young and female (and this being Finland, depressingly slim and pretty).

Gwyneth's talk was on the subject of core concepts of science fiction, of which she presented three. The first was what we traditionally call "sensawunda", but which Gwyneth prefers to call "the sublime" on the grounds that "sublime" is a much older and more elegant word that happens to mean much the same thing. She illustrated this with a

quotation from Percy Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* in which the poet tries to invoke a sense of huge forces beyond our understanding, and pulls a very science-fictional trick of illustrating this with an appeal to modern science. In Shelley's day, one of the big "gosh wow" discoveries of science was that the earth is actually millions of years old and that gigantic and ferocious creatures lorded it over the planet long before mankind came on the scene. For many of us, of course, that still generates plenty of sensawunda today, but in a time when most people still believed in Archbishop Usher's calculation of the age of the Earth, made by assuming the literal truth of the Bible, the shock factor was much increased.

Gwyneth's second core concept was that of the grotesque, admirably illustrated by Franz Kafka's famous short story, "Metamorphosis." The point of this, Gwyneth explained, is to get over the idea that the universe is an irreducibly strange place in which really weird things can happen. Finally she talked about aspiration, turning for an example to Martin Luther King's famous "I have a Dream" speech. Gwyneth expounded the theory that, rather than being a literature of ideas, science fiction was a literature of idealists. We talk about "what if" because we want to change the world (hopefully for the better).

Robin Hobb's talk was on a rather more practical level, but also started with a lyric poet. Robin was talking about why fantasy writers need to do research, and inevitably that comes back to the question of suspension of disbelief, an idea first coined by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Much of what she said is stuff that I have been saying about fantasy for a long time (and said interminably about role-playing for years before I started *Emerald City*), but Robin put things rather better than I do and I'd like to

share with you a selection of not-quite-verbatim quotes.

"Most of your mistakes will come because you thought you knew something and didn't check it."

"You should not necessarily believe that I have complete knowledge of beekeeping, but I must make you believe that my beekeeper character does have that knowledge."

"You will not have any faith in what I say about dragons if you discover that you can't trust what I say about horses."

Robin also presented a number of research tips, including the following:

- triple check everything that you read on the Internet because it is probably wrong;
- start with a children's book to get a concise and entertaining overview of the subject you are trying to learn about;
- collect a cadre of friends with in depth specialist knowledge of useful subjects.

Later that afternoon Gwyneth gave a short lecture on short story writing to a gathering of the Finnish Science Fiction Writers Association. This focused on using the detective story structure as a model for creating a science fiction story. Instead of a murder, you have something strange and different about the universe. The characters proceed to investigate this new thing. And the story ends when they understand the new thing and its consequences for the world.

The writers' meeting was also very well attended, mainly again by young people. I think the majority was still female, but a lot more men turned up for this one.

Sadly Finland's most famous SF writer, Johanna Sinisalo, was unable to attend, she being on a signing tour of the US at the time. Oh well, I'm sure I'll get a

chance to catch up with her at some time in the future.

The Fanzine Panel

Friday morning got me off to an early start with a panel about the current state of fanzines. I was ably assisted by Ben Roimola, who publishes *Enhörningen*, and by Jouni Jukkala, the co-editor of *Alienisti*, the clubzine of the Jyväskylä SF club. Ben is part of the sizeable Swedish-speaking population of Finland, so *Enhörningen* is written in Swedish, whereas *Alienisti* is in Finnish.

The most obvious thing about Finnish fanzines is that they don't seem to have been affected by the Trufan-Sercon feud. All Finnish fanzines are focused on SF, and many of what the Finns call fanzines we could call semi-prozines: *Portti* and *Tähtivaeltaja* for example. Many of the Finns in the audience had never heard of trading fanzines or exchanging a fanzine for "the usual". It was perfectly acceptable to them to charge for a fanzine. This is odd, because in neighboring Sweden fanzine culture is pretty much identical to what it is in Britain.

Anyway, I waved a bunch of fine fanzines at people, suggested that they try to get hold of Guy Lillian III's excellent *Zine Dump*, and pointed people at efanzines.com. I suspect that the Finns will find Bruce Gillespie's *SF Commentary* much to their liking, but will be seduced by the excellence of *Plokta* regardless of content.

Ecological SF

This panel made me rather nervous. Firstly I haven't read a lot of SF that you might call "ecological" (Joan Slonczewski for example). Secondly I have little patience with hard line

environmentalists and was expecting a major row to blow up. In the end, despite the fact that we had a Greenpeace activist on the panel, everything was very cordial. This may have been because we are all united in our dislike of American attitudes towards the environment. John Clute was able to comment that everyone in the room accepted the truth of global warming without anyone yelling out in complaint about left wing conspiracies. And there were several hundred people in the room.

Obviously we spent a long time talking about Kim Stanley Robinson, he being one of the most ecologically focused SF writers active today. But I am pleased to say that we also concentrated heavily on the very wonderful John Brunner. If the result of that panel is the sale of a few more copies of *The Sheep Look Up* then I shall be well pleased.

One thing that is worth reporting is that the Finnish branch of Friends of the Earth sponsors an annual ecological SF short story contest. I find it hard to imagine this happening in Britain, where the environmentalist community seems to regard science as the enemy. It was also kind of ironic that while we were having this civilized discussion Britain was being treated to yet another of Prince Charles' Luddite rants. Sigh.

Feminist SF: Theory

One of the things that worried me greatly about being asked to chair a panel on feminist SF in Finland is the matter of meanings of words. It is hard enough dealing with an audience whose first language is not English and whom you have to try hard not to confuse, without having to delve into shifting sands of jargon. Let me explain.

To start with, of course, we have to deal with the whole question of "what is feminist SF?" You could spend an entire 1-hour panel discussing "what is feminism?" and not get very far. The same could be said of "what is science fiction?" To make things easy I decided to opt for a Damon Knight style definition, namely that any work that claims to be feminist SF, or which a self-identified feminist says is important to the feminist SF conversation, is fair game for the panel. However, I also had in mind my own definition of feminist SF that fitted quite closely to the plan for the panel.

Back in the 1970's, when feminism was young and angry, feminist SF very clearly meant SF that was something that took part in the sex war. It was SF that made the argument for women's emancipation, and which promoted equality. Since then, both feminism and feminist SF have moved on, and the Tiptree Award very specifically looks not just at female emancipation, but at any work that examines issues of "gender". The official academic language for this is that feminist SF comprises any work of SF that problematizes gender, but "problematize" is such an ugly word that I'm going to try to avoid using it wherever possible. All that it means is that the work in question treats the subject (in this case gender) as an issue to be discussed rather than as a given.

Here, however, I have to stop and think, because use of the word "gender" in Finland, and in many other places outside of the English-speaking world, is fraught with difficulty. Go back far enough in the history of English and you will find that "sex" and "gender" were pretty much synonymous. My suspicion is that "gender" was a convenient term that could be used to refer to the difference between males and females

without having to resort to the horrible s-word with its connotations of disgusting physical activities that should not be discussed in polite society.

These days, of course, "gender" is taken to mean something rather different from "sex", at least in feminist thought. There is biological sex, and there is gender, and the two are not the same. Conservatives have taken this quirk of linguistic history to, at least in their minds, "prove" that the feminist use of the word gender is "wrong" and, of course, "against nature", but the problem it provides in English is minor compared to that is causes in other countries. In Romance languages, for example (French, Italian, Spanish, etc.) there is no equivalent term. You can't separate "sex" and "gender". Reading an essay on feminism in Finland (thanks Irma!) I discovered that in Finnish the word normally used to translate "gender" is "sukupuoli". This literally means "half of a family partnership", so you cannot talk about "gender" in Finnish without implicitly assuming a pattern of heterosexual partnerships and families. That clearly won't do at all. Now obviously many Finnish SF fans are well aware of this issue, but it was something that I was very wary of.

In order to combat this problem the Italian feminist, Rosi Braidotti, has adopted the term "sexual difference". This in itself is problematic for reasons to do with feminist history. When feminism first started it was hopelessly politically incorrect to admit to any actual difference between men and women (apart from the "obvious", being that women were mature, intelligent and wise, whereas men were childish, thought with their gonads, and were prone to acts of outrageous foolishness). Indeed, admitting that men and women were different in any way was seen to be leaving the door open for arguments as

to why they should be treated differently. It was not until the 1990's that feminism grew sufficiently confident to accept discussion of difference. Sadly, some feminists are still very much mired in the adversarial paradigm, and use of Braidotti's terminology in a US context is liable to attract screams of "traitor" from your audience. In any case, the use of the word, "gender", in English is so deeply ingrained that it would be difficult to dislodge.

Terminology then, is difficult and needs to be explained. When I say that feminist SF discusses issues of gender what I actually mean is that it generates questions along three separate groups of axes. Firstly there are physical issues. Each cell in our bodies is indelibly stamped with a sex marker in the form of a chromosome: XX for females, XY for males, and rarely XXY for interesting hybrids. In addition there are external physical markers of gender: genitals, breasts, beards and so on. A human being can have the external physical characteristics of a male, of a female, or more rarely of both. It is also possible to surgically alter people to give them external physical characteristics different to those that they were born with, or to remove those characteristics entirely (see the "nutes" in Ian MacDonald's *River of Gods*).

Next up we have issues of patterns of thought, wants and preferences, social behavior and so on. Medically it is beyond doubt that the patterns of neurons in male and female brains are different. How much that affects our behavior, and how much those differences are a result of nurture rather than biology, is still very much open to doubt. Nevertheless, we are stuck with a world that appears to be viewed rather differently by males and females, and in which there are people who are

convinced that their mental view of the world is at odds with their physical sexual characteristics. This is the area that English-speakers traditionally refer to using the term "gender" and which Braidotti would prefer to be classed as "sexual difference".

Finally we have issues of sexual preference. Human beings may prefer their sexual partners to be of the same physical sex as themselves, of the opposite physical sex, or to be anyone that takes their fancy. And in the division of lesbians into "butch" and "femme" we can see one example of gender impinging on the choice of sexual partner.

That is a lot to take on board, but anyone who thinks that something as complex as human behavior can be fully understood with simplistic models is undoubtedly foolish. Writing this a couple of days before the panel, I can only hope that I manage to explain it all reasonably well.

Feminist SF: The Panel

It was a hoot. Honestly it was. I had a great time. I did a plug for Wiscon, Judith Clute did a plug for the Tiptree Award. We told a bunch of stupid men jokes, which even the men in the audience laughed at. We talked about Magical Girls and gender bending in anime; we talked about why the replicants in *Blade Runner* are gendered; we talked about Sheri Tepper and Joanna Russ and Suzy McKee Charnas and Matt Ruff. No one started screaming at anyone else, which was a welcome relief given some of the dreadful feminism panels I have been on. Must remember to post some useful links to the blog.

Guest Speeches

I didn't get to all of the GoH speeches at the convention, but those I did attend were all very interesting. John Clute, of course, talked about encyclopedias and categorization. Impressively he did it all off the cuff. Clute knows a vast amount of stuff about SF, and can talk intelligently and entertainingly about it effortlessly and endlessly. And despite his reputation for mining the stygian depths of the English dictionary he managed to keep the Finns with him throughout.

Gwyneth Jones read a paper, but it was a fascinating paper covering a vast array of territory from cognitive theory to the origins of fairy stories. Cinderella, apparently, may have its origins in China. Or it may not. One of the fascinating things about folklore is that it is impossible to prove anything because in order to do so you have to take sides in the diffusion v. parallel development debate. Gwyneth promises that the paper will be available online when she finishes it, although that does require her to stop tinkering with it, something she was busily doing the night before her talk.

Possibly my favorite of the GoH speeches, however, was that given by Jonathan Clements. His subject was the early history of anime, delving back into its use by the Japanese navy as a propaganda tool for persuading young boys to join the navy when they grew up. The oldest surviving piece of anime (the very first pieces were lost in an earthquake in Tokyo) is an anti-English propaganda film in which the Japanese soldiers are talking rabbits and the Evil English all have horns on their heads, presumably to show their relationship to demons. Jonathan showed us a clip, and very amusing it was too (especially if you enjoy laughing at the Evil English).

Jonathan also showed clips from the very first episode of *Astroboy*, from an early episode of *Gigantor*, and from the superb final episode of *Gunbuster* (well, one can't have an entire anime talk without giant robots). It was a fascinating talk, and one that I think would appeal very much to traditional SF fans even if they think that they hate anime.

In place of a closing ceremony the con had an all-star guest panel. Jonathan and Mr. ABe had wisely fled, but the rest of us were sat on stage with instructions to talk entertainingly about sex and parallel universes. Two minutes before the panel was due to start I was told that I was chairing it and that it was my job to keep things lively. The good news is that I knew I could rely on Clute to talk intelligently about any subject I threw at him. The bad news is that Gwyneth thought the audience would be amused if she took to challenging everything that Clute and I said. This led to some heated exchanges that went over the heads of most of the audience and not a small proportion of the panel. I've told Robin that Gwyneth and Clute were making it all up as they went along and are not really privy to some deep Secret Knowledge hitherto confined to the darkest corners of academia. Please don't disabuse her. Miraculously, the Finns seemed to find all of this highly amusing. I think I did something right. I wish I knew what it was.

The Masquerade

In theory the convention had three separate masquerades. The anime folks had staked out the main hall for two separate cos-play competitions, one for groups and the other for individuals. The group session was on Saturday and I was really looking forward to it because there were some people in really

great anime costumes wandering around the convention. I was staggered when it was announced that the event had been cancelled because there were no entries whatsoever. Apparently Finns are very shy about going on stage. I was also somewhat surprised that no attempt was made to fill in the time slot with something else. Turning out the main hall into an already packed convention was not a wise move, and I'm sure someone could have come up with a replacement event. Heck, with an hour or two's notice I would have done a slide show presentation about Worldcon masquerades.

On Saturday evening the science fiction folks got to do their masquerade. Much to my surprise, I was asked to be a judge, along with Gwyneth Jones, Judith Clute, Toni Jerrman and Jukka Halme. We didn't have a single experienced costumer amongst us. Indeed, as far as I know, none of us had ever judged a masquerade before. I do hope we didn't offend too many Finnish costumers.

If we did, however, the format of the contest will have had something to do with it. There were two prizes on offer, one for costume and one for presentation. But these were not judged together; they were two entirely separate contests. The presentation contest was mercifully short, because there was only one entrant. The "costume" prize was hard because what it was effectively asking for was workmanship judging. We didn't have the necessary knowledge to make that decision, and in any case we never got close enough to the contestants to judge. So we interpreted "costume" in a rather wider sense to include a certain amount of sense of character.

Having said that, several of the entrants fell down badly because they had little or no stage presence. Presumably thinking that they were only being

judged on the costume, they stood on stage like shop window dummies. That isn't going to win you friends amongst a bunch of inexperienced judges. There is also a question of costume design here. We had no photographs, we were a fair way from the stage and the lighting was poor. When I got a close-up look at the Shaman costume I realized that it was much better than we had given it credit for, but because it was all shades of brown we couldn't see the quality of the work from the stage. (Also the contestant didn't exactly endear herself to the judges by coming and standing right in our line of sight after she came off stage.)

On the other hand, some of the contestants did have good stage presence. One of the two honorable mentions went to "The Other Mother" from Neil Gaiman's *Coraline*. She had presentation and character. Had she entered the presentation contest she might have won it. But the two contests were judged separately so we ended up giving her an honorable mention in costume instead.

The other honorable mention went to "Enigma", who is apparently a comic character. We could see that there was a fair amount of work in the costume (the detail was nicely highlighted) but most of us had no idea who the character was or whether it was a good representation. Thankfully we had Toni Jerrman who was able to vouch for the costume's authenticity. The choice of costume was very brave, but it was also an occasion where supporting documentation for the judges would have been very useful. Just a page out of the comic would have done the job.

The decision to give that honorable mention to "Engima" was actually pretty close. There was also a very good four-piece "Addams Family" entry. Without giving too much away, we felt that one of the four was excellent, but one or two

of the others dragged the overall performance down. If you are going to do a group, you all have to pull your weight.

The choice of winner was close to unanimous. We gave the prize to "Vampira" (Mari-Pilvi Junikka). She had the hair, she had the make-up, she had a very nice dress, and she looked as comfortable in the role as Elvira does in hers. I have a sneaking suspicion that it is a persona she uses a lot, and that if we had all been Finnish fans doing the judging we might have just said, "oh it's Mari-Pilvi, those are her street clothes." But, we were mainly know-nothing foreigners and we made the decision on that basis.

Finally a few comments on the staging. We were in the upstairs bar of the students' union. Fortuitously it had a small stage, minimal lighting and a sound system (which only the performance entrant made use of). As far as I could see, there was no green room (i.e. a changing area for the contestants) and no stage crew. Two of the contestants didn't turn up. In terms of quality of staging it was a few rungs down from Wardrobe, the small British costume convention. But, that is the price you pay for running a minimal-budget convention. More on this later when I come to discuss just how the Finns manage to run conventions with no membership fee.

The single-entrant cos-play on Sunday was apparently very successful. I have no idea why people were prepared to go on stage singly but not in groups. Sadly I was busy at other panels and missed the event. Fortunately my new friend Esa Virtanen had some photos I could use. The winning costume is really spectacular.

The Conventions Panel

Sunday afternoon saw a brave attempt by Ben Roimola (Interaction's Finnish Agent) and I to sell memberships to the Glasgow Worldcon. Just why should the Finns, who are used to getting their conventions for free, pay €145 for a Worldcon membership? I talked encouragingly about large numbers of attending writers and editors, and did my best to excuse the high cost. I think some of them took it in, and Ben said we made two sales, which I'm really pleased about.

Other cons were also being promoted at the panel. There won't be a Finncon next year, apparently because of the Worldcon. Which is odd because at current rates of expansion a 2005 Finncon is likely to have a larger attendance than Interaction, even without a single American.

This year's Swecon sounds like a lot of fun. M. John Harrison is the main writer Guest of Honor. Sadly the timing is such that I can't attend. Oh well, maybe next year.

Talking of other Scandinavian conventions, I discovered at this panel that there is such a thing as a Nordic Fan Fund. Ben has details here: <http://www.enhorningen.net/noff/> (though sadly not in English). I'll try to get more information about this for Worldcon.

The Finnish Language

I didn't even try to learn Finnish before going to the con. I'm completely hopeless at human languages. I can't manage Spanish, let alone anything complicated. And Finnish, believe me, is complicated, at least for us English speakers. The first problem is that the Finns use a very different grammatical structure to us. They do everything with

suffixes. As Tino, of the guest liaisons, explained, the phrase "I think I will throw myself into an adventure" would be rendered in Finnish as only two words: throw and adventure. The whole of the rest of the meaning of the sentence would be expressed by using suffixes to modify the meaning of the verb and noun.

Finnish is also very strict about pronunciation. Vowel length is particularly important. Consider the words Kesä, Kisa and Kissa. The first means summer, the second a competition, and the third a cat. English speakers are liable to pronounce them all the same. And of course in English it is perfectly legitimate to pronounce the word "bath" as "barf" or "baff", depending on one's accent and social class. Jonathan, who has a Finnish girlfriend and is learning the language, tells me that he tried to ask for a carrier bag in a grocery store and ended up asking for a kiss by mistake. The Americans have raised mispronunciation of words to an art form. They would be completely lost in Finnish. I might one day be able to learn to read Finnish, but I don't think I will ever be able to pronounce it without my Finnish friends collapsing into giggles.

How Do They Do It?

So how exactly do the Finns manage to run such a large convention without having a membership fee? Well, as you no doubt anticipated, it is complex. And I think I should start by saying that I think having completely free conventions is a bad thing. A small charge, €10 or €20, would encourage Finnish fans to understand that something was being provided to them, and that they needed to give something in return. In the current climate, Finnish fans are likely to be unwilling to attend

conventions in other countries, or even other types of convention in Finland, because they won't see why they should pay to attend. And that is sad, because I'd like to see them export their all-encompassing attitude, and because the conditions that allow them to do free conventions are very specific to the type of con that they run.

I spent quite a bit of time at Finncon talking to Johanna Ahonen who chaired last year's Finncon (also a Eurocon so even larger than usual). Her budget for the convention was, very approximately, €20,000. In contrast the budget for a typical Eastercon, with perhaps a quarter of the membership, is around €40,000. These figures are very rough, and I hope to post something more detailed on some SMOFish discussion groups when Johanna and I have had a chance to compare budgets in more detail. Please bear with me for now.

The first thing to note is that almost all of the Finncon income comes from advertising and sponsorship. In comparison Eastercons have very little income of this type. Clearly the general population in Finland has a more positive attitude towards SF than the UK (otherwise we'd not have been part of an arts festival), but even so I'm sure that Eastercons could raise more money if they tried. Quite possibly most of them have been afraid to do so for fear of being accused of selling out to commercial interests. But, if an Eastercon could get €20,000 in sponsorship, it could halve the membership fee.

Two other areas where Finncon clearly spends less are publications and green room. Because people don't buy memberships in advance, there isn't the need for progress reports. And the program book for the Finncon I attended was 48 pages in A5 (that's a standard European paper size, roughly equivalent to horizontally-halved letter size). It

looked like it might have paid for itself in advertising. Eastercons spend a lot of money on publications. Some of this could, of course, be saved by making progress reports available electronically by default, and simply by having less in the way of publications, but I suspect that Eastercon members have become accustomed to a certain level of publication quality and will not be prepared to see that reduced, even if it does save them money.

As for green room, it is traditional at Eastercons to provide every participant at every panel a free drink, which may well be a pint of some expensive real ale. Finncon had bottles of water, and as far as I could gather no actual green room. Once again I suspect that Eastercon attendees would react angrily to the removal of something (free beer) that they have come to regard as a basic right. (By the way, I am not including guest entertainment expenses under green room - despite their much lower budget the Finns spend rather more on guests than a typical Eastercon.)

Perhaps surprisingly, facilities costs are not an issue for the Eastercon - Finncon comparison. Facilities costs for Worldcons are enormous (around half a million dollars), but both Eastercons and Finncons get them more or less for free. With Eastercons there is an element of risk because the hotel contract will give you free function space if and only if you sell the required number of room nights. This exposes Eastercon committees to the risk of a large financial penalty if membership turns out to be low. Finncons get their facility space free because they use university buildings. This is on the grounds that students could obtain course credits in areas such as women's studies, cultural studies, digital culture, creative writing and literature by attending the panel sessions at Finncon. Some US conventions also

register as providing course credits, though I've not seen any get free meeting space as a result.

I've not been involved in a Unicon committee, but I suspect that this degree of public-spiritedness on the part of universities would not happen in the UK. They would want payment, and they would not recognize anything happening at a science fiction convention as being of any academic merit. In time the same financial constraints may affect Finnish universities as well. But for now getting free meeting space in purpose-built lecture rooms saves the Finns a bundle of money elsewhere.

Possibly the biggest area of mystery, which Johanna and I are still sorting out, is that of tech. Eastercons spend a huge amount of money on their "tech" budget: Finncons hardly anything. Much of this difference is because in Finland all of the A/V equipment comes free with the rooms. The Finns have no need to hire microphones, projectors and so on. On the other hand, if they need to get better equipment they may not be able to do so. The quality of the staging of the masquerade this year was poor. If they hadn't had a small stage available in the student union I'm not sure what they would have done. One of the things that was desperately required at this Finncon was a bunch of Ops guys with radios who could keep an eye on the crowds and ensure that panelists got where they needed to be. Johanna tells me that she had this for her Finncon, but only because someone on her committee loaned them the equipment for free. Jyväskylä didn't have that luxury. There are still areas of the Eastercon tech budget that I am investigating, and I have a sneaking suspicion that some of the Eastercon expense is a result of its being held in a larger and more crowded country.

Location is probably another issue of difference. Finncons are generally held in fairly urban areas. Jyväskylä is probably the smallest town to hold one. There is no question of having a Finncon at some out of the way hotel on a motorway junction. People have to be able to walk there. And they have to be able to stay with friends. One of the more delightful aspects of Writers' House was the fact that every morning when I got up to go to the bathroom I found a new group of young men camped in the lounge outside my door. They were happy to sleep on couches, and did not expect or demand a decent quality hotel room.

Like I said at the start, it is all very complex. But I do think that there are things that UK (and US and other) conventions can learn from Finncons. Not the least of which is that if you make conventions cheaper and cater more for younger tastes then lots of young people will come. I have this awful feeling that in many ways Eastercons and Worldcons (and many other cons) are deliberately pricing themselves at a level that will discourage younger attendees. It would be sad to see SF fandom die out everywhere except in Finland.

Finncon Wrap

OK, so where is the traditional Morganesque dissection of con-running failures? Well, I've already said my piece about the masquerade. There were also some scheduling problems on Sunday, mainly because the larger than expected attendance caused the con committee to move panels between rooms to accommodate the vast number of anime fans.

Did I say numbers? It is hard to judge attendance at Finncon because they don't sell memberships, but all of the 3,000 program books had vanished by

the end of Saturday. There were huge numbers of people there, most of them very young. Elsewhere you may see reports of attendance being around 5,000. Treat these with a pinch of salt. The arts festival counts each ticket sale as a separate "person" attending. In line with this policy Finncon was asked to count people attending on Saturday as separate from people attending on Sunday (and people attending the Saturday evening event in the Student's Union as separate again). As this does not conform to traditional methods used by conventions to count membership I'm ignoring it and sticking to 3,000 as a more reasonable estimate.

In fact one of the main problems of the convention was that it was too big for the venue. Getting between panels was a real problem - far more so than at Chicon 2000. If my friend Kurt Siegel had been there he would have had a heart attack at the level of fire risk. Fortunately Finns are much calmer people than Americans. I didn't see anyone (except me) getting irritated at the crush. People just went with the flow as best they could and didn't start pushing or yelling.

Most of the excess numbers were anime fans. I can see that it will become necessary to spin off the anime convention to a separate event sometime in the near future. This will be hard, because the anime people looked rather less well organized than their SF counterparts, and of course you don't want to create a Boskone/Arisia style disaster. But as BayCon has shown, it can be done in a friendly and supportive manner. I very much hope that Finncon will continue to have anime programming even after the anime convention has been spun off. And I am very sure that it will continue to have media programming.

Of course there are always problems with having a large number of young people at a convention. In particular it means that the ladies' toilet will be full of large numbers of adolescent females just hanging out and not actually using the facilities. In an English speaking country they would, of course, be engaging in all sorts of interesting gossip. But these persons, being Finns, were communicating in absolute silence. I guess it was natural to them, but to me it made it even harder to work out who was in line for use of the cubicles and who was not.

Overall, however, it was an excellent convention, and one that I would be happy to go back to. Given the choice I would rather spend a weekend at Finncon than at a typical Eastercon. (And of course I'd rather spend the weekend cleaning sewers than go back to Blackpool.) You might get a larger number of big name writers at an Eastercon, but the Finnish fans I mixed with seemed to have a genuine interest in science fiction and were not obsessed with fandom as an end in itself.

And before I forget, I have to say that the guest liaison people at Finncon were superb. As I write this John Clute is ranting to me about the poor treatment of guests at Concourse. And he is quite right to do so. The likes of Chris Priest, Philip Pullman and Sue Mason are doubtless too polite to vent in the pages of *Emerald City*. But they were not happy, and were right not to be. I won't even start on Parris McBride's assessment of Torcon III's guest handling. In comparison to these to conventions, Finncon was superb. They cared about their guests, and so they should. Clute says, "they treated the welfare of guests as of paramount importance, and that made me feel like responding in kind." That should be a lesson to every convention committee.

Tino, Kati, Elsa, Mika, Irma: thank you, you were wonderful.

Locus Poll 2004

The Winners

SF Novel: *Ilium*, Dan Simmons (Subterranean; Eos);

Fantasy Novel: *Paladin of Souls*, Lois McMaster Bujold (Eos);

First Novel: *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom*, Cory Doctorow (Tor);

Young Adult Novel: *The Wee Free Men*, Terry Pratchett (HarperCollins);

Novella: "The Cookie Monster", Vernor Vinge (*Analog* Oct 2003);

Novellette: "A Study in Emerald", Neil Gaiman (*Shadows Over Baker Street*);

Short Story: "Closing Time", Neil Gaiman (*McSweeney's Mammoth Treasury of Thrilling Tales*);

Collection: *Changing Planes*, Ursula K. Le Guin (Harcourt);

Anthology: *The Year's Best Science Fiction: Twentieth Annual Collection*, Gardner Dozois, ed. (St. Martin's);

Non-Fiction/Art: *The Sandman: Endless Nights*, Neil Gaiman, et al. (Vertigo);

Editor: Gardner Dozois;

Magazine: *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*;

Book Publisher: Tor;

Artist: Michael Whelan.

Analysis

What follows is based on the detailed voting breakdown, only available through the paper version of *Locus*.

I'm quite pleased to see *Ilium* win Best SF Novel, even though it is only half a book. I note too that *Pattern Recognition* and *Quicksilver* are hot on its heels at #2 and #3 respectively. No worries about whether a book is SF here. The voters are also very internationally aware, with *Absolution Gap* coming in at #6, *Coalescent* at #9 and *Natural History* at #13.

Best Fantasy Novel, on the other hand, is deeply depressing until you get down to Mary Gentle's *1610* at #5 and Tad Williams' *The War of the Flowers* at #6. Of course this may be because two of the best fantasy novels of last year, *Veniss Underground* and *The Etched City*, are in the Best First Novel category, where they finished #2 and #4 respectively (and both should have been higher).

Best YA Novel is something I know little about, but I was sad to see Garth Nix run over by the Pratchett juggernaut.

Vernor Vinge just sneaked ahead in Best Novella from Connie Willis's "Just Like The Ones We Used To Know." Personally I much prefer the Vinge story, and would have placed Kage Baker's "The Empress of Mars", which came in at #3, well above the Willis story too. Walter John Williams' "The Green Leopard Plague" was at #8, which doesn't bode well for its Hugo chances. Thankfully the dreadfully dull Catherine Asaro story that got on the Hugo ballot was nowhere to be seen in the Locus Poll. I was pleased to see Robert Freeman Wexler's *In Springdale Town* at #15 because it must have had fairly limited distribution.

Jeffrey Ford's "The Empire of Ice Cream" is deservedly rated the best non-Neil Gaiman novelette. And quite right too. What is perhaps odd is that Jeff finished third and Neil had three stories listed. The third one, "Bitter Grounds", came only 6th. Yet Neil thinks it was his

best piece of the year. And Matthew Cheney agrees with them. I haven't read it yet, but I trust their judgment. Lucius Shepard's "Only Partly Here" was at #4, and from what Ellen Datlow says about it, it should have been on the Hugo ballot as well. Of the other Hugo nominees, Michael Swanwick came in at #10, Charlie Stross at #15, Robert Reed at #24, Jim Kelly at #29 and Jay Lake sadly not listed at all.

Neil Gaiman's "A Study in Emerald" won Best Novelette despite being short-listed for "Best Short Story" in the Hugos. The length limits for the two awards are the same. Neil tells me that the story is right on the upper limit for short stories. Knowing the people running the Hugos this year, they would have put the work in Short Story even if it was just one word short of the limit and everyone had nominated it in Novelette.

The Locus Poll's short story listings are quite different from those in the Hugos. This is to be expected, as Short Story is the category that generally shows the most diverse nominating in the Hugos. Of the Hugo nominated stories, Joe Haldeman's "Four Short Novels" came in at #2 and David Levine's "The Tale of the Golden Eagle" at #4. But of course they were not up against Neil in the Locus Poll.

I read so few anthologies and collections that I can't really comment on the next two categories.

Quite why non-fiction and art books are lumped together is a mystery to me. They end up like that in the Hugos because they are the most popular types of entry in the Best Related Book category, but that is a catch-all, not a category restricted only to two wildly different types of books. John Clute has every right to be peeved, because *Scores* came in at #4 and would have won the

non-fiction category had there been one. I can't see a non-fiction book ever winning this combined category, and it would be better to split it. Congratulations to Farah Mendlesohn and Edward James for getting *The Cambridge Companion to SF* in at #7, an excellent performance for a book that is genuinely academic rather than just non-fictional.

Best Magazine is, of course, dominated by the big fiction mags. Only Ellen Datlow's *Sci Fiction* (#4) breaks their ranks. *Interzone* comes in at #5 which is remarkable considering how bad it has been of late. Hopefully the new Andy Cox era will see it rise higher. The top-rated non-fiction magazine, at #8, is something called *Emerald City*. Quite how this happened I do not know, and I suspect that the editors of the likes of *SF Site* and *New York Review of Science Fiction* (not to mention *Ansible*) are hopping up and down with rage. All I can think of is that you kind people voted for me when I asked you to. And there was me just hoping to finish above the likes of *Foundation*, *SF Studies* and *Extrapolation*. Wow! Thank you, folks!

Tor won Best Publisher by a margin that Michael Schumacher can only dream of. But the good news is that positions #7 to #15 were dominated by small press publishers. Congratulations to Golden Gryphon for being top of the little guys. Executives at the likes of RoC, Warner and Penguin are presumably holding urgent investigations into their poor performance.

No one seriously expected Gardner Dozois not to win Best Editor, and Michael Whelan seems to have wrested the adoration of the public back from Bob Eggleton. Both of those results are likely to repeat in the Hugos.

Overall I still think that the Locus Poll is the best indicator in quality of SF that we

have, but even so it still shows the same signs of sheep-like voting habits that plague the Hugos. I do wish people would think a bit before casting their votes.

The Red Goddess

*I met a lady in the meads,
Full beautiful - a faery's child;
Her hair was long, her foot was light,
And her eyes were wild.*

“La Belle Dame Sans Merci”

John Keats

I've always thought that Robert Graves got it wrong. I guess by “White Goddess” he just means the Moon and that a triple aspect is assumed. But once you get into goddess theology you'll quite often find the term “white goddess” referring only to the Maiden, who is young, beautiful and most importantly virginal, which I don't think is what Graves really wanted. The Crone, of course, is the black goddess, and men should avoid her at all costs unless they are seeking a glorious death in battle. Which leaves us with the Mother. Now admittedly She is often shown as heavily pregnant, but that in itself is an indicator that this is a woman at the height of her sexual powers. I mean, the Fairy Queen who stole Thomas the Rhymer to be her toy boy wasn't thinking virginal. So if a poet, or an artist or writer, wants a muse, it is the red goddess he wants. She is the one who is the fount of creativity. And while the Maiden might have men dying of unrequited love, the Mother will have them dying of lust, or exhaustion.

So much for theology. But what is the point of a muse anyway? What is it that creative people want? Why, to see true

beauty, of course. They want a way to see through to what is real. It is a Plato thing. But it is also a Celtic thing. Because those fairy mounds represent the Mother's bulging womb. And that means that somewhere, between her legs, there will be an entrance into the World Beyond. If only we could somehow manage to see through that doorway, what wonders might we behold?

They were in a large room or cavern with a rough convex ceiling, composed of stone and mortar. Threads of vegetation protruded from the stones overhead; as Swinburne began to walk around, small things burst and belched beneath his shoes, tiny conical caps of mushrooms, fleshy green earth tongues, red-tipped fungi that exploded with a scent of apples and kelp. There were heaps of very old brick, marbled with a soft bloom of turquoise mould. The air was sweet with a strange pervasive smell of apples, as though they stood inside an orchard within sight of the sea.

What am I talking about? Why, the book that has the red goddess right there on the cover. I am talking about a book that is about the madness of art. The sort of thing that affected Richard Dadd, Algernon Swinburne, Gabriel Rossetti and many others (insanity was fashionable in the 19th Century). I'm talking about a book that asks, "what if?" Do famous artists go mad because they can't find the perfection they seek, or because they found it?

The book in question is *Mortal Love*, by Elizabeth Hand. It has Swinburne as a character, and makes use of several other artists under assumed names. Dadd is there very clearly as Jacobus Candell. Aubrey Beardsley is a ghost in the background. Edward Burne-Jones gets a walk-on. Rossetti is mentioned

frequently and Oscar Wilde's mother briefly takes center stage.

Only half of the book, however, is set in Victorian times. The other half is a present day tale centered around Daniel Rowlands, an American journalist on sabbatical in London. For all that he is researching into British romanticism, Rowlands is far too sensible to believe in anything supernatural, even when it happens right under his nose. Which is unfortunate for him, because several of the other members of the cast are not human at all.

"Their conception of mortality is nothing like ours: their lives are so much longer that they have no premonition of what it is to die, to live entire lives with the knowledge that everything must die. For them death is rare and always unexpected. They are utterly without a vocabulary for it. That is why they cannot create art themselves, or recognize what we create. To them we are like paintings. That is why they steal our children and take us as lovers. That is why they collect us."

On her web site (<http://www/elizabethhand.com>)

Hand mentions that the book has been a long time in gestation and has gone through several major re-writes. Very occasionally it shows, as there are bits of plot that seem to go nowhere. But for the most part *Mortal Love* is a superb piece of dark fantasy. It sucks you in with the anxiety of good horror; it is packed with literary and artistic references that have you rushing to Google to see what is real and what isn't. It has a fabulous motorbike. Dear old Balthazar Warnick has a small part in the proceedings. And the ending is beautiful.

Look, this book has gushing blurbs on it from Peter Straub and John Crowley. What could I possibly know about this

stuff that they don't? Certainly this is Hand's best novel since *Waking the Moon*. Possibly it is better. It may well end up being my favorite fantasy book of the year.

Mortal Love - Elizabeth Hand - William Morrow - hardcover

Rising Star

There are many methods that you can use to destroy the home planet of your enemies. Sitting in orbit in a large weapons platform that you have named *Death Star* is quite effective if you are into the whole Evil Overlord thing and want an opportunity to gloat over your victims as you bombard them. However, for sheer cleanliness and efficiency probably the best method around is to blow up their star.

Eight minutes after the detonation, the radiation front reached the innermost human habitat in the system, the world called Moscow. The neutrino flux was high enough to deliver a rapidly lethal radiation dose even after traveling right through the planet. The nightside fluoresced, atmosphere glowing dimly against the unbearably bright background. The gamma pulse, close behind it, flashed the dayside's atmosphere to plasma and slammed it into the already melting rock. Supersonic tornadoes rippled around the daylight terminator, scouring the surface down to bedrock.

Of course, in the bright and breezy world of Mutually Assured Destruction it does help to be insured against such an event. The inhabitants of Moscow were not stupid. They knew that attacks from other star systems were not unthinkable, and thinking about them

they opted for a tried and tested way of making sure that they got their revenge, even if they were way too dead and burned down to their component subatomic particles to enjoy it. The method they chose involved keeping a small fleet of slower-than-light bombers hidden away in the outer reaches of their solar system ready and waiting for orders to deploy. Once underway, such a fleet may take decades to reach its target, but it is practically undetectable until it is too late to stop it.

"This is a reconstruction of a Muscovite Vindicator-class second-strike STL bomber. Our best intelligence gives it a maximum tau factor of point two and a dry rest mass of two kilotons - extremely high for the product of a relatively backward world - with an aggregate yield of 120 million megatons. It's probably designed to prefragment prior to impact, and coming in at 80 percent of lightspeed with several hundred penetration aids and a wake shield against ablator clouds, it would be able to saturate any reasonable planetary ballistic defense system. It would deliver about 20 percent more energy than the Chicxulub impact that hit Earth 65 million years ago, enough to devastate a continent and trigger a dinosaur winter."

And that's just one of them. Following the destruction of its star, Moscow's automated defense systems launched the STL fleet against the only obvious target: New Dresden, a system with which Moscow had been engaged in an unpleasant trade war. The chances of the fleet being found while in transit are vanishingly small. The 800 million inhabitants of New Dresden don't have the means to evacuate, and have nowhere to go if they did. Their only hope is persuading Moscow's government in exile, a small group of ambassadors spread about neighboring worlds, to issue a recall command. But

are the ambassadors likely to have sympathy with a world that they believe has just destroyed their home? And more to the point, they are being assassinated at an alarming rate.

Welcome to the world of Rachel Mansour, UN "weapons inspector", and to *Iron Sunrise*, Charlie Stross's sequel to the Hugo-nominated *Singularity Sky*. Rachel's latest "bomb disposal" mission is to keep the Muscovite ambassadors alive, and persuade them to recall the STL fleet by finding out who really did blow up Moscow's star. Along the way she will encounter Wednesday Shadowmist, a teenage Muscovite with an invisible friend who was lucky enough to be off-planet when the nova hit, Frank "the Nose" Johnson, a Times war correspondent whose description bears some remarkable similarities to that of Stross himself, and the ReMastered, a nasty political movement that is something of a cross between the Nazis and the Mormons.

I thought that *Singularity Sky* was an entertaining book full of fun ideas, but not exceptional. It had cartoon villains and a fairly predictable plot, and I was somewhat surprised (if very pleased for Stross) that it got on the Hugo shortlist. *Iron Sunrise* is an altogether different animal. There is nothing cartoon-like about the ReMastered, nor about what happens to Wednesday, and the plot has enough kicks in the tail to make your average rattlesnake sick with jealousy.

Not that Stross is writing perfect books yet. His politics is still very much from the heart, as opposed to the polished arguments of Miéville or the fascinating analysis of MacLeod. He is also still writing very quickly (he is notorious for hammering keyboards to death), which is understandable for a young writer keen to establish himself but can leave the job part done. I'm sure I spotted a few continuity errors and plot non-

sequitors that might have been ironed out by spending more time on the book. I'd love to see Stross work with a really top-class hard SF editor like David Hartwell who will have an eye for such things.

These are, I think, minor niggles (though I note that Nick Gevers complained of similar problems in his review in *Locus*). *Iron Sunrise* is a very impressive book. Given the overwhelming sentimentality of the Hugo electorate it seems likely that a British writer will win the Best Novel Hugo in Glasgow. I wouldn't discount Dan Simmons and George R.R. Martin (although I see from *Locus Online* that publication of *Olympos* may now have slipped into 2005 and *A Feast for Crows* seems to have been delayed more times than I've had hot dinners), but Ken MacLeod (*Newton's Wake*) and China Miéville (*Iron Council*) have already staked a strong claim to the rocket. There are also new books to come from Iain Banks and Jon Courtenay Grimwood, but they are less well known in the US and therefore at a disadvantage. Stross, however, has already proved his popularity with the voting public, and *Iron Sunrise* is starting to get him noticed by critics. And he lives in Scotland. If you are the betting sort, a small wager now on Mr. C. Stross for the 2005 Best Novel Hugo might prove to be a wise investment.

Iron Sunrise - Charlie Stross - Ace - hardcover

Circus Training

In a recent issue of *The New York Review of Science Fiction* someone (I think it was Russell Blackford but my copy of the issue is in California) complained of Robert Freeman Wexler's *In Springfield Town* that it was not at all clear why

many of the events in the story happened as they did. If you are the sort of person who likes things explained, Wexler's debut novel, *Circus of the Grand Design* is not going to make you any happier. Wexler doesn't do explanations. In his work, things happen. They happen for creative purposes, or for allegorical purposes, or sometimes, I suspect, because they are very, very weird and Wexler likes the idea of disturbing his readers.

People who are not used to this sort of surreal writing are going to spend a lot of time thinking that *Circus of the Grand Design* is one of those books in which the hero is going to wake up at the end and discover that it has all been a dream, or more likely a drug-induced hallucination. They are going to be disappointed. In Wexler's universe it is entirely possible for someone who has just burned down the holiday home he was renting to run into a circus impresario in a café and be whisked away from the fields we know on a train that travels through space, time and for all we know multiple dimensions, there to have strange and wonderful adventures. These things just happen.

Circuses, of course, are full of the oddest people. Our hero, Lewis, gets to meet Garson Gold, the world's most arrogant juggler, a troupe of acrobats who all look alike, speak very little English, and spend much of their time fighting, Cinteotl the chef, who is forever cooking foods that Lewis has never heard of, Bodyssia the strongwoman and her troupe of performing capybaras, and many other strange and wonderful folks. Most importantly there is Joseph Dillon, the circus's manager and the only person who seems to know how the train works, or how to activate the marvelous mechanical horse that is the circus's prime attraction. And of course there is the train itself, which seems to have a

certain familial resemblance to The TARDIS in several ways (including its unreliability).

Not that this is all just an exercise in weirdness. As with most fantasy, there is a tale of personal development and redemption buried in the narrative. Lewis, it turns out, is an imaginative American boy who suffered badly from a strict upbringing in a military family and has fallen into a pattern of allowing other people to bully him and run his life for him. The only defense mechanism he has is flight. Wexler mixes this story with the old Greek myth of Cybele and Attis, and the very strange traveling circus, to good effect. It is a bit of a guy thing, but they need to have their myths too and this is considerably better than the usual run-of-the-mill American son & father story.

In a recent interview in *Fantastic Metropolis*

<http://www.fantasticmetropolis.com/s/how.html?iw,wexler,1>, Wexler mentions that one of the inspirations for the novel was Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*. I trust he'll forgive me if I say that he's not yet up to Carter's writing standard. After all, few people are. But he does seem to have a good grasp of the Carter style. I think I would have recognized the book as Carter-influenced even if I hadn't read the interview first. And of course Carter is no bad influence to have. There are few bigger names in the history of fantasy fiction. Then again, Wexler is also setting himself a very stiff target. It doesn't always pay to invite comparison with the very best. But so far, so good. *Circus of the Grand Design* is a strange and clever fantasy story that probably doesn't have mass market appeal but is ideal for an adventurous small press publisher like Prime. If you like weird stuff, this is for you.

Circus of the Grand Design – Robert Freeman
Wexler – Prime – publisher's proof

Mystic Wood

Any new book by Patricia McKillip is likely to be a delight of language and myth. Her latest offering, *In the Forests of Serre*, is a Mythopoeic Award nominee and is particularly splendid. It uses a range of Russian legends such as the Firebird and Baba Yaga and Koschchei the Deathless to weave something new from traditional fairy tale and fantasy adventure.

Ronan stared at him. He and his father were very much alike in their height and strong build, through the king, massively boned like an ox, stood nearly a head taller. Ronan had also inherited his coppery hair. The king let his grow in a fox's pelt over his mouth and jaws. He had lost one eye and one front tooth in a battle long ago. The scar seaming his face from his brow had pulled his upper lip open in a perpetual snarl. But it was the puckered, empty skin where his eye should have been that was more chilling. It seemed, Ronan had decided long ago, as though he had a hidden eye there, that he could see into secrets, thoughts, invisible worlds.

Unfortunately for Prince Ronan of Serre, his father not only looks like an ogre, he behaves like one too. His devotion to Serre is absolute. He will ensure its safety, if necessary, by conquering every other country in the world. Ronan's sole purpose in life, at least as far as King Ferus is concerned, is to produce an heir to inherit the kingdom.

For the Prince this is a problem. He is still mourning the loss, in childbirth, of his beloved wife, Maye. Suicide, it seems, is preferable to living without her. When his father orders him to marry again immediately, Ronan tries to rebel,

but Ferus is ruthless and no mean sorcerer. He will not be denied.

Then, of course, there is the matter of the bride. Dacia is a small but rich country to the south of Serre. Its rulers are reputed to be powerful wizards. So powerful, indeed, that Ferus is prepared to marry into their royal family rather than conquer them as is his usual practice. For young Princess Sidonie, this not only means marriage to a young man whom she has never met, who has an ogre for a father, and who has no interest whatsoever in her; it also means a long and fear-filled trek through the heavily forested countryside of her new home.

They had chanced into a timeless place, Sidonie felt as she sat at her fire one night. Into a place that would never change and never end. The trees hid even the changing moon.

That the forests of Serre are a dangerous place is beyond doubt. Why else would her father have sent a powerful young wizard, Gyre, to accompany Sidonie on her journey? And if she had been able to talk things over with her fiancé, the princess would have heard of dreadful horrors. You see, one day while riding in the woods Prince Ronan chanced upon the powerful witch, Brume, and accidentally killed her favorite white hen. Now he is under a powerful curse. One that his father, and perhaps even Gyre, cannot lift.

The house levitated suddenly. Ronan saw the powerful calves and huge, splayed feet below it as the witch, carrying her cottage from within, began to run.

Ultimately, however, the witch will prove to be but a minor hurdle on Ronan

and Sidonie's road to true love. For in sending Gyre with the princess, King Arnou of Dacia has unwittingly loosed on Serre an evil more terrifying than death itself.

Much of the action of *In the Forests of Serre* I found reminiscent of an Ursula Le Guin Earthsea novel – surely no mean comparison. In addition the book makes excellent use of Russian folklore for the scenes in the forest itself (Helen Pilinovsky, who knows far more about Russian folklore than me, is a fan of the book). The two themes seem to mesh together very well. Any McKillip book is going to be good, but I think I have enjoyed this one more than any other I have read.

The Forests of Serre – Patricia McKillip – Ace – mass market paperback

Roads to Battle

And so we come at last to the sixth and final volume of Chaz Brenchley's Outremer series: *The End of all Roads*. As is appropriate to such a climax, Brenchley turns up the action to a fever pitch. The Folded Land of Surayon is now host to four separate armies. The Sharai are just out to loot and kill any Patrics they might come across. With their charismatic leader, Hasan, close to death, they have little in the way of a campaign plan. Marshall Fulke and the Ransomers, on the other hand, are very clear where they are going. They intend to obliterate the blasphemous sorcerers of Surayon from the face of God's Earth, every last heretic man, woman and child of them. Baron Imber von Karlheim will loyally support the Ransomers if called upon to do so, but his primary objective is to recover his runaway wife, Julianne. As for the forces of Surayon, they will just be happy to escape with their lives.

Nor was it only trees that suffered, or only crops and cattle. Those same axes had hewn at men; those same flames had burned women in their cottages, women and children too. Ronan had no wrath, but his own fear survived; he had watched every death warily. He couldn't believe that these heretics and sorcerers would simply die as they did die, like farmers and families or any mortal folk.

Yet, unknown to all of these forces, a fifth army is also abroad in Surayon. It is an army of 'ifrit, and their Ghûl slaves. An army of supernatural beings, half of which can be killed only with blessed weapons, and half of which can only be killed by a single blow. It is an army that has pursued and manipulated our heroes through five volumes of adventure. One theory is that the 'ifrit have brought the various human armies of Outremer together so that they might kill each other, thereby to make an 'ifrit conquest easier. Another theory is that have simply herded all of the human together into a single killing ground, the easier to slaughter them all at once.

There were 'ifrit everywhere, so black they swallowed sunlight where they did not shrug it off like water. There were men who were organized in opposition, in defence, and men who were not; men who were effective, and men who were not. So far as Jemel could see, they were all dying anyway. Even those not crushed or bleeding to death, not dangling screaming from the jaws of a demon – even those who were strong and determined, still mounted and fighting well with weapons that were fit for the work, Jemel thought that they were white bones walking, only that they hadn't realized or accepted the truth of it yet.

There is, however, one final piece of the puzzle. Consider some of the titles of the books in the series: *Tower of the King's Daughter*, *Feast of the King's Shadow*, *Hand of the King's Evil*. The King of Outremer has not been seen by his subjects for forty years, yet his influence persists through loyal servants such as Coren de Rance. With his subjects slaughtering each other, and being slaughtered in turn by invaders from the Otherworld, it is perhaps time for the King to put in an appearance at last. And when he does, perhaps we readers, not to mention the heroes of the novel, will discover what has actually been going on, and what vast plot they have been unwitting pawns within.

Looking back on the series, I have been very impressed with Brenchley's work. While the general idea of the series - a small group of heroic characters, most of them youngsters, fighting against overwhelming odds to save the world - is certainly the stuff of formula fantasy, there is little formulaic about Brenchley's treatment of the subject matter. Outremer is very clearly a series written by someone who cares about what he is doing rather than someone looking to churn out processed product from the great Tolclone sausage factory. If I am going to read a big fantasy series, this is the sort of thing I want it to be.

I'm perhaps less happy with the experiment of reviewing the series piecemeal. I have found myself continually vacillating between wanting to say a lot about the book and hand and wanting to avoid spoilers for people who haven't started the series yet. But, that is the way of the world. I really don't think I can afford to take up a large chunk of one issue on a six-book series, albeit six refreshingly short books.

I suppose I should do some sort of wrap, looking back on the series and identifying themes and such. Unfortunately it has taken seven months to get this far, and I've read a lot of other books along the way. I'm not sure I can remember the books in sufficient detail for that. What I have noted is the careful way in which Brenchley has magical content of the tale, from practically nil in the first volume to character's flashing here and there, djinn-back, in the final one. That, I think, was very neatly done. For me the other really encouraging aspect of the series was the general sense of morality it espoused. Human beings were treated as human beings, regardless of whether they were Patric or Sharai, gay or straight, warrior or sorcerer. Doubtless if I were an Evangelic Christian, or a Moslem Fundamentalist, I would be disgusted by Brenchley and demanding that he be burned at the stake. But then again I wouldn't be writing this magazine, would I?

So let's just end by saying that this is a rather fine fantasy series. And of course in the way of such things the author has carefully left room for sequels. Hopefully we'll see more of Brenchley's work here in the future.

By the way, Amazon UK appear to have stopped listing in the 3-volume UK edition of the Outremer series, so the sales link below is for the 6th volume of the US edition.

The End of All Roads - Chaz Brenchley - Ace - mass market paperback

Interview: Deborah Layne & Jay Lake of Wheatland Press

Wheatland Press (<http://www.wheatlandpress.com/>) is based in Oregon and is gaining a reputation as an innovative publisher of short fiction. At Wiscon this year I spoke to the company's founder, Deborah Layne, and to Jay Lake, who besides being a provider of excellent fiction himself is also an Associate Editor with Wheatland.

CM: So how did you get involved in this small press business.

DL: It started because Jay and I, and a couple of other writers who lived in Oregon, carpooled together to Eugene for a workshop every week. That meant we spent four hours in the car together, talking about the things that writers talk about. It started as a bit of a joke, we were all writing things that were completely unclassifiable, so we started joking that no one was going to publish us so we'd start our own damn magazine. And then I happened to be in a position where my husband got laid off from his job with a good severance package. I had some money so I started thinking that maybe I would start a magazine.

DL: Then I talked to Bruce Holland Rogers, and he said, "why don't you try an anthology instead." I was aware of *Orbit* and *Leviathan* and *Starlight*, and similar publications, and I thought, "yeah!"

DL: That was when we decided to do *Polyphony*. The first one was by invitation, because we knew the kind of writers that were doing the kind of thing we wanted to publish, and we wanted to show that vision. We also wanted to have a couple of unpublished writers, and a good balance between male and

female writers. Those were things that were important to me in doing this.

DL: So that was where we started. And somewhere along the way I discovered that I liked putting books together, so it grew from there.

CM: What's the working relationship between you and Jay?

DL: Well, I was the one with the money, so I was the publisher, and Jay and I were co-editors. We share the editorial duties, but I do all the business side of things.

CM: But you publish Jay's work as well.

DL: I thought that Jay was ready to do a collection, and I had seen Frank Wu's artwork and I thought that the two were meant to be together. So I convinced them to start working on that. Then other things came along, and I'm just really enjoying creating books.

CM: You said you had some start-up money. Can you give me a ballpark figure of how much it takes to start a small press? Four figures, five figures?

DL: It doesn't take a whole lot, and thanks to Print-on-Demand you can put that money where it belongs, in the writers' hands. I get very frustrated with people who try to tie Print-on-Demand into vanity publishing and don't realize that it is just another printing technology, not a publishing or editing model.

DL: So I had a few thousand dollars. And one of the things we wanted to do was pay professional rates. We pay 6¢ a word. Because I use a Print-on-Demand publisher I get the same per-unit cost as I would for a print run of 3-4,000 copies, but I don't have to order those right up front. I don't have a garage full of books. I can pay the authors, and then I can order copies as I sell books. That's how I was able to pay 6¢ a word and still keep the books available through independent

bookstores, through the web site, and at conventions. So if you are looking at doing an anthology of the sort of size of *Polyphony*, and you want to pay professional rates, you are looking at a cost of around \$4-5,000.

DL: Of course you then have to get that money back again through sales. I've gone into it willing to wait, and I can now see break-even looming on the horizon.

CM: How many copies do you have to sell in order to be able to do the next one?

DL: About 500. That would be good break-even.

CM: Does that include paying you for your work as publisher?

DL: No, it doesn't. It also excludes things like convention expenses. I'm lucky, I am in a position where I can do this for a couple more years without making any money, just for the love and enjoyment of it. Eventually I hope it turns into a profitable business, but I can carry it a little way.

<Jay arrives>

CM: Jay, I presume that you give your editing services for free as well?

JL: Yes, I am happy to accept all of the prestige I can eat.

JL: How that works for me is that while my primary goal is to be successful as a writer I happen to find editing very fulfilling and interesting. Not the business side of it. I don't ever want to be a publisher. But I hope to one day be able to edit in big time markets. I'd like to take over something like *Year's Best* one day. Not that anyone would want to work quite as hard as Gardner does. But being able to do some interesting theme anthologies at a higher level would be nice.

CM: You mentioned that *Polyphony* #1 was by invitation only, but you have some pretty high caliber people there: Andy Duncan, Maureen McHugh, Carol Emshwiller, Lucius Shepard. How do you persuade people like that to provide material to a start-up?

DL: Bruce Holland-Rogers has my undying gratitude for helping get this thing started. Besides not telling me I was crazy, he also said he would commit to giving me a story. He happened to know Ray Vukcevic well and persuaded him to give me a story, and then he and Ray allowed me to use their names when approaching other people. So we asked a bunch of people and they said, "yeah, we do have things that don't fit into any specific genre categories." And that's how it kind of rolled.

CM: So it is essentially a networking thing.

JL: There are a couple of other nuances to it. First of all it is amazing how often people are not asked. The other thing is that Deborah had made a decision to pay professional rates, which made us credible.

DL: I think also the freedom of not having a theme, of saying that it doesn't have to be just science fiction, just fantasy or just horror also helped. It can be a combination of all those things. People found that really freeing and were very excited about it.

CM: Is the title, "*Polyphony*", somehow tied into this idea that you are doing lots of different things?

DL: We went through a lot of weird stuff. We were trying to find a word that conveyed the idea of many voices, which is of course what "polyphony" means. We entertained so pretty deadly ideas and I don't think I want reveal those.

JL: No, no! We won't look smart if we do.

CM: How has the solicitation process evolved with the later volumes?

JL: The second one was officially invitation only but was rather loose. We didn't actually put out a call but some people contacted us. The subsequent volumes were open call.

DL: And we got five hundred submissions for each.

JL: Which is another reason why we did invitation only in the first place.

DL: And that was over a 45-day submission period.

JL: That's a lot of subs for a small press publication.

CM: Given that you guys are giving your time for free, how do you cope with 500 submissions?

JL: By stressing out badly.

DL: Our process is that I collect them and go through them and do a preliminary filtering, then pass them on to Jay. He does the real first read, and narrows them down to about ninety that he thinks I definitely should read.

JL: And then we bounce them back and forth until we have narrowed them down to the ones we are going to buy. Working together seems to help that process.

CM: Wouldn't it be better to have a themed anthology to narrow down the submission rate?

DL: It would except that I hate them. When I reviewed for *Tangent* I would get themed anthologies and by the time I got half way through I would feel like I had been bludgeoned. I'd be reading the same story over and over again.

CM: OK, you've convinced me. I can just imagine how hard that would be if you were reading submissions.

CM: So Jay, tell me about your collection. What was it like working with Frank?

JL: Well, let me tell you about Deb first, because she said she wanted to do a collection, and I'd only sold about four stories. I said, "you're nuts, nobody will want to read me." And she said, "oh, but they will!"

JL: And then Frank and I met at Norwescon a couple of years ago, and we got on like a house on fire. We must have been separated at birth or something. Deb got very keen on us working together, so we sat in a booth at ConJosé with Nina Kiriki Hoffman and worked it through. Frank illustrated twelve of my stories. One of those was one which *Writers of the Future* picked up, and is now on the Hugo ballot, but I had expected to be rejected, so we had a last minute change of plan and I literated one of Frank's paintings.

JL: Now that painting happened to be originally inspired by James Tiptree, Jr.'s story, "Love is the plan, the plan is death." So I have committed the cardinal sin of writing a sequel to a Tiptree story, and I'm here at Wiscon and I'm expecting to be punished for that.

CM: Insert loud smacking noise here.

<laughter>

JL: Then Frank came up with this idea of a limited edition. We ended up doing a 26-print run boxed version of the book with color plates of all of the illustrations. I hand-typed a story for each of the 26 letters, A-Z. Frank illustrated each story. There are no copyrights. The person who owns the box owns the story and the picture. We've sold 25 of them, so there's one left. They went like hot cakes. We've got so much publicity and good will out of this.

CM: Yeah, I remember seeing Frank demo it at the pre-Hugo party at Torcon 3. People were fascinated by it. If anyone wants to buy that remaining copy, how much is it?

JL: \$150. And if one of us wins a Hugo or dies or something it will be worth a lot more. And look, there's fourteen color plates in there. That's \$11/plate. It is worth it for the plates alone. And it is in this beautiful box. So Deb was right, by the time that book came out a lot of people were interested in me.

JL: We are going to do another one, scheduled for the end of 2005, tentatively called *Fu Manwu and the Lake Monster*. We are going to do it half and half. I'm going to literate 6 or 7 of his paintings, he's going to illustrate 6 or 7 of my stories, so it will truly be a collaboration. *Lake Wu* was more of a writer-artist relationship; the next one is going to be an integrated book.

CM: Is there any chance of us ordinary mortals getting an edition of *Lake Wu* with the illustrations in color?

DL: The color thing is a problem, because it is very expensive. Right now it doesn't cost any more to include black and white illustrations than to do text because everything is digitized.

JL: But color plates would have made it almost a \$150 book by itself, without the box and stuff. Maybe in a year or so the prices may have come down a bit and we'll be better known so we can do a bigger print run...

CM: When you and Frank have won your Hugos and a hugely famous...

JL: The alternative is to go to someone like *Electric Story* and do an e-book version that has color plates. We are looking at options for that right now.

<At this point Jay had to go to have his lunch>

CM: Following on from *Polyphony* you have now started to do collections by individual authors, but as yet no novels. Obviously the collection by Jay was something specific that you wanted to do, but is the move into other collections a policy or did things just turn out like that?

DL: It is. I do have one novel by Jerry Oltion, *Paradise Passed*, that will be out in October or November. I might start looking at other novels later, but I prefer short fiction to novels. I think the short form lends itself more to the experimental and crafted things that I like to read. A lot of my favorite writers are people who I think are at their best at the short lengths: Howard Waldrop, Lucius Shepard, Jay.

CM: Has he written any novels?

DL: He has a couple hanging around. You may see one sometime.

CM: I could do with you at *Emerald City*. A lot of short fiction bores me to tears.

DL: Whereas I have had a hard time finishing many of the genre novels that I have picked up recently. I find myself not finishing them more often than not, because I think they should have been novellas, most of them.

CM: Anyway, you have done collections for Jay, Howard Waldrop and Jerry Oltion. Anything else on the horizon?

DL: There's *Polyphony* #4, of course. And we've got a Stephen Utley collection coming in the fall. That's going to be really exciting. I guess you could call them "love stories", but some of them are so dark and twisted. That's just an aspect of love. I think Steve's work is really quirky and subtle, and he doesn't have nearly the attention he ought to have.

DL: Also we have a book of poetry. It is by Tom Smario, a poet who lives in Portland. What I'm doing with him is a

book of boxing poems called *Knuckle Sandwiches*. Tom works as one of those corner guys at a fight. Now I don't know a lot about boxing, and I don't read a whole lot of poetry, so I guess I was a natural to do this book. But I read it and it is astounding work. The visceral beauty of it really got me.

CM: It sounds like an interesting thing to do, but is it going to sell to your regular customers?

DL: Probably not, but Tom has something of a following and he has a lot of connections in the boxing community, so we'll be marketing the book through those channels.

DL: I'm doing a collection of Lucius Shepard's movie reviews that have appeared on Electric Story, plus a couple of his other non-fiction pieces.

CM: Those reviews are great, he fairly rips into people.

DL: He does, and it has got the best title of anything I've done so far. Lucius came up with it. The book is called *Weapons of Mass Seduction*.

CM: Then there's the Zeppelin book, which is a themed anthology, which you hate, right?

DL: Yeah, but it's such a loose theme: any kind of airships. And everybody loves those because they are so big and improbable. Jay and David Moles are editing it. They were on a panel at Norwescon about airships. The other two guys on the panel: one was an actual rocket scientist who, God forbid, actually knew something about how the things work and why they stay up, and the other was a person who does a comic book that has an airship in it. During the panel David was assembling a model of a Zeppelin. A radio controlled model. About half way through he had it finished and inflated it and launched it, and the entire room was mesmerized.

That's the sort of effect we are hoping for with the book.

CM: Getting back to the business side of things, have you ever had quality issues with Print-on-Demand?

DL: I think I have been lucky. But also I have paid a lot of attention to their guidelines. If you follow their instructions and produce the sort of files they want then they are more likely to produce a good-looking book. I think the technology itself is continually improving too. My books look really good, but some of the PoD books from, say, five years ago don't look as good. Lightning Source has really improved a lot.

CM: Do you do all of your own page layout?

DL: I do. I'm getting better at it.

CM: It is something you have had to teach yourself, presumably.

DL: Yeah, I have been consulting with some people who really know what they are doing, and people have been really good giving me advice. I think each book works a little better than the last one.

CM: I gather that there are a few experts around the community.

DL: Yes, I've talked to Robert Wexler. And Kelly Link was really helpful after the first *Polyphony* came out. We exchanged some email, and she gave me a lot of pointers on things that I just didn't know, and didn't know that I didn't know.

CM: Yeah, that's always the hard stuff.

DL: One of the things that have been really good is that the small press people within the genre industry don't really see each other as competitors. We tend to see each other as in this together, and each of us has our own little spot in it. I got so much good advice from people

like Patrick Swenson at Fairwood, from Gavin and Kelly, Jeff Vandermeer and Forrest Aguirre. At World Fantasy Con in Minneapolis Peter Crowther sat down with me for an hour going over some of the business and production issues. That was just invaluable. All of these people have been really generous with their time and their knowledge, and that's really made a huge difference.

CM: Distribution then. Presumably you have the usual problems with Borders and Barnes & Noble.

DL: Yeah, those are just out of reach for me now. I'd have to spend so much money to get carried by Ingrams that it would just bury me. What I get by going through Lightning Source is a listing on Amazon. Technically they get me listed with Ingrams too, but they don't discount at the level bookstores want, so the bookstores that carry our books buy directly from me. That's come from going to conventions, meeting booksellers, and the traditional cold calling. I've now got a good number of bookstores that are ordering from me.

CM: But independent bookstores are closing hand over fist, right?

DL: Yes, unfortunately. Of course I also sell direct through the web site. Every order I get there is lovingly hand-packed by me. I've been able to keep up with it so far.

CM: The Amazon listing is presumably just a case of you being on their web site and if someone orders a copy of a book they will get it from somewhere else.

DL: Lightning Source handles that. I don't ever touch those orders. I get a summary report telling me how many books were purchased in a given period, and then I get a check from Lightning Source.

CM: How successful are convention sales?

DL: Well, this is my first time doing it myself. I've had a couple of volunteers: Robert Wexler and Forrest Aguirre, who have been helping me staff the table. I'm not giving them anything except that I'm selling their books. Nobody's getting paid for their time. I doubt that I will try to do tables other than at Wiscon. I'm completely in love with Wiscon now. It is so much fun. I'm going to come back next year and have a table, but I'm not sure that it is worth it to me to do it at any of the bigger conventions.

CM: Any other methods of publicity that work for you?

DL: It is hard. I think it is the hardest thing about being a small press: getting the word out. Jay was talking about all the interest we got over the *Lake Wu* book, doing the limited edition and with him and Frank getting Hugo nominations. Jay and I always try to do writers' workshops at conventions if we can. I always notice a rise in web sales after an appearance.

CM: If you go to a convention, who do you think you sell to?

DL: I'm worried that I only sell to writers who want to sell to me. I hope that there are other customers out there, but a friend of mine says she thinks it is all a pyramid scheme. Then again we've had a lot of sales at conventions that are not really writer-heavy.

DL: But you know, I don't think I'm publishing the sort of book that will ever sell 10,000 copies. One of the authors I work with says he always tells publishers, "look, you can print 3,000 copies, but you are going to eat 1,000 of those. If you can live with those numbers then so can I." And I said, "yes, I can."

DL: I guess the way I judge whether what I'm doing is successful isn't a lot to do with selling thousands of copies. Sure, selling 10,000 copies of a book would be nice. Winning the lottery

would be nice. Having my pumpkin turned into a coach would be nice too. Is that why I'm doing this? No. I'm doing it because there are certain types of book that I would like to see out there. I'm doing it because I'm the sort of person who enjoys being involved in editing and producing books. As long as I can keep this thing supporting itself then I'll be happy.

Chinese Whispers

At the World Fantasy Con in Minneapolis in 2002 I asked Justin Ackroyd what was new and interesting from Down Under. He sold me two fantasy books by a New Zealand-based writer called Alma Hromic. Sadly I still haven't got round to reading them, but much to my surprise I got email from Alma earlier this year. She's now living in the US, and she has a new novel out. Unlike Zoran Živković, Alma was either unwilling or unable to resist the marketing ploy of adopting a name more "acceptable" to the American public, so she is now Alma Alexander. Her interests are still the same, but her book isn't fantasy, or is it?

HarperCollins appear to be marketing *The Secrets of Jin-Shei* as mainstream. The top ranked blurb on the back of the book is from Joanne Harris and the word "fantasy" doesn't appear anywhere on the cover. And yet, despite what you may read in the book's marketing, it is not set in historical China. Alexander admits in a postscript that she has taken a bunch of liberties with history. And besides, the book has an evil sorcerer in it, who does real magic. There is a sword maiden. So just how much in the way of fantasy tropes does HarperCollins think is acceptable when marketing to a mainstream audience?

The title of the book comes from a concept of vows of sisterhood made between Chinese girls. It is a sort of, "I'm going to be your very best friend for the rest of your life" thing. It also comes complete with a "women's language", a system of writing the Chinese language (no, let's not go there, this isn't historical China, OK?) that is known only to women. To some extent it is a secret code, but because Chinese script is not an alphabet it is probably rather more difficult to crack. Anyway, this is something that is based on something that mediaeval Chinese women did do, which is interesting to know, though in the end it doesn't have much bearing on the plot.

As to the plot, well it starts off fairly predictable. We are introduced to a bunch of young girls from different backgrounds. Through various coincidences they end up building a web of jin-shei sisterhood vows between them. One of them happens to be a princess. I'm afraid I am not entirely convinced by a plotline that has a bunch of teenage girls manage to take over a mighty empire, but as the book progresses things get much more realistic and dangerous, and Alexander is to be congratulated for not shirking from unhappy bits.

Along the way, of course, the book is full of the sort of thing that publishers want from a "women's novel". There are marriages, there are unhappy love affairs, there are babies, and there is struggle against arrogant and misogynistic men. I think I have also found a parallel to the heaps of dull exposition that you find in hard SF novels. Reading through *The Secrets of Jin-Shei* I got very, very tired of reading about exactly what each character was thinking and feeling, and how those thoughts and feelings had just been affected by what someone had just said.

I longed to just be able to watch the characters in action.

But they are interesting characters. There is little of the dull stereotyping that you would expect from a formula romance novel. And, as I said above, Alexander does not shirk from having bad things happen. The book also provides an interesting investigation of the idea of sisterhood vows. Does jin-shei really mean "my sister, right or wrong", or is it something more complicated. Does it make a difference that one of the sisters is an Empress?

Overall, then, a pretty good book. But is it fantasy? Personally I think not. Alexander does use a few fantasy themes, such as the health of the land being bad when things are bad at court. But she never directly cites the former as a result of the latter. She shows the general population believing in the connection, but that is very different from claiming that the connection is true and inevitable. Yes, there is an evil sorcerer, and yes he does magic, but he is presented as someone who is an expert in secret sciences, and is often described as an "alchemist". So even though the bad guy is defeated in the end, the real solutions to the plot's conundrums are political, not magical. If put on the spot I would say that the book is written more like an historical novel than a fantasy novel, and this is doubtless what allows it to be marketed as mainstream.

The Secrets of Jin-Shei - Alma Alexander - HarperCollins - hardcover

Found in Translation

One of the problems with translating books from foreign languages is that you often tend to only get the hard jobs.

There are doubtless lots of novelists in Argentina, but some of them are exceedingly famous, and they are the ones that people in non-Spanish-speaking countries want to read. One of those famous Argentinean writers is Angélica Gorodischer. She has written 17 novels, has won numerous awards, is compared to Borges, Calvino and Kafka by the Buenos Aires press, and has none of her work available in English, until now. Fortunately for us, the person who has chosen to translate Gorodischer's work is a brilliant writer in her own right, and a person whose interests in fiction seem to map well with Gorodischer's own: Ursula Le Guin.

The book in question, *Kalpa Imperial*, is a strange beast. It is a collection of short stories about a mythical empire. The material was first published in Argentina in 1983 as two separate volumes. It was re-printed in Barcelona in 2000 as a single-volume collection, and it is that format that Small Beer Press has chosen for the first English-language edition. You will see the book referred to as a novel, presumably on the grounds that it is a fix-up of sorts. Certainly all of the stories seem to be set in the same mythical empire. But aside from that there is little to connect them and I think I'd classify it as a collection.

All these works of the imaginative inventions unfortunately got into chronicles, which were made into books which everybody respected and believed, principally because they were thick, hard to hold, tedious, and old. And they got into legends, those tales that everybody says they don't believe in because they can't take them seriously, and that everyone believes in precisely because they can't take them seriously. And they were sung in ballads, which are insidious because they pass to easily about town squares and the ports and the dance halls. And none of it was true, none of it, none of

the romantic origins, none of the melodious and fantastical names.

As to the stories, they are all fables. There is little attempt at world building, but equally very little in the way of magic or other traditional fantasy tropes. What we get are legends out of the history of the empire, which seems to stretch back thousands of years. There are good emperors and bad emperors, wise empresses and vacuous ones. Much of the book is to do with meditation on government and how to undertake it wisely.

This is where things get kind of interesting, because the back cover contains blurbs from reviews written in Argentina and Spain. The Argentinean review says, "not once is there an attempt to pass judgment on the real world from fiction," whereas the Spanish one specifically says that the book is allegorical. That could just be two reviewers reading the book differently. But it occurs to me that the first publication of the book was only a year after a couple of wannbe imperial despots called Galtieri and Thatcher fought a stupid war over a small collection of barren islands in the South Atlantic. Could Gorodischer perhaps be commenting on this? Does the fact that one of the stories has a character called Magareta'Acher have anything to do with this? Is the fact that the Emperors live in the northern hemisphere of their world and the brave and independent rebels live in the south significant?

Maybe, but for the most part the stories have rather less obvious political content. They are much more the sort of thing that Le Guin writes: interesting little fables that deride the power-hungry and promote a small-is-beautiful view of the world. There is a worry with translation that translators will impose their own style and prejudice on the

work, and the similarity to Le Guin's own work could raise suspicions of that here. But having read all of the book I suspect that Le Guin would have had to undertake a major re-write to achieve that because there are just so many places where the style and attitudes come through. I suspect rather that Le Guin and Gorodischer have fairly similar attitudes and preferences, and that therefore Le Guin is an ideal person to translate Gorodischer's work.

As for recommendations, if you like Le Guin then you will like this book as well. On the other hand, it is certainly not traditional SF or fantasy as we English-speakers understand it. There certainly are some fun stories there. I particularly enjoyed the odd versions of Greek myths retold by the caravan master in "The Old Incense Road". And I certainly wish that more of Gorodischer's work were available in English.

Kalpa Imperial - Angélica Gorodischer (tr. Ursula Le Guin) - Small Beer Press - trade paperback

The Secret History of Urth

It was a very long time ago that I read Gene Wolfe's *The Shadow of the Torturer*, the first book in the long and ambitious series that Wolfe has now, allegedly, completed. My review of the book was so bad that I'm now ashamed to let anyone see it. But I did read what Dave Langford had to say about it and that opened my eyes. As John Clute says, you cannot read Wolfe properly at all unless you realize that you are reading a puzzle. The books simply don't make enough sense unless you participate in the game. You cannot follow the plot unless you make some effort to unravel the tangled clues that Wolfe leaves for you.

There are, then, already two levels of reading Wolfe. There is the casual reader, who will probably go away hopelessly confused and disappointed; and there is the enlightened reader, who has some idea of how to extract meaning from Wolfe's puzzles. But there is another level beyond that, the level of the Wolfe obsessive. Just as there are physicists who will not rest until they have found the ultimate scientific Holy Grail, the Theory of Everything, so there are people whose life will be incomplete if they do not succeed in solving every last puzzle that Gene Wolfe has set in his books.

The trouble with this is that Wolfe, cunning and contrary old beast that he is, is not exactly very forthcoming on the subject of how many puzzles there are, or indeed in providing sufficient clues for them to be solved with certainty. Consequently books like Robert Borski's *Solar Labyrinth*, while providing a wealth of fascinating background and speculation, also end up sounding at times like some conspiracy theorist's history of the Knights Templar.

Borski is at his best when enumerating general rules for understanding Wolfe, some of which I expect he had a hand in developing. For example, it should be clear to most people that in *The Book of the Long Sun* characters with animal and plant names are human, and characters with mineral names are constructs. Thus Maytera Mint is human and Maytera Marble is a Chem. And if Councilor Lemur appears not to be human then it is likely that the construct that claims to be Lemur is being remotely controlled or is a vehicle for a downloaded personality, because the original Lemur must be human.

A more subtle variant of this type of rule is found in *The Book of the New Sun*. Characters whose names are derived from mythological sources are all aliens.

As Borski points out, this leads to some interesting speculation. In particular Typhon, the great dictator who caused *The Whorl* to be built and whose mind was downloaded to become the god Pas in *The Book of the Long Sun*, must have been an alien, not a human. This in turn raises speculations as to the mission of *The Whorl*. If Typhon came from another planet, could it have been Green or Blue? Was the whole point of *The Whorl*'s journey to take Typhon back home? And if it was, did Wolfe have the whole thing planned right from the beginning?

Well, as you can see, it is easy to let the speculation run away with itself. And Borski is perhaps at his worst when he gets so attached to an idea that he holds onto it in the face of all evidence. A good example is the case of Severian's missing twin sister, Severa, who is never introduced by name in *The Book of the New Sun*. Many Wolfe scholars believe that she is the young Witch, Merryn. Wolfe is on record as saying, "I think that that may very well be the case, but I've never settled that in my own mind." The brief scenes set on Urth at the end of *The Book of the Short Sun* seem to confirm this hypothesis. However, Merryn = Severa isn't Borski's preferred solution to the puzzle. Therefore he not only rejects Wolfe's assertion that they might be one and the same, but suggests that Wolfe's comment that he hadn't made up his mind which character was going to be revealed as Severa is deliberate misdirection on the part of the author.

This, I suspect, is taking Wolfe-watching paranoia a step too far. If everything that Wolfe says about the books is liable to be treated as unreliable, how can we ever know the truth? How many levels of mis-direction will we have to plumb before arriving at a correct answer? Are there, in fact, any correct answers, or has Wolfe simply left Borski and his fellow seekers chasing after mirages? It would

not surprise me if any seemingly perfect solution to a Wolfe conundrum would dissolve, squonk-like, in its own complexity before it can be shown to a fellow human.

Don't let this put you off Borski's book, however. If you are a fan of Wolfe's intricate puzzles then you will find much to inspire and enlighten you in what Borski has written. Even if you disagree with everything he says, that will at least have eliminated a bunch of possible solutions from your search. And note also that *Solar Labyrinth* is restricted almost entirely to *The Book of the New Sun*. There are another seven books in the series that Borski has not yet dissected fully. If you want to find out what he has to say about them, you probably need to buy *Solar Labyrinth* to encourage him.

Solar Labyrinth - Robert Borski - iUniverse - trade paperback

Short Stuff

A Master at Work

At the Finncon dead dog party Jukka Halme and I were discussing John Crowley. We concluded that it is not wise to read more than one Crowley book a year. It would be like dining every night on fresh lobster, perfect steak and exquisite strawberries. Not only would it risk making you bored of the best things in the world, but it would put you off consuming anything else for life.

Sadly I don't quite have that luxury. I'm well behind on reviewing Crowley's work and I'm going to have to do one book ever six months or so. In this issue the work in question is Crowley's new

collection of short fiction, *Novelties and Souvenirs*.

I say "new" with some trepidation here. As with most short fiction collections, all of the works in the book have been published before elsewhere. More significantly, some of the very best content appeared in a 1989 collection called *Novelty: Four Stories*. "Great Work of Time" is a magnificent combination of time travel paradox and alternate history (and is a World Fantasy Award winner). "In Blue" is a fascinating study of a future in which Maoism has not only triumphed by actually works because almost everyone accepts correct thought as the only way to think: almost everyone. Together with the delightful fable, "The Nightingale Sings at Night", these three stories form the dramatic core of *Novelties and Souvenirs*: just short of 200 pages out of less than 350. And all three appeared in *Novelty: Four Stories*.

On the other hand, *Novelties and Souvenirs* also contains twelve much shorter pieces, including the superbly imaginative "The War Between the Objects and the Subjects" (yes, seriously, a war between parts of sentences - just think how it might be fought). There are stories dating back to 1977, some of which appeared only in magazines. The Crowley completist, while he may already have *Novelty: Four Stories*, will doubtless want *Novelties and Souvenirs* as well. As for anyone else, why would you not want this superb collection of the short story teller's art? Well, possibly because it might put you off reading anyone else's short fiction for life. But that is a risk worth taking.

Novelties and Souvenirs - John Crowley - Perennial - trade paperback

Fiction in Many Voices

As you will see from the interview with Deborah Layne and Jay Lake elsewhere in this issue, the whole point of Wheatland Press's *Polyphony* anthologies is to present a bunch of diverse voices writing stories that cannot easily be categorized in traditional genre pigeonholes. The good thing about that is that you get some interesting stories. The bad thing is that you can get an above average number of stories with the "why?" factor (as in, "why did you bother to write that?"). Literary short stories are all very well, but if the sole point of the piece is the quality of the writing, rather than anything to do with neat ideas, then that writing has to be well above the standard of traditional genre short fiction.

It is to a large extent a matter of personal preference, of course. Personally I found *Polyphony* #3 a rather mixed bag. There are some good stories in there, for example Barth Anderson's "The Mystery of Our Baraboo Lands", which received an honorable mention in the recent Speculative Literature Foundation's Fountain Award. On the other hand, despite the promise of variety, I found rather too many "mah girlfriend done left me" stories. The fact that Vandana Singh provides a "mah husband done left me" doesn't balance this out. There was rather too much self-pity going around.

One of my favorite stories is "Handsome, Winsome Johnny", by Sally Carteret, which has traces of a vampire story but is mainly about rock bands. Carteret has apparently spent a lot of time in LA failing to make it in the rock business, and she has no romantic illusions about the process.

The truth of rock and roll is an ordinary truth best expressed by mediocre bands like

Mister Wrong who're always going nowhere, spreading that truth in dirtbag bars like the Spot, the evangels of a fleshy, dumbshit religion whose icon is a teenage boy humping a mike stand.

Then again, there is always the wonderful Jeffrey Ford. "Coffins on the River" is a tale of a couple of failed, middle-aged artists (more self-pity, I'm afraid). Barney does paintings of dead super heroes floating down a river in open-topped coffins. His friend, the narrator, writes science fiction novels that don't sell because, well, here's a synopsis.

A great deluge sweeps the earth, and a particular hundred year old apartment building made of wood cracks off its foundation in the onslaught of catastrophic flooding and is swept away containing its inhabitants. They sail the newly made world in the bobbing structure, searching for dry land and other survivors. Perno Shell, a previously quiet, bookish man becomes the captain of the odd vessel and takes upon himself the task of bringing all of his neighbors to safety. The seas teem with mutated monsters, barges of blind pirates returned from the dead, sentient islands, as the unlikely adventurers search for the secret of how, through the manipulation of Time, to remake the world in its previous image.

Polyphony is, I think, an anthology for people who like experimentation. If you are looking for weird and interesting stuff, you will find it. If you are looking for new names, you will find them. The penalty for this is that there will be some stories that are not to your taste. But then again you can get that, even in a "year's best" type anthology. So full marks to Wheatland for doing interesting stuff, but you probably won't

see many Hugo nominees coming from this series.

Polyphony #3 - Deborah Layne and Jay Lake (eds.) - Wheatland Press - trade paperback

Hugo nominees: Novellas

“Walk in Silence” by Catherine Asaro. I can see that Asaro means well with this story of hope between two antagonistic species, but it is dull and predictable and full of stereotypes. This is the sort of stuff you find in the back of women’s magazines (except with two humans of different races rather than a human and an alien). There has to be better stuff than this on the ballot.

“The Empress of Mars” by Kage Baker is an engaging tale of grit, beer and stubbornness on a marginally economic Mars colony. It does have a certain amount of the Disneyfication of Celticness that the Americans are so fond of. There is, for example, nothing on Earth, or indeed any planet in the solar system, that would persuade civilized people like the Welsh to agree to the creation of a common language with the tongues of uncouth barbarians such as the Irish and Scots. Why, we’d rather lose at rugby to the English.

Well, OK, to the Australians.

Nor would we agree to form some sort of Celtic Federation with Gaelic bastards. Why as Ms. Baker proves only too conclusively in her story, not a one of them is to be trusted. Pirates and sheep-stealers, the lot of them. And there is the small matter of Welsh beer, which everyone knows is bloody awful. There is a theory that stouthearted Welshmen such as Martin Hoare, Dave Langford and Rhys Hughes drink such vast quantities of beer because they like it. But in fact what they are trying to do is nobly protect the rest of the world from having to drink any Welsh beer. Because

they wouldn’t have the stomach for it, see. And where was the singing, eh? How can you possibly set a story in a Welsh pub and not have people bursting into song every few minutes? Bloody ludicrous, i’nit.

OK, so I would have liked the story better if Rhys Hughes had written it. But Kage Baker has certainly entered into the spirit of the thing. I laughed. Lots.

Besides, how can I not enjoy a story in which the English are portrayed as a bunch of stuck-up, puritanical villains? All that was missing was an evil mastermind called Clive.

“The Green Leopard Plague” by Walter John Williams is probably the most thoughtful and ambitious piece of short fiction on the Hugo ballot, but it also falls over its own ambition. Williams is trying to say something very profound about the state of the world and the prospects for nanotechnology to rescue us from our predicament. He’s also trying to say something profound about economics in a world that has cornucopia machines. But alongside that he has in bizarre far-future love story and a near-future techno-thriller that sometimes distract from what he’s trying to say and which don’t mesh as well as they need to in order to make the whole thing work. Basically the ideas needed more space and more work. Brave though.

“Just Like The Ones We Used To Know” by Connie Willis is a very short parable about global warming with more padding to it than one of Connie’s speeches. I skipped most of it. There were a few amusing jokes along the way, generally about the idiots who call into radio talk shows. But not enough to make it worth reading the whole thing in detail.

“The Cookie Monster” by Vernor Vinge is going to do very well if only because it

contains a lot of references to other works of SF. The characters, having worked out roughly what is happening to them, get to discussing which classic SF story best explains their predicament and might therefore hold clues to the best course of action. Also the story contains a lot of computer jargon, which will score it points with a large section of the electorate. I'm voting for Kage Baker, but I suspect that Vinge will win.

Hugo nominees: Novelettes

There are six nominees, presumably due to a tie for the final place.

"The Empire of Ice Cream" by Jeffrey Ford, I have already reviewed. It is a startlingly good piece of fiction. I loved it. It has already won the Nebula. Only the Gaiman Factor prevented it winning the Locus Poll. Neil doesn't have a story in this category.

"Bernardo's House" by James Patrick Kelly is a very odd fairy story about a house AI whose owner has gone missing. It is an interesting idea, certainly worth reading, and rather sad in at least two very different ways. Reminded me of an old Roxy Music song - you can guess which one, but it is on *For Your Pleasure* and bizarrely it has been covered by Field of the Nephilim. Not a winner though.

"Into the Gardens of Sweet Night" by Jay Lake is already a winner in the Writers of the Future contest. It is a tale of a young man called Elroy and a talking pug called Wiggles who adventure in the tropical forests of Texas and in the gardens above the Earth. As ever with Jay Lake, it is beautifully inventive. But it isn't in the same class as "The Empire of Ice Cream".

"Hexagons" by Robert Reed is an alternate history story about not electing bigoted fanatics to political office,

dressed up as one of those deeply boring American father-and-son stories. I suspect it may be an attempt to explain that patriotic and wholesome Americans should not vote for G/e/o/r/g/e B/u/s/h Adolf Hitler, but it does so in such a ponderous and roundabout way that I probably wouldn't have got past the first page if it hadn't been by Robert Reed.

"Nightfall" by Charles Stross: exactly what we have come to expect from our beloved bearded wonder. It has a singularity, it has a talking cat, and it has enough technological gobbledigook to boggle anyone's reality. Personally I prefer the Jeff Ford as a piece of literature. Practically I suspect that this one may win because it is so fabulously science fictional. And none of the Americans voting for it will realize that Charlie is making jokes about Capitalism. Oops, what have I said...

"Legions in Time" by Michael Swanwick may well be the favorite going in to the vote simply because it is so rare to find a Worldcon at which Swanwick doesn't win a short fiction Hugo. The story is an entertaining time travel piece with a nice bit of speculation about human evolution tied in. But it doesn't come close to the Ford for literary quality, or to the Stross for "gosh-wow" factor, so I think that this time the master may go away empty-handed.

The Concrete Casbah

Concrete what? OK, listen up, the Concrete Casbah street party is an attempt to raise awareness of and curry votes for the campaign to have Bridgwater's delightfully eccentric folly, the Concrete Castle (<http://www.concretycastle.com/>),

restored and turned into an arts center. This will particularly benefit local bands, who will get a place to rehearse and studio space. The project is part of the BBC's *Restoration* series, in which the viewers vote to see which decrepit pile of stone they would like to see restored to its former glory. The campaign is being run by the Strummerville (<http://www.strummerville.com/>) charity, set up by friends and relatives of the late Joe Strummer to help young rock bands. Strummer lived near Bridgwater for several years before his untimely death in 2002, which is why Strummerville wants to do something here. Leading supporters of the charitable trust include Clash guitarist, Mick Jones, and the artist, Damien Hirst. Got that, good?

So there I was, digital camera and umbrella to hand, ready to enjoy the most stellar street party that my hometown has seen since the Monmouth Rebellion in 1685. Could I spot the occasional celebrity? Surely I could. Julien Temple was around from the start, which is hardly surprising as filming rock stars is one of his fortes. Of course he is not a stranger to these parts, having directed, *Pandaemonium*, a movie about Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who lived round here. Thankfully Porlock is rather nearer Minehead than Bridgwater so we don't have to take responsibility for ruining *Kubla Khan*.

There was a BBC crew as well. How much of the concert will find its way onto *Restoration* isn't exactly clear. Griff Rhys Jones, who fronts *Restoration*, turned up early, but then disappeared for the afternoon. The poor guy looked like he had been hauled out of bed at 4:00am to get driven here, but that didn't stop him being consummately professional and posing for photos with local kids.

Master of Ceremonies for the afternoon was Keith Allen, best known for collaborating with Hirst and Blur's Alex James on a certain well-known jolly pop song about curry and football. Allen is a good front man and had to deal with a crowd that was at times less than responsive. Of course no one thought to tell him that while the people of Bridgwater love a vindaloo as much as anyone, this isn't exactly a soccer town and many of the crowd, if they did have an interest in international football tournaments, would be supporting Wales, not England. Ah well.

It took a while for things to get going. At the advertised noon start time it was all still a bit shambolic. But then that is the rock star way, and doubtless they knew it would take a while for the crowd to assemble and get warmed up. Allen bravely tried to encourage interest in some karaoke, and was saved from complete disaster by a young Welsh girl called Julie who provided a superb rendition of "Fever". Most of the rest of the locals were, well, what you might expect from karaoke.

Local bands were another matter. There were two teenage kids, one black and one white, who did a fine rap set and proved just why Bridgwater needs a Strummerville venue. Those kids could be good, given the right encouragement. Obedientbone

(<http://www.otterview.co.uk/bone/central.htm>), a band from Devon, opened the professional line-up and did a fine job. Their singer reminded me a lot of Cerys Matthews, which is no bad comparison.

Another local band, Propaganja (<http://www.midnightmango.co.uk/bands/propaganja/propaganja.html>) followed with some interesting reggae and ska-influenced music. They seemed very popular with the local kids, and they provided the first big surprise of the

evening, a guest appearance on saxophone by Andy McKay. This, of course, made my day. Many years ago a very young Cheryl bought every record that Roxy Music put out, even McKay's solo album, *In Search of Eddie Riff*. I never dreamed that I would be standing in the street in Bridgwater with McKay on stage just a few feet away from me. Thankfully I'm a lot older now and managed to avoid swooning or throwing any underwear.

Some other local acts (and a bunch more karaoke) got mixed in with the program, including a fairly impressive local samba band with lots of drums and dancers. Some Monmouth Rebellion re-enactment folks got in on the act too. But what the crowd was really waiting for was the arrival of the stars. There had been a lot of confusion as to who was going to turn up (rock stars are like that, very unreliable). There was no Primal Scream. I saw no sign of Kate Moss. But what we got was even better.

We got Billy Bragg (<http://www.billybragg.co.uk/>).

If you are going to have an open air gig on a tiny stage with a make-shift sound system you can't ask for anyone better to perform than Billy Bragg. His style of one-man-one-guitar and protest songs is just perfect. And so was he. He treated us to performances of "Sexuality" and "Waiting for the Great Leap Forwards". The latter was somewhat updated for modern ears, containing the odd pointed comment about smart bombs in the hands of dumb people, and exhortations to dump Tony Blair. Supposedly Joe Strummer loved Bridgwater because of its rebel spirit. Bridgwater loved Billy Bragg for much the same reason.

Oh, and Bragg is well up to date with modern media. He asked us all to mention him on our web sites when we got home. So Billy, if you are reading

this, drop me a line and say "thank you", huh?

Next up was Badly Drawn Boy (<http://www.badlydrawnboy.co.uk/>), an artist I'm not familiar with having been out of the UK music scene for some time, but clearly someone with a lot of talent. After a couple of songs he was joined on stage by Mick Jones, who proceeded to show that he knew far more about playing a guitar than any punk rocker ought to. Finally Andy McKay joined in for an instrumental version of "Rock the Casbah". The concert concluded with a karaoke version of that same song, which finally had the crowd in full voice. A grand time was had by all.

So here's the deal. Firstly, just as a reminder that this is the biggest thing to hit Bridgwater since the Monmouth Rebellion, here's proof. The town got mentioned in *The Independent* (<http://enjoyment.independent.co.uk/music/news/story.jsp?story=538798>). Of course the idiot headline writer managed to mis-spell the town's name, even though the journalist got it right throughout, but that's just a measure of what we are up against.

OK, so Alan Yentob, the BBC's Director of Entertainment, happens to live here. (And he did turn up at the concert.) But that isn't going to help us any. *Restoration* (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/programmes/restoration/>) is on BBC2. It is watched by luvvies (I'm not even going to try to explain that to Americans), aged academics and National Trust members, most of whom will ever have heard of Bridgwater, let alone be likely to vote for a mad plan by a bunch of aging punk rockers. If you want *Restoration's* money to go into a project that is vibrant and forward-looking and totally unconventional, rather than have it go to

a boring stately home, then the Concrete Castle needs your help.

The Southwest heat of *Restoration* will be aired at 9:00pm on Sunday July 25th (the day this issue goes live). As well as quite possibly getting a chance to see me on TV (the BBC crew took a lot of crowd shots) you can vote. Phone lines will apparently be open from 2:00am (British time) on the 25th until midnight on Monday 26th. The phone number is +44 (0) 9011 332222. It will cost a bit to call, because 34p of every call fee is going to the *Restoration* fund. But hey, wouldn't it be cool if the BBC found themselves suddenly getting a flood of calls from places like California, Australia and Finland?

Oh, and they use traditional Chicago voting methods. Vote early, vote often.

Miscellany

More Awards news

The results of the other Campbell Award, the one not presented at Worldcon, and formally known as the John W. Campbell Memorial Award, are as follows:

- 1st - *Omega*, Jack McDevitt
- 2nd - *Natural History*, Justina Robson
- 3rd - *The X President*, Philip Baruth

Hooray for Justina! (although of course I would have liked to see her win). Let's hope this does wonders for the US publication (currently scheduled for January 2005). I will get hold of a copy of the McDevitt and review it sometime soon.

Also out are the results of the Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award, which is for short fiction. The top three are:

- 1st - "The Empress of Mars," Kage Baker
- 2nd - "Bernardo's House," James Patrick Kelly
- 3rd - "It's All True," John Kessel

I see that "The Empire of Ice Cream" was listed amongst the finalists. It is, I maintain, a better piece of writing than any of the above. But I'm not going to begrudge Kage Baker her win, because she's provided a great piece of entertainment.

Stamp Campaign

Chris Barkley writes to tell me about a campaign to get the US Postal Service to produce commemorative stamps with pictures of famous SF people on them. Personally I'm not a big fan of such things - I can see this one turning into a cat fight about whose pictures should be used. And in any case as a non-American I don't feel it my place to petition the USPS. But if anyone wants a copy of the petition then please email me and I'll send it along.

Footnote

August is going to be busy. I have the SF Foundation's conference on Commonwealth Science Fiction coming up in two week. I'm very much looking forward to meeting some SF writers from India, not to mention old friends like Nalo Hopkinson, Sean McMullen and Stephen Dedman. Later in the month I've got a Concussion committee meeting. I'm also teaching a training course in London, immediately after which I fly out to the US. I then have to put #108 together before leaving for Worldcon. So things are going to be pretty chaotic.

What will we see in the way of books? It rather depends on what comes my way. The new George Martin is scheduled for an April release, but that is by no means reliable. I do have books by Larry Niven, Ellen Kushner and Steve Cockayne on my "to read" pile. There's also a fascinating history of Savoy, one of Britain's most controversial small presses. We'll see how much of that, and what else, I manage to cover.

Ciao,

Love 'n' hugs,

Cheryl