

# EMERALD CITY #121

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A monthly science fiction and fantasy review magazine edited by Cheryl Morgan and available from her at [cheryl@emcit.com](mailto:cheryl@emcit.com) or online at <http://www.emcit.com>

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We do like to offer our subscribers something in return as well as the magazine, and this month we are delighted to be giving away a free copy of Hal Duncan's excellent debut novel, *Vellum*, kindly donated by Pan Macmillan. The draw for the book will take place on October 22<sup>nd</sup> and is open to all subscribers.

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## Beyond Transcendence

By Cheryl Morgan

At the end of *Natural History*, Isol, Zephyr and a few other characters have, if not exactly become one with the

universe, have at least merged with an entity (Unity) that is sufficiently powerful that many people will inevitably view it as a god. At that point, any sensible science fiction writer would stop. The issues raised are too complex, too difficult to describe, and indeed too difficult to talk about at all without descending into philosophical debate. Justina Robson, however, is not just any science fiction author. She doesn't appear to be afraid of anything, and she might just have the talent to get away with it.

Here then, is *Living Next Door to the God of Love*. It is a sequel, of sorts, to *Natural History*, and it asks lots of difficult questions. What will happen to society when there exists a foreign power that appears to be able to manipulate the fabric of spacetime, even to the extent of making people? What is it like to be one with God? For that matter, is being one with God Heaven or Hell? And what happens if God decides that He doesn't want to be one with Himself?

No, this is all too complicated. Let's start with something simple.

Francine is fourteen, averagely pretty, and very, very smart. She gets great grades in school, and consequently none of the boys will date her. Francine is painfully aware that her mother designed her to be that way. Genetic engineering is a terrible thing for the engineered. And if that wasn't enough, mom's new boyfriend sees Francine as a major rival, not only for affection, but also for financial support. So Francine does that thing that fourteen-year-old girls down the ages have always seen as the only available solution to their problems: she runs away from home.

This, however, is the post-contact universe. Unity has granted mankind many gifts, including the ability to play in all sorts of interesting pocket

universes. Some of these make great places to run away to. Others do not but, being desperate, Francine doesn't have much choice. She ends up in Sankhara, which you get to by going to Blackpool but which is more like a cross between Glastonbury, a Thai beach resort, a Tolkien fan convention and The Shift.

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*The broad avenue with its central reservation of grass and tall palms unspooled beneath us, pushing the huge triple fortress of the Massif and the Aelf away until they became a single three-pronged spire of light against the pitch black perfection of the night sky, stars blotted out by the fairy dust glow that shone off every roof and shallow plane in the city so that every building from the greatest to the most humble was limned in a pale golden shimmer like ancient glory. Then we turned, following the line of the Purbright river towards the docks, and everything but the triple spire was lost to sight, hidden by the close brick walls of the warehouses and yards, their sides peeling with the eczema of old bill posters proclaiming legendary DJs, obscure political agendas and the return of the Justified Ancients of Muu Muu.*

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Another such "sidebar" world is Metropolis, where Unity has not only configured the laws of physics to allow superheroes to exist, but has also thoughtfully provided artificial beings ('Stuffies') for them to fight. It was a very ordinary day in Gotham City when the universe died. There was nothing any of the heroes could do about it. The whole thing was over in a matter of minutes. Only one conscious being survived. Unsurprisingly it was the very being that Unity was trying to kill when it chose to destroy Metropolis.

SolarGov is understandably upset. A lot of its citizens were in Metropolis when that universe vanished. Theodore, the representation that Unity uses as an

ambassador to humans, is unconcerned. The vanished humans have, after all been Translated, subsumed. They have become one with God. Besides, Unity had much more important concerns. Part of it has gone AWOL, and potentially rogue.

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*Unity operations which require energy transforms across all 11-D maintain stability because there is only one operator. But with two such operators, each not knowing what the other is doing or plans to do, there is a virtual certainty that energy transactions across the 11-D will cause a fatal instability, and destroy the conditions which permit the existence of all expanded four-D spacetimes, including your own. The splinter is a conscious operator, like myself, capable of destroying all expanded fourspace, whether it intends to or not.*

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Of course if you were to talk to this "splinter" (which by the way happens to call itself Jalaeka) it might claim that Theodore was being economical with the truth. It might claim that being one with God wasn't all it was cracked up to be, especially if you happened to be part of God yourself. It might explain why gods all down the centuries have been such uncaring and dangerous psychopaths.

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*"He doesn't care about you or Francine because ultimately he sees everyone as an adjunct of himself – eventually it'll all be OK, because you will be him and vice versa."*

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Oh, I've just told you where Jalaeka fled to when Metropolis was destroyed. But you knew that would happen, didn't you?

This should give you an idea of the magnitude of the challenge that Justina

Robson has set herself with this book. There's nothing virtual in her universe. Reality really is plastic in the hands of Unity (and of Jalaeka should he choose to exercise his power). And while there may be a fair amount of gung-ho action along the way, there is no chance that the problems the plot poses are going to be solved by the deft application of a solid, righteous fist to a villainous but glass-like jaw.

Of course there are dangers in this approach. A good number of the people who try to read this book are simply not going to be prepared to expend the effort to work out what is going on, especially in the opening chapters. Another group will come to the conclusion that the book is a heap of pseudo-intellectual posing and that if they'd wanted to think about the nature of existence then they would have studied philosophy in college. Both of these groups will, of course, miss a fabulous reading experience.

There is another danger that is perfectly encapsulated by a quote I pulled from Gary K. Wolfe's *Soundings* last issue. Transcendence is indeed only a short step away from incoherence. It is incredibly difficult for an author to write this sort of stuff and remain comprehensible. I know I found myself losing the thread on several occasions, but that could easily have been because I was reading the book in a hurry on my Palm. *Living Next Door to the God of Love* is not only a book I want to read again, but also one I think I need to read again in order to full appreciate everything that is going on.

And there is indeed a lot going on. One thing you can be sure of about this book is that nothing has been put into it by accident. If you don't know why a particular character is there, or what a particular scene means, then you probably just haven't worked it all out yet. And the reason that the book isn't as

long as *Olympos* is not because there's less in it, but because Robson doesn't see the same need to explain herself to her readers in great detail.

Of course I'm not going to be able to re-read the book. I won't have time, never do. So I want to see a few academic articles about this book. Something that looks at the philosophical issues, and the gender issues, and the literary references, and everything else that Robson has put into it. Please?

Oh, and I want to see Pan Macmillan submit the book for the Booker Prize.

*Living Next Door to the God of Love* - Justina Robson - Pan Macmillan - manuscript

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## Fox in The City

By Cheryl Morgan

There are many ways in which you can tell that an author is really, really good. For example, he may be able to write equally well in a range of different styles. He may do a lot of dedicated research that comes through in the detail given in the book. And of course he may provide fabulously slick prose and memorable characters that tug your emotions every which way. Take, for example, Jon Courtenay Grimwood.

Grimwood's last novel, *Stamping Butterflies*, was pure SF. It talked of nanotech and Dyson Spheres and generation ships and the nature of the universe. The new book, *9tail Fox*, is set in contemporary San Francisco and is primarily a noir crime novel. Grimwood, of course, lives in the UK, and while he has spent a lot of time traveling around the world San Francisco is not his usual habitat. So he went and talked to the San Francisco Police Department and researched the city and its history. Damn

it, he knows San Francisco much better than I do. All he needs now is the stuff about the slick writing, memorable characters and so on, and if you've read any of his recent work you'll know that's a given.

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*There was nothing wrong with the body he wore. Apart from the obvious, that it belonged to someone else. It had a full head of hair, winter blue eyes, near perfect teeth and skin that had barely seen sunlight in thirty years. He was tall, well dressed and rich.*

*"Anything else you'd like?" asked Sharon Gold.*

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The hero of our tale is Sergeant Bobby Zha of the SFPD. Like most cop heroes, he's a bit of a loner, but he does know the city inside out, and specializes in having connections with the city's low life: whores, fences, petty crooks, and a collection of homeless people who give the impression that they've recently been playing bit parts in a Tim Powers novel. Which is just as well, because Bobby Zha is dead.

To be more precise, Zha was murdered while investigating a break-in at a warehouse. He knows this because he can remember dying. And he can remember dying because when he woke up again he was in the body of Robert Vanberg of New York, who had been in a coma since being injured in a road accident at the age of seven. Vanberg got a very hefty compensation payout, and as a result is now very rich. Bobby Zha just wants to know who killed him, and why his partner, Pete Sanchez, stood by and let it happen.

He also wants to know about the fox.

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*Nine tails flowed behind the fox like flame, and so fast did these flicker that Bobby found*

*it impossible to know if there really were nine of them or if there was just one tail that was always in nine places at once.*

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I could be very tempted at this point to roll out Gary Wolfe's marvelous concept of "homeopathic SF" — a book that contains minute traces of the appropriate ingredient and yet manages to have the desired effect. The science fiction in *9tail Fox* is limited largely to some mad scientists who have ideas so daft they turned up in a bad late Heinlein novel. The fantasy comprises a few token appearances by the Celestial Fox of Chinese mythology. (Remember Larissa Lai's book? *When Fox is a Thousand* he gets to be immortal.) Gollancz, quite wisely, are marketing the book to fans of David Mitchell and Haruki Murakami. But while *9tail Fox* is a beautifully written piece of literature, it is also a gripping hard-boiled thriller that gets you almost as badly as *Effendi* does.

You see, before Bobby Zha died, he was not on the best of terms with his wife, Ellen — in fact she was having an affair with Sanchez. Nor was he on the best of terms with his teenage daughter, Kris, who despised him in that self-righteous way that only teenage daughters can. Then he ended up having to attend his funeral, investigate his own death, and solve a few other, rather more nasty crimes, because it was very certain that Sanchez didn't need him dead just to get access to Ellen. Something much bigger was at stake. Something that appeared to involve Russian gangsters and dead babies.

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*Civilians misunderstood. They thought cops went in, solved crimes and moved on. It didn't work like that. Cops went in, got fucked over by the shit they were investigating and dragged it behind them like a length of slime. When the slime finally*

*got too sticky to let them walk down the street, the brass handed out desk jobs or put you on something easy and insubstantial, like handling the homeless.*

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There are no pulled punches in *9tail Fox*. Grimwood has all the grittiness and local color of Richard Paul Russo's excellent Carlucci series, but with the SF content toned down enough to sell to a much wider market. This book might just break him as big as Richard Morgan, movie deal included.

I read a lot of books about the Bay Area in advance of the San José Worldcon, and given that I spend much of my time there I read others when I can. While I am prepared to defer judgment to friends who are natives of The City, I think this is one of the best of them. (At this point Grimwood is batting up against Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*, so hopefully he'll forgive me for not being more precise there.)

Hopefully the folks at Bantam will get this one out in the US very quickly, but it probably won't be until next year, so you may want to buy online.

*9tail Fox* - Jon Courtenay Grimwood - Gollancz - publisher's proof

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## Shape Shifter

By Cheryl Morgan

It has taken me rather a long time to get round to reading this year's other Tiptree winner. I was pretty certain that Johanna Sinisalo's *Not Before Sundown* would have a good chance of the prize, but I was quite startled to see it share the award with a novel by Joe Haldeman. Still, I have finally got a copy of the book, so here's the review.

If I were looking to categorize *Camouflage* I might mutter obscurely about a blend between hard SF and pulp. On the one hand it contains a lot of serious science. On the other, the central character is so off the wall that it takes a writer of Haldeman's skill to keep you believing in the story. Here's some background.

In 1931 something that had spent quite a number of years as a great white shark decided that it wanted to try being a human for a while. After millennia in the ocean, trying various body forms, it had finally noticed that things on land were getting interesting. It took quite a while to get the hang of being human; an adventure that included several embarrassing social faux pas and a spell in a lunatic asylum, but eventually it got the hang of these complex creatures and started to enjoy life among them.

Meanwhile, in 2019, Russell Sutton is approached by a rich and eccentric US Admiral. Sutton is a marine engineer famous for raising wrecks. His company, Poseidon Projects, had already raised the Titanic. He's looking for something to top that. Admiral Haliburton has an offer for him. He wants Russ to raise the wreck of an alien spaceship.

From this start the story proceeds on two parallel paths. The near future track proceeds slowly through the raising of the alien vessel and the various steps that Russ and the scientists hired to work for him take to try to analyze it. They try all sorts of things, including a military laser canon and putting it in different simulated planetary environments to see if they make it more comfortable. None of this works. Meanwhile the historical track follows the alien as it learns about humans. It discovers sex and war. The latter is a disturbing experience, though not too inconvenient for a creature that is more like intelligent matter than an intelligent

being. Here it is being executed by a Japanese officer during WWII.

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*The world spun around, sky twice. The changeling's head came to ground face up, and it watched with interest as its upside-down body spouted blood, and then fell or was pushed into the grave. It couldn't see after that, but heard and felt the warm dusty soil being shoveled over it.*

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Such a creature can, of course, attain power and wealth fairly easily. The alien can, given an hour or so, take any form it wants. It can impersonate any human. It can ingest material and use it to formulate clothes, equipment or money. It is its very own walking, thinking nanotech assembler. Luckily for humanity, this particular alien likes humans too much to use its powers to dominate them.

But there is another alien, one that has been living amongst humans for millennia. It knows their ways well, and has made war its trade. Thankfully it has been satisfied with being rich and getting to enjoy killing on a regular basis. It has been too cautious to openly subjugate humans. There is one thing, however, that both aliens obsess over. Being hundreds of thousands of years old, they have quite forgotten who they are and where they came from. All they know is that they are different. When a group of humans discovers an alien spacecraft deep in a Pacific trench and brings it to Samoa, both aliens take a keen interest in developments.

What exactly does all of this have to do with the Tiptree Award? Well, as I noted earlier, much of the book is devoted to the story of the first alien (Haldeman calls it "changeling") learning to pass as human. It finds it easier to be male at first because males are stronger and have more social influence. But as the

20<sup>th</sup> Century blends slowly into the 21<sup>st</sup> it begins to find being female a better fit to its strategy of staying hidden. A pretty girl can get places no man ever could.

To be honest, there isn't a lot of social observation in the book. Haldeman hasn't set out to write about the difference between being male and being female. He has his story to tell, which he does with his customary brilliance. And along the way two things become obvious. Firstly Haldeman writes female characters very well. And secondly he is aware of the issues, and drops observations into the plot when it requires them.

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*It had been a woman often enough to know that men would accept a lack of sexual activity for a long time, if you were attractive and kept them talking about themselves.*

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In some ways I think the fact that the changeling doesn't obsess over the differences between men and women is a strength of the book. The changeling has no social conditioning, and therefore no hang-ups about whether it presents as male or female. The choice is simply one of convenience and strategy. In all other ways it sees male and female humans as equal, or should I say equally alien, which makes it a dispassionate observer of the human condition. On the other hand, this stance can easily be taken as backing the idea that there are no differences between men and women other than superficial physical ones. This is a much more contentious stance, and one I suspect is likely to be far more obvious and important to members of a Tiptree jury than to Haldeman.

I don't want to go off into discussions of feminist theory here because the gender aspects of the book are not hugely significant. People who hate feminist SF will enjoy this book for its many other

fine qualities. Indeed, I have the paperback edition, which came out after the book won the Tiptree, and Ace doesn't mention the award anywhere in the book. But at the same time, while *Camouflage* is an excellent book, had I been on the jury I think I would have argued against the book winning the Tiptree, and made myself very unpopular with hard-line feminists as a result.

*Camouflage* - Joe Haldeman - Ace - mass market paperback

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## Facing Extinction

By Cheryl Morgan

One thing I am beginning to learn about Julie Czerneda novels is that they are all going to be fun. No matter what awful threats face her heroes, they are going to prove to be charming, amiable people who mostly get on well together and who laugh and joke with each other at every available opportunity. Thus in *Survival*, the first of the Species Imperative series, even though the galaxy is threatened by a gray goo-like threat that promises to wipe out all organic life, the characters still spend a lot of the time enjoying themselves. And when things get bad they get to throw tantrums without anyone once complaining that their behavior is socially unacceptable. It is a good life, being a Julie Czerneda character.

The central figure in *Survival* is Dr. Mackenzie ("Mac") Winifred Elizabeth Wright Connor, a field biologist specializing in studying salmon at a nature reserve on the Northwest Coast of America. She and her best pal, Dr. Emily Mamani, are just starting up a series of experiments on the new season's salmon migrations when their

careful work is interrupted by the arrival of a foreign dignitary and his entourage.

Said dignitary turns out to be one Brymn, the first member of the mysterious Dhryn race to visit Earth. The Dhryn look rather like large, blue, hairless, seven-armed bears. Their vocal range is so low that humans can almost feel them as much as hear them. They are, in a strange and alien sort of way, cute.

In addition the alien visitor has a human handler, a suave diplomat called J/a/m/e/s B/o/n/d Nikolai Trojanowski. Mac takes an immediate dislike to him, which of course means that the pair will fall in love later in the book.

It turns out that Brymn has sought out Mac because he needs help with a deadly threat facing the galaxy, a threat only the Dhryn fully understand because only they survived its last attack. But lo, it turns out that the bad guys, the mysterious and invisible Ro, are onto Brymn and want to stop him and anyone who offers him help.

At this point we learn that Emily is a Ro agent who has been spying on Mac for ages. Then the Ro try to kidnap Mac, Nik gets shot and left for dead, and Mac is hustled off to the Dhryn homeworld where she will be safe. That's the set-up.

Those of you who enjoy such puzzles can probably work out most of what happens in the rest of the book already. If you need a hint, just pick the most obvious outcome that results in the most characters turning out to be nice people in the end. *Survival* is not a book that sets out to upset its readers.

But I did read it all the way to the end, and there are good reasons for that. The first is that Czerneda has thought a bit about interacting with aliens. The Dhryn are not humanoids with latex patches on their foreheads. They think differently to

us, and misunderstandings are all too easy. True Czerneda presents these in a jokey fashion, but at the same time she shows awareness of simple and obvious problems. For example, the Dhryn all treat Mac with great respect because she has a lot of names – a sign of great honor in their society. Also they can't quite get their heads round the idea that an intelligent species would be so badly designed as to require a regular intake of a simple liquid like piss – yes, the Dhryn excrete pure water, and don't quite know what to make of the human habit of drinking it. This isn't alien interaction on the level of Gwyneth Jones' Aleutian Trilogy, but at the same time it is streets ahead of much of what passes for science fiction (or at least Sci Fi).

In addition, Czerneda, for all her joking and easy reading, has a serious point to make. The whole plot centers on the fact that the Dhryn have banned scientific study of certain important things because their leaders don't like the conclusions that scientists might come to. I think we can all relate to that message.

And finally, as I said earlier, the whole book is darn good fun. Yes, it is fairly light reading, but it is also good entertainment. I see from the preview at the back of the book that volume #2 in the series features a Captain Frank Wu. That I have to read, if only to discover what sort of nasty end Czerneda inflicts upon him.

If I were an editor working for an SF book publisher I would buy Julie Czerneda books and be confident that they would sell.

*Survival* – Julie Czerneda – Daw – mass market paperback

## Firefly All Grown Up

By Karina Meerman

Once there was a television series called *Firefly*, written and produced by Joss Whedon (*Buffy*, *Angel*). Fourteen episodes were made, but only ten were aired in the US before the show was cancelled. (In the Netherlands, where I live, *Firefly* was aired after midnight on a Saturday.) The series was described as cowboys and whores in space. Not very appealing. On top of that, how are ordinary people to deal with nine main characters, Chinese swearing and spaceships but no aliens? Yet when the full series was released on DVD it turned out that people loved it. *Firefly*-hugging websites sprung up everywhere and fans (calling themselves Browncoats) cried for more. They got more; they got a feature film called *Serenity*.

The Dutch premiere of *Serenity* in Amsterdam was attended by some two hundred fans and lead actors Nathan Fillion (Captain Malcolm Reynolds) and Summer Glau (River Tam). It was a prescreening, as part of the worldwide publicity campaign. Whedon has learned that fans can be a mighty force and he is counting on them to make his film into a success. The question is, will it be?

First, the story: five hundred years into the future, the universe is a collection of peaceful planets under the rule of the Federation. After a lengthy war, only few people live outside the "civilized world" on the lawless (read "free") outer planets. Captain Malcolm 'Mal' Reynolds, fought on the losing side. He is a hard man, with an odd sense of honor (and humor, too). After peace was declared, he turned to a life outside the Federation with a *Firefly* class transport-ship called *Serenity*. His crew are the gorgeous ex-soldier Zoe (Gina Torres), her funny husband pilot Wash (Alan Tudyk), mechanics-loving engineer

Kaylee (Jewel Staite) and not-so-bright bounty hunter Jayne (Adam Baldwin). On their travels, they pick up preacher Shepherd Book (Ron Glass) and the sophisticated prostitute ("companion") Inara (Morena Baccarin), who when the film starts, no longer live on the ship. The brilliant doctor, Simon Tam, (Sean Maher) and his crazy sister, River (Summer Glau), still do, but are increasingly dangerous to *Serenity* and her crew, and Mal wants them off his ship.

River Tam and her brain are what the film is about. The Federation has sent their very best bounty hunter to track her down because, after being tinkered with, she apparently knows all sorts of secrets and has dark and powerful fighting abilities. The lovely, graceful girl moves like a dancer, but is deadlier than Benjamin Kiddo and no one is certain what sets her off. After a bizarre fight in a bar, Mal decides to keep both brother and sister on board. With help, they discover they are being tracked by the bounty hunter. In their flight from him, the *Serenity* crew is briefly reunited with Shepherd Book, who teaches Mal a bit about the way the Federation will attack. Shortly after, Mal willingly walks into a trap (enter his beloved Inara) and encounters the bounty hunter personally. They exchange witty phrases and lots of punches and Mal and Inara barely escape. The chase then turns ever more desperate, with bodies scattered across the universe. The point where Mal decides to fight back is positively chilling. Lone bastard hero takes on "civilization" with nothing to help him but friends and faith. Good stuff.

And more than half a movie to go at this point. It is an action & emotion packed film, and considering the difficulty I'm having reconstructing the story I wonder if it isn't too packed for the average viewer. Or maybe I'm just getting old.

One viewing just didn't seem enough, but that also may have something to do with watching a big screen from the second row in front. Anyway, the point where they discover the Big Secret felt a bit odd, almost an excuse for the rest of the story. Later, when the bombardment of images and sounds had settled in my brain, it seemed to make more sense and fit the bigger theme. I liked the way in which the *Serenity* crew decided to solve all the issues concerning the Big Secret. I liked it even better that I was kept hanging for a long time, before I knew if they were going to succeed that way or not. And who would live to tell.

You can probably tell by now I liked the film. But the question is, will it be a mainstream success? Being a fan of the series, I know the stories of each *Serenity* crewmember and have felt for them. I had wondered how others would cope with the large amount of people to like and the answer is, "they don't have to." Surprisingly quickly, you are up to date on the nature of River's craziness and how dangerous she is for all those around her. And underneath the story of her being chased by the Federation, there are layers and layers of other things going on. Some will get picked up, others won't. Unfortunately for non-English speakers, the way Whedon uses the English language is near impossible to translate and a lot is lost in the Dutch subtitles.

As this is a movie and not a television show, *Serenity* has a different pace than the series (more *Moulin Rouge* than *The English Patient*). It feels more condensed in some places and a bit stretched out in others, but in general you are kept very busy. You will be laughing one minute and gasping with shock the next, and vice versa. What I kept thinking was PLENTY. *Serenity* has plenty speed, plenty action, plenty noise, plenty fighting, plenty Reavers, plenty

emotions and plenty little in-jokes the fans will love. There should have been more Chinese swearing, more leather and less IQ points for Jayne, but that might just be me. It is a full movie with a complete story and it is a fine ending to the old series, as well an intriguing basis for a whole new one. But will *Serenity* be a success? I honestly don't know. In the Netherlands, I doubt it. It is a small film with only twenty copies released. Much of the wittiness will be lost in translation. But when I asked Summer Glau's Dutch security guard what he thought he spoke the dreaded yet hopeful phrase, "I usually don't like science-fiction, but I enjoyed this."

*Serenity* - Joss Whedon - Universal - theatre release

*Firefly - The Complete Series* - Joss Whedon - Fox - DVD

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## What Stories Turned \*Your\* World Upside Down?

By Anne KG Murphy

I was in Chicago this spring, being Neil Gaiman's guest liaison at the Nebulas, and I was standing next to Neil at the post-awards party when David Hartwell walked up and told him (approx.), "This is actually a really good anthology." He was holding *The World Turned Upside Down*, edited by David Drake, Eric Flint, and Jim Baen. I had seen the pile of them on a table at the back of the room, but I hadn't actually *looked* at them, assuming due to the cover illustration (an historical depiction of two armies facing off, with a couple aliens strolling through the scene) that the focus was military alternate history (not one of my favorite subgenres). Now I actually

looked at it. I turned it over and saw the list of stories on the back cover and I was impressed. It's a brick of a book (many of the stories are actually novellas) but I highly recommend it.

Basically what the editors did was compile a collection of stories that really made an impression on them during their youth in the '50s and '60s. This is old-time science fiction, with magnetronic drives and antigrav body harnesses and a powerful sense of possibility. Aliens and humans show up in all varieties both terrifying and noble.

Some of these stories were old favorites of mine, but more were new discoveries for me. The '50s and '60s predated my birth, and I suppose I am part of the target audience of this collection for that reason. Particularly delightful discoveries included the psionic story "Goblin Night," by James H. Schmitz; Robert Sheckley's boy scout story, "Hunting Problem;" The touching though fatalistic "Thy Rocks and Rills, by Robert Earnest Gilbert; Keith Laumer's story "The Last Command," which gives tribute to multiple kinds of forgotten veterans; and "St. Dragon and the George," a very funny piece by Gordon R. Dickson, fantastic in more than one sense of the word. Many good reminders that humanity (and inhumanity) are not tied to physical form.

Some stories in this volume, such as John Campbell's "Who Goes There?" and Tom Godwin's "The Cold Equations," have been anthologized many times before. Others, such as Murray Leinster's "The Aliens," are there partly to pay homage to authors who are all but forgotten by the next generation, their writing largely out of print. There are twenty-nine stories in all, bracketed in a most worthy way by Arthur Clarke's "Rescue Party," a now-familiar exploration of how humans might

impress other races by using our rapid technological development to overcome a seemingly impossible challenge, and Ted Sturgeon's "Thunder and Roses," a sobering reminder that technology wielded with hate and lack of forethought can turn inward and hurt us most horribly and irrevocably.

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*"Thunder and roses." Twisted, sick, non-survival roses, killing themselves with their own thorns.*

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This revisit of the nuclear terrors of the '50s also illustrates how some of the most important challenges human beings face are internal struggles, of psychology, ego, and heart.

Flint sounds like a boy again as he expresses his enthusiasm for the material in this collection in prefaces and postscripts. Drake also writes inspiring comments, a bit more staidly, and Baen provides sparing but choice little notes. Science fiction is partly about perspectives, and these three men illuminate this broad collection with their personal perspectives, in interesting counterpoint to one another.

*The World Turned Upside Down* - David Drake, Eric Flint, Jim Baen, Editors - Baen Books - hardcover

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## Minding the Living

By Juliet E. McKenna

This is the fifth of Kelley Armstrong's 'Women of the Otherworld' books, so wary readers will be forgiven for looking out for ominous signs of failing inspiration or those dread indicators that a series with a cast of recurring characters is about to descend into soap

opera. Thankfully, no such flaws are present as a well-thought-out plot builds to a logically satisfactory denouement while still delivering real shocks and audacious twists right up to the conclusion.

The choice of protagonist is an inspired one. We are in the ghost world with Eve Levine, half demon and black witch who was killed before making it onto the pages of the earlier volume *Stolen*. Death hasn't stopped her watching over her daughter, Savannah, now the ward of another witch, Paige, whose adventures feature in *Dime Store Magic* and *Industrial Magic*. Don't worry if you haven't read these books, or if you can't recall the finer details. Necessary back-story is deftly slipped in as this tale rapidly takes on a fully rounded life of its own. The same light touch swiftly shapes a coherent afterlife with judicious use of established myth and echoes from films and TV series such as *Ghost* and *Angel*. This isn't lack of imagination at work but rather shrewd writing facilitating rapid familiarization. Thus the reader isn't distracted by working out the ground rules when they should be enjoying this story. And there are plenty of original touches to add depth and texture. Chicago's ghost world is stuck in its 1920's heyday, while a visit to Glamis Castle suggests explanations for the British royal family's peculiarities that even the most extreme tabloids haven't yet dreamed up.

The tale's the thing above all else, and as in many supernatural adventures, the Fates are taking a hand in human affairs. Evil is loose; the Nix, who feeds on chaos and death and who's been prompting vile murders throughout the ages. The Fates hope Eve's unorthodox background means she will have more success in capturing the creature than the angels who've been sent after it so far. An interestingly flawed heroine, well

aware that she could do with some redemption, Eve is actually far more concerned with finding a necromancer whom she can convince to put her in touch with Savannah. But she owes the Fates a favor and they are determined to collect. So Eve hunts the Nix, who turns out to believe the best form of defense is attack. Soon Eve is chasing the Nix in desperate hopes of catching up before the creature reaches her own prey.

So far, so simple. Only it isn't. The Nix can only work through people, so humanity cannot shrug off responsibility for its own evils onto supernatural forces. The seduction of evil, its freedoms and realities, is woven into the fantasy. Where the bloody results are laid out before us, this is exploration, not exploitation, the visceral jolt notwithstanding. Nor are the victims forgotten. Where there is evil, there must be justice and that's explored as well, along with the nature of punishment and torment. Hell can truly be other people, especially for psychopaths.

Just as the humans that partner the Nix have made their choices, Eve faces hard decisions of her own. Ghosts may be impotent when it comes to interaction with the living, but on their own terms they can enjoy a satisfying sex life. Eve has come to a comfortable accommodation with Savannah's deceased father Kristof; a relationship that provides wry comic relief offering effective contrast to darker aspects of the story. Hunting the Nix puts all that at risk. And what is Eve to do about Savannah? Is she able to let her daughter go, to grow up and make her own choices and mistakes as her life goes on in a way Eve's no longer can? Can Eve set aside her own self-indulgent fantasies in the face of this reality? How is she going to explain herself to Paige, her husband Lucas and Jaime the necromancer, once she's dragged them

all into this? All these effectively realized characters and their well-observed relationships add yet another level to this satisfying read.

If you are already a fan of Kelley Armstrong, you'll enjoy a book that builds on all the strengths of her writing thus far and offers considerable promise for what's to come. If you haven't read her before, this is an excellent place to start. If you've yet to try what's becoming the distinct sub-genre of supernatural chick-lit, prepare to be agreeably surprised by a well-crafted piece of writing that certainly shouldn't be dismissed with disdainful genre labeling.

*Haunted* - Kelley Armstrong - Orbit - mass market paperback

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## "Demented" Fiction

By Mario Guslandi

After his debut book from BJM press, *The Nightmare Exhibition*, and his outstanding 2004 short story collection from Tartarus Press, *Morbid Tales*, Quentin S. Crisp returns with a further collection featuring six longish new stories. I say "new" but, oddly enough, all of the pieces included in the present volume date back to 2001 and 2002, that is to say *before* the Tartarus book. And I say "stories" for want of another suitable term to describe these offbeat pieces of fiction.

Crisp himself, in his introduction, when facing the problem of defining his work (ruling out traditional labels such as horror, gothic, and weird) has coined the term "demented fiction," a genre which, obviously, cannot be confined within the conventional boundaries of a tale or of a novelette.

If the work presented in *Rule Dementia!* does precede the stories that appeared in *Morbid Tales*, then to me this comes as a relief, otherwise I should conclude that Crisp's thriving as a fiction author is suffering a severe setback. Mind you, Crisp remains a writer endowed with extraordinary abilities to forge exquisite phrases, choose precisely the right words to describe an object, recreate a mood, or pinpoint a character, but he seems to lack the capability of keeping the flow of his prose under control. A typical example is "The Haunted Bicycle," where, in spite of his masterful command of the written language, Crisp simply cannot stick to the plot, keeps digressing, and turns out flowery prose to the point that the story runs out of steam long before its rather disappointing conclusion.

In contrast "Jellyfish Joe" starts up as the tedious report of the founding of a silly religious sect, full of pseudo-philosophical junk. Then, thanks to Crisp's fascinating writing style, the story gains momentum in describing the leader's disappearance and spiritual testament.

"Zugzwang" (no idea of the word's meaning) is the upsetting portrait of a young man and his difficult relationship with other human beings. The story remains utterly ambiguous: is life a masquerade, the true nature of which can be only fleetingly detected, or is what we are reading just the delusions of a paranoid personality unable to cope with the daily existence?

A young man unable to face the world's reality is a common character in the book, and can also be encountered in "The Tao of Petite Beige," where Taiwan with its ancient temples, a sexually repressed young man, and an Internet icon of femininity are the ingredients of an insipid piece dragging along purposelessly for fifty pages. Even

Crisp's elegant wording and his skill in conveying a constant feeling of unreality cannot compensate for the defects of a story entirely lacking substance.

"The Waiting" is another dreamlike story where a man finds himself pushed into an enigmatic and frightening Outside full of secrets and mysterious gods. Imbued with a sense of universal horror that questions the meaning of our existence, once again the story is too long, packed with delirious visions ("demented" fiction, indeed) and soon becomes boring.

The same applies to "Unimaginable Joys," another tale where the plot, if any, gets lost in a flood of surreal events and digressions. Once again the main character is an outsider, a kind of Peter Pan living in a personal dimension.

Crisp's potential is enormous and his writing skill exceptional. The publication of this old material displays his early, sometimes unsuccessful efforts, to become the accomplished writer we have met in his remarkable *Morbid Tales*.

*Rule Dementia!* - Quentin S. Crisp - Rainfall Books - trade paperback

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## Quantum Psychology

By Cheryl Morgan

*Emerald City* gets a lot of requests for reviews from small publishers I've not heard of. Most of them I end up turning down, but every so often something really interesting comes in. That was most definitely the case with *Venusia* by Mark von Schlegell. To start with, it is one of the launch titles for a new range of SF novels. Perhaps more interestingly the publisher, Semiotext(e), whom I have interviewed in this issue, specializes mainly in the more experimental end of

mainstream literature. More information about what they are up to with this new series is available in the interview. But what is *Venusia* all about?

Two centuries into the future, Earth was falling apart under the constant pressure of human activity: war, pollution, religion, politics, or just plain simple greed. The planet was a mess. So a determined group of individuals decided to make a new start by founding a colony on Venus. It wasn't easy, but scientific adaptations, including green skin to soak up energy from sunlight, and a special system for generating an artificial Terran-length day/night cycle from the long Venusian day made it possible.

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*If Venusia were to set its calendar by the planet's slow rotation, a single Venusian day (a "v-day" the humans called it) would prove very long indeed, consisting of more than 243 Terran, 24-hour days. To counteract the unfortunate situation, the colony's robot factories manufactured Terran Standard Time by blowing a hole in the eternal cloudcover every twelve Terran hours. The regularity established an illusion very like time.*

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Unfortunately humanity took their usual bad habits to Venus with them, and if the colony were to survive extreme measures would be necessary. Thanks to the brilliant scientist, Hugo Morituri, and some useful hallucinogenic flora, *Venusia* now flourishes under the benevolent dictatorship of Princeps Jorx Crittendon. Citizens go about their daily lives, they watch Reality-V shows, and they attend the obligatory twice-daily Feed at which they feast upon flowers.

Consuming flowers has many effects, including a certainly susceptibility to the mutability of reality. That is why trained neuroscops such as Dr. Sylvia Yang are

needed to monitor the mental health of citizens and, if necessary, erase any unhealthy ideas. Most importantly, however, the flowers cause citizens to forget both past and future. Venusia no longer has a history, and no one has ideas about shaping the future. There is only now.

Unfortunately no system of social control is perfect. There are always oddities, always people who slip through the net. One such citizen is Rogers Collectibles, a small-time antiques dealer. His profession ought to be suspect enough, though he has worked hard to avoid the attentions of the authorities. But now he has acquired something rare and valuable. It is a book: *Brane World*, written by Peter Melton, the founder of Venusia. It is a history of the colony. For Rogers Collectibles, life is about to get very dangerous.

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*But why a bookstore? Did bookstores, like electrons, depend on statistical waves of movement that could be released at any time? Sylvia stood shyly and let the quiet come down around her. It was a hush and peace she'd never known. A scent rich with the wood and mold of paper; alternate histories yawning from text-laden recesses. A floor creaking as she walked.*

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The influence of 1984 on von Schlegell's writing is clear. Indeed, the whole idea of controlling the past in order to control the future can be found in Orwell's book. *Venusia* also has some fairly obvious examples of Newspeak, including describing cigarettes as "lung protectors" and people who refuse to eat the hallucinogenic flowers as "addicts." But of course the use of Newspeak in politics has never been more common than it is today. It is not surprising, therefore, that SF is producing more and

more books like *Venusia* and Karl Schroeder's *Lady of Mazes*. Control of reality is the ultimate dictator's dream.

Rogers Collectibles is not exactly the stuff of which social revolution is made. He's a dotty eccentric with just enough willpower to do what he wants and not what society wants of him. However, circumstances link him to Sylvia Yang, to Martha Dobbs, an ambitious Reality-V reporter, and to Niftus Norrington, a government agent who chooses to aid the rebels because of his passion for Sylvia. Possibly more importantly, this little group has help. Unbeknownst to Sylvia, the unassuming potted ornament in her office is actually PHRED, a sentient plant doing his best to make sure that the stupid humans don't make a mess of Venus the way they ruined Earth. There are other allies to be found as well.

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*"I am a particularly sophisticated machine," said the little black-eyed creature. "An extraordinary machine, if I may be so bold. I represent a league of other such spectacular technologies. Indeed, Sir, the League of Extraordinary Machines has now committed itself to aiding you and the Doctor in your neuroscopic endeavors."*

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Put like that, *Venusia* sounds like a fairly straightforward SF thriller about bold freedom fighters overthrowing an oppressive regime. If it had been, however, I doubt that Semiotext(e) would have bought it. Rather it is a mind-bending excursion through the plastic neuroscapes of quantum reality. Our heroes have to enforce their right to their own existence before Jorx Crittendon can define himself as the sole representative of reality. If you are looking for a comparison, it reads more like Jeff Noon than anything else I can think of.

So, if you are into weird ideas, surreal landscapes, and narratives whose geometry is decidedly non-Euclidian, *Venusia* is the book for you. What is more, I suspect that the folks at Semiotext(e) are intending to produce more of this sort of book. I think that will be a very good thing.

*Venusia* – Mark von Schlegell – Semiotext(e)  
– publisher’s proof

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## Detecting Magic

By Cheryl Morgan

Here’s another one of those review requests that turned out to be a gem. I’d never heard of Gayleen Froese or Newest Press when the email came in, but Froese has her own web site < <http://www.gayleenfroese.com/> > and I was sufficiently impressed by what I saw there to take the book. Here then, is *Touch*, a supernatural detective story blending into horror.

The detectives in this particular case are Anna Gareau and Collete (‘Collie’) Kostyna. Anna has the embarrassing ability to see visions of important moments in people’s lives if she happens to touch them, or something dear to them. This is not good. She spends a lot of time with her hands in her pockets, and tries to stay on the fringes of society. Right now she’s working as a courier, smuggling a valuable WWII Luger into Canada for a friend who is an antiques dealer.

In Victoria, British Columbia, Anna runs into two problems: the client has changed his mind about the gun and won’t pay for it, and she becomes a suspect in a murder case. The other prime suspects are Collie and her boss, Paul Echlin, who writes best-selling books about famous people. The

murdered woman, Jocelyn Lowry, had arranged to meet Echlin at Anna’s hotel to provide him with some information about a story he was investigating. It seems that the star journalists at *The Rail*, a local magazine, have all started behaving crazily for no apparent reason. Jocelyn worked as a graphic designer at *The Rail*.

Anna gets involved in the case by being in the wrong place at the wrong time. But, as luck would have it, Echlin offers to hire her to help investigate the case, and teams her up with Collie to do the legwork while he goes to talk to important people.

So far so good. Well, sort of. When I started reading the book I quickly dropped into the state of thinking about how the book had been written rather than about the story itself. You know that feeling when you keep thinking to yourself, “I can’t understand why that character did that”? Thankfully this doesn’t last long. As soon as Froese has got through the hard part of getting her unlikely heroes working together she gets on with what she is good at, which is writing about characters. Anna and Collie, despite their frequent fights, manage to make a good team. Anna herself is understandably reserved and standoffish. Here Froese contrasts Anna with *The Rail*’s parenthood reporter:

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*To be fair, Kate Eby might always have been terminally girly. Probably grew up in a room with a canopy bed and had one of those porcelain dolls with her birth month written across its skirt and a birthstone in its precious little hands. Anna’s childhood room had featured a stuffed badger and a .22.*

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Collie, on the other hand, is younger, sassy and reckless. She is forever talking back to people, getting into rows, and narrowly failing to crash her car despite

some of the worst driving Anna has ever seen. Here's Anna's view of her partner.

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*"I've only known her a few days and I know better than that. Her idea of caution is carrying a rabbit's foot while jumping out of a plane with no parachute."*

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Paul Echlin is also a vivid character. He has an enquiring mind and, once he gets hold of an idea, worries at it incessantly while ostentatiously displaying his intellectual superiority. Anna and Collie soon stop telling him what they are up to.

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*Checking in was the cautious and reasonable thing to do. But they weren't going to call Paul. If they did, Paul would pretend to applaud their good sense, but he would also smirk and call them "ladies." He would call them "ladies" in the sweet and condescending way that one might call a couple of five year old girls "ladies." Death was preferable.*

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Of course it was probably a good idea that they didn't tell Paul too much, because it quickly became obvious that someone had it in for the *Rail* journalists, and that someone was behaving suspiciously like he was able to cast magic spells on his victims. Jocelyn was a member of the local neo-pagan community, and appears to have been convinced that magic was being used, given the various (presumably ineffective) charms with which she surrounded herself. This is not the sort of thing you take to the police, let alone a relentlessly forensic boss. Indeed, Anna would rather not believe it herself, supernatural powers being something she's somewhat in denial about. Collie, however, is a firm believer in the occult,

which of course provides another area of friction between Froese's heroines.

By the time I was half way through *Touch* I was really enjoying how Froese handled her characters, and her wry sense of humor. And the ending of the book is sufficiently creepy to get the book classed as Dark Fantasy. Gayleen Froese has a lot of talent. I hope to hear more from her in future.

*Touch* - Gayleen Froese - Newest Press - trade paperback

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## The Devil in Sydney

By Cheryl Morgan

Australians seem to have a thing about the netherworld. Zoran Živković has just published an anthology of Australian fiction called *The Devil in Brisbane*. I recently reviewed another Australian anthology, *Encounters*, in which one of the best stories was called "The Flatmate from Hell". And now here's Anna Tambour's novel, *Spotted Lily*, in which a Sydney girl takes the Devil as a flatmate.

Angela Pendergast, however, knows exactly what she is doing. You see it is Pledge Week in Hell. The Devil needs recruits and Angela, being totally fed up with the way her life is going, has taken him up on his offer of exchanging her soul for undying fame. Thus Brett Hartshorn, as she decides to call him, takes up residence in the same house as her for a while and sets to work on writing her a best-selling novel.

So far so Faustian, and of course it doesn't take Angela long to realize that she has done a deal with someone who is fundamentally unreliable and untrustworthy. But, on the other hand, poor old Brett isn't exactly comfortable either. To start with there are the small

matters of the horns and tail that need disguising. And writing a best-selling novel turns out to be rather harder than he had imagined.

One of the things I liked most about this book was that it was so difficult to tell where it was going. From that set-up it could easily have turned into a *Good Omens*-style comedy. It doesn't, although it does provide Tambour with plenty of excuses for wry observations about human nature.

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*The owner of the Restonia arrived by proxy, in the form of the company lawyer. He sidled up to Brett, and tried to engage in small talk, using words like 'cool', meaning, in the lawyer's case, that he had been taking lessons in acting human from his teenage daughter, but they hadn't worked.*

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If we are not getting out-and-out comedy, what are we getting? Well certainly we are getting some commentary on morality. Brett points out early on that the problem with being in charge of punishing sinners is that the awkward humans keep changing their mind about what is sinful and what isn't. He's just getting started on some evil terrorist and suddenly the guy gets re-classified as a freedom fighter and he has to let him go upstairs. It is all very frustrating. And Brett, it seems, is just not up to following the deviousness of the human mind.

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*"You didn't used to eat meat."*

*"No. I was a vegetarian."*

*"But you ate squids and octopuses almost every day."*

*When would he ever learn the finer points?*

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Mainly, however, the book is about Australia. It has the most distinct Australian voice of any novel I can remember reading, and it has that "sense of place" that authors always talk about when trying to describe why books by people from their country are different from books by people from any other country.

There are a couple of distinctive Australian obsessions that haunt the book. The first is to do with culture. Certainly if you live in a very young country that is miles from anywhere it is something worth worrying about (although I suspect that Jonathan Strahan has a far better chance of finding intelligent conversation in Perth than I do in Darkest Somerset). This is especially so when your most famous cultural icons are dame Edna Everage, Sir Les Patterson, Crocodile Dundee and Mel Gibson, and when your country is marketed to the rest of the world as being full of beer-swilling, sport-watching loveable oafs. It is not surprising that some Aussies develop a bit of a complex.

We know, of course, that Australia has produced many fine writers (to which list you can now add Anna Tambour), that it grows some of the best wines in the world, and that given its tiny population it does absurdly well at just about anything its people turns their hands to. Defending Australia's reputation is not hard. But then someone will mention that Australia's most famous painter is Norman Lindsay who had a thing about drawing, well, naked Sheilas, and the whole thing begins again. (One of Lindsay's etchings adorns the cover of the book, so if you are reading this online you can see just what I mean.)

Anyway, there is a lot of talk about art, about fashion, and of course about books (a subject on which Angela seems to

know rather more than Brett, despite his voracious reading) and the upshot of it all is a very Australian appreciation of talent while at the same time having no truck with pomposity. There is also a pointed reminder that Australian tourists (even Satanic ones) are generally rather better behaved than British ones.

Another major tension I remember well from Australia is the question of The Bush. The vast majority of Australians live in big cities, but The Bush is always there as a reminder that Australia really is an alien landscape with which the original European settlers never quite came to terms. To be blunt, if America had been settled by some of the same sorts of idiots who settled Australia then they'd be rejecting tomatoes, potatoes, sweet corn, turkey and chocolate as "disgusting native food", and redwoods would be being chopped down, not for their wood, but because they were "unsightly" and needed to be replaced by Proper British Oaks.

Of course if you happen to live in The Bush then you will know only too well that it is an unforgiving place, that wombats aren't entirely cute, and that kangaroos have about the nuisance value you would expect from 6-foot tall rabbits that can bound along at 60 mph and leap any fence you put up (though they do taste rather good, just don't tell the tree-huggers back in the cities). Yet The Bush is also an outstandingly beautiful place the like of which you will find nowhere else on the planet.

Much of this, of course, is Cheryl waxing nostalgic about Australia and remembering all of the things she loved about the place. Themes like this certainly pervade the book, and add a welcome spice of foreign-ness to Tambour's elegant prose and pointed observations. But what do they have to do with selling your soul to the Devil? Well, that's another Australian issue.

You see, one of the best things about Australians is that if you put them in a competition it doesn't matter how hopeless the odds, or how awesome the reputation of the opposition, they'll get out there and do their best to try to win. Which is why, if Faust had been an Australian, he would not have stood for any nonsense from the Devil, or from God for that matter. And neither, in the end, does Angela.

You may have noticed that I've said almost nothing so far about the fact that this is a book in which one of the characters happens to have horns and a tail, a penchant for pyromania, a favorite diet of raw meat and blood and a habit of disappearing in a puff of brimstone when annoyed. In fact, if you gave *Spotted Lily* to an average mainstream reader and described it as a fantasy they would not understand what you meant. After all, there isn't an elf or dragon in sight. But it is more than that. It is partly that Tambour's Australian cast refuses to be fazed by anything, no matter how odd, and partly because the book is so well written that for a lot of the time you don't actually notice that it has a supernatural element to it.

A mainstream publisher, of course, would have ruled *Spotted Lily* "too Australian" to be a success in the USA, which is doubtless one reason why it has ended up being published by Prime. But as regular readers will know, I have huge respect for Prime as a publisher. They did, after all, break K.J. Bishop. *Spotted Lily* is a very different Australian book from *The Etched City*, but it is a very good one all the same.

*Spotted Lily* - Anna Tambour - Prime - trade paperback

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## Dark Country

By Cheryl Morgan

It has been one of those months for small press books. Here's another one. Raw Dog Screaming is another company that is new to me. From the look of their catalog they publish a fair amount of horror. (Why is it that small press horror novels have such bad covers?) However, there are some familiar names there too. They have a Jeffrey Thomas Punktown novel, and a collection of stories by Forrest Aguirre. *Westermead*, by Scott Thomas, could be classed as horror as well. Certainly the book is full of ghost stories. But it is also much, much more.

Westermead is not just the name of the book, it is the name of the country in which the stories are set. It is a rustic place, full of quaint villages and even more quaint customs. The book is structured around the land. It is divided into four seasonal sections. Each begins with a description of the months of that season, and is followed by stories set at that time of year, and appropriate to the season.

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*The house stood on a modest hill with a grin of pear trees along one side. The misty grey of the distant mountains lay beyond, and beyond that reared a menace of dark clouds. The lawn was dappled blond with buttercups, dandelion and broom, and red where some of the inhabitants had been disassembled.*

From "Four Bronze Sisters"

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The feel of *Westermead* is something like 17<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup> Century England. At heart it is still very much a rural society, but there are Kingdom men in charge, and the country is beginning to become dominated by rich landowners. There is a war going on against the rebellious

inhabitants of the North, who refuse to bow to Kingdom rule.

Equally like England, the country is infested with sprites, boggles and phantom creatures of all kinds. Many of the stories involve these strange beings. Indeed, one follows the adventures of two "documentarians", Dover Beech and Fin Purdy, as they try to track down the mysterious Frost Mare that has come to haunt the island of Drowning Tin. Beech is obsessed with anything supernatural and quite heedless of his own safety in pursuit thereof, whereas his friend Purdy would much rather document monsters from the safety of a warm pub and spend his time chasing pretty girls. They make a great team.

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*There remains to this day a quaint, archaic ritual, which locals in a number of northern villages perpetuate. At midwinter eve, when the days have shrunk and night rules the calendar, natives leave hot coals on their doorsteps so that a great snowy moth with a wizened man's face might swoop down and carry their offerings off beyond the horizon to relight the sun.*

"The Solstice Moth," from Beech and Purdy's *Bestiary*

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Beech and Purdy are creatures of the summer, as is poor Radley Birchcroft who, after accidentally decapitating himself, makes a deal with Death to get his life back but forgets to specify one very important detail. Most of the stories, however, are set in bleaker times of the year and have correspondingly less humor to them. My favorite is "The Soldier and the Cryptie," a tale of love and death during the military occupation that the Kingdom authorities call The North War. Aside from the lack of religious fervor driving the conflict, it might just as well be set in Northern Ireland, or Iraq.

There is a certain amount of danger in setting an entire collection of stories in the same location. Many of the tales in *Westermead* have a very similar feel to them. That may not be quite what people expect from a short story collection, but then again if you like Thomas's writing you'll be very happy. For me, I could have done with a few less colorful similes. I'm sure that Thomas uses "like" more often than almost any other word. I also got a little bored with the comely, plump rustic maids whose ample charms kept jiggling through the storylines and bursting from their restraining corsets. But I'm sure Thomas enjoyed writing about them, and it does make a welcome contrast to the grim nature of some of the rest of the text.

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*Certain flowers only bloomed at night. It was a slow unwitnessed ritual. Salt-pale petals like flattened thumbs opened to praise a tallow moon. Their moth perfume blew soft across the moors, calling to the dusky sea. Beneath the waves, where slithering unnamed creatures haunted muddy shadows, the skulls of the drowned looked up and smiled.*

From "The Frost Mare"

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The publicity for *Westermead* compares Scott Thomas to Jeff Vandermeer. I think that's stretching it a little. *Westermead* is nowhere near as off the wall as *Ambergris*. But it is a fascinating creation, and one that I would be very happy to read more about. It is an excellent fantasy setting, and there's not an elf or dragon in sight.

Raw Dog Screaming will be having a launch event for *Westermead* at World Fantasy Con. This sounds like an excellent idea, because the book is a perfect fit for the convention.

*Westermead* - Scott Thomas - Raw Dog Screaming Press

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## Interview: Chris Kraus of Semiotext(e)

Semiotext(e)

<<http://www.semiotexte.com/>> is a new name in science fiction publishing. Although the company has been about since the mid 1970's, it has only recently started to publish a science fiction list. One of their first books, Mark Von Schlegell's *Venusia*, is reviewed elsewhere in this issue. Here Cheryl Morgan talks to Chris Kraus, one of the Semiotext(e) editors, about the company and how she sees their foray into SF.

**Cheryl:** Can we start with the name of the company? Most people will doubtless get the play on "semiotics", but what about that (e)? Your books are on paper so presumably it doesn't indicate "electronic".

**Chris:** Semiotext(e) ... a pun devised in the mid 1970s, referencing both the bi-cultural basis of the whole enterprise ("text" being "texte", a French feminine noun) while parodying the preponderance of parenthetical clauses in hip academe, e.g. The (M)other ... Umm, you probably had to be there.

**Cheryl:** I understand that the company is a division of MIT Press. That sounds more like a company that would publish computer manuals, not avante garde fiction. What are you guys doing there?

**Chris:** MIT has a great art list, a great technology list. They function as our distributor, and do similar work for two other independent presses, October and Zone.

**Cheryl:** Presumably being part of MIT Press relieves you from having to worry

about a lot of the printing and distribution issues that bedevil most small publishers.

**Chris:** Exactly. It was making us crazy. At a certain point we decided we either had to do this on a more professional basis, or not do it at all.

**Cheryl:** Your back catalog is primarily mainstream fiction, albeit often on the bleeding edge of that genre. What made you decide to get into science fiction?

**Chris:** “Mainstream” fiction in America now means books that will sell at least 20,000 copies in hardback. Generally these books are either of the Candace Bushnell variety, or tendentious ‘serious’ works by institutionally sanctioned upper-class humanists. There’s very little place in the mainstream for wit, contradiction or rage, or even a larger worldview — qualities we adore, and see happening in a real way within the Sci-Fi community. Our fiction backlist, featuring writers like Michelle Tea, Eileen Myles, Kathy Acker, Fanny Howe posit a female first-person as the new universal. This is decidedly an alternate mode of perception. The Sci-Fi series is our attempt to broaden this out onto a geopolitical scope, something that’s desperately needed now.

**Cheryl:** Where do you see the market for your SF series? Are you hoping to sell it to traditional science fiction fans, or is the plan to broaden the minds of your usual market?

**Chris:** I think Semiotext(e) readers are already RIGHT THERE. After all, our Foreign Agents backlist features works by Jean Baudrillard, Paul Virillio, Gilles Deleuze ... philosophers who have devised theories of speed, simulation, multiplicity. The Sci-Fi list brings these concerns into the realm of fiction. Of course we’re hoping to reach new readers who are already absorbed in

these thoughts through their involvement with Sci-Fi.

**Cheryl:** Your standard blurb about the series talks about, “Reinhabiting the tradition of the philosophical and political fable.” Does that mean that you see SF as part of a continuum stretching back through Orwell and Huxley to Thomas More and Plato?

**Chris:** Of course, absolutely. It’s only recently that people agreed that the scope of the novel ought to be small.

**Cheryl:** You describe *Venusia* as a “dystopian fantasy,” but actually there’s a lot of science in it. Mark von Schlegell makes a determined attempt to explain how *Venusia* works using ideas from areas like quantum mechanics. That’s not what normally happens when a mainstream publisher gets involved in SF — they prefer to gloss over all of the technical stuff.

**Chris:** We’ve always been great fans of the technical, figuring out how things work, why things are the way they are. This can apply to economics, poetics or science. Two years ago we published the French economist Alain Joxe’s book, *The Empire of Disorder ...* a precise description of how global economy has eroded the old concept of autonomous nations. Paul Virillio (*Speed and Politics, The Aesthetics of Disappearance*) writes about military technologies, the philosopher Michel Foucault (*Foucault Live*) talks about technologies of the self.

**Cheryl:** If we are talking political fables, presumably *Venusia* is intended to have meaning for our own world. Would it be fair to describe it as a novel about political spin?

**Chris:** It’s a novel about so many things, political spin — or the ability to control reality by controlling the flow of images, the evisceration of language — being just one of them. *Venusia* is a dystopian, ahistorical world. But it’s also a fable

about friendship – how the most unlikely people can discover each other and create a new history. It's about the erotics of plants, the sweetness of hallucination. Von Schlegell is the quintessential Sci-Fi writer because he's juggling such a full deck of fascinating, arcane information within the compelling framework of story. And, you know, it's a very hopeful and positive book. Von Schlegell fulfills the demands of the genre, while creating people we actually care for. Venusia at large may be spinning like a cartoon, but Rogers and Martha, Niftus and Sylvia are devising credible worlds of their own.

**Cheryl:** The other book that you have chosen to launch the series is *Babylon Babies* by Maurice Dantec, which was originally written in French. Can you tell us a bit about it?

**Chris:** *Babylon Babies* was France's answer to cyber-punk ... it was enormously successful in France, and will soon be produced as a big-budget Sci-Fi epic in the US by Fox and Canal Plus. *Babylon* takes place in 2013 AD, and follows the travails of Toroop, a professional mercenary, from the Balkan Wars of the 1990's through Afghanistan at the turn of the century, and into the Sino-Muslim wars of the future. Bottoming out, Toroop is hired by the Siberian mafia to escort Marie Zorn, the bearer of potent cloning molecular structures, to safety in Canada. Zorn, it turns out, is also a schizophrenic. The book has an enormous geopolitical sweep, and hundreds of vivid descriptions of the schizophrenic state of being and mind. It's also pure pop, compelling to read. It's like a Japanese anime writ very large.

**Cheryl:** I notice a strong French connection on your web site. Is that just Sylvère's influence, or does it indicate a wider interest in French culture?

**Chris:** Sylvère Lotringer is Semiotext(e) ... he founded the press in the mid-70's as a means of introducing certain French theories into American art, academic and underground culture. It just so happens that the most important philosophical-technological theories of the late 20th century were coming from France ... French theories were providing a kind of missing link, the relation of simulation, speed and technology to the social political realms that were sadly absent from more specialized works in the US and the UK. The commitment isn't to France, but to an inclusive worldview that is at once visionary and extremely descriptive of all facets of reality, as it's lived now.

**Cheryl:** Do you have any other books in the Sci-Fi series planned?

**Chris:** We are in the process of developing some projects, including one on Radionics and outlaw technologies. We are also hoping to publish Dantec's new novel *Cosmos, INC.*, a cyber-Christian post-apocalyptic thriller.

**Cheryl:** If an existing SF author was interested in being published by Semiotext(e), what advice would you give them about the sort of material you are looking for?

**Chris:** Yes ... we're always looking for books that transcend any genre, books with a globalist scope that are still somehow personal. Something written by someone.

**Cheryl:** Chris Kraus, thank you for talking to *Emerald City*.

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## Out of Synch

Topping the bill for this month's column is Bantam Spectra's version of M. John Harrison's *Viriconium*. This is essentially

the book that Gollancz put out in their Fantasy Masterworks series, but with the addition of an introduction by Neil Gaiman. The book includes the full text of the novels, *The Pastel City*, *A Storm of Wings* and *In Viriconium*, plus the stories from the collection, *Viriconium Nights*. It is an absolute must for any fan of quality, edgy fantasy.

Also on the Locus new releases list is Gwyneth Jones' *Bold as Love*. I thought Night Shade had already published this, but perhaps it got delayed a little in the rush to get *The Algebraist* out. The book is a Clarke Award winner.

Ballantine Del Rey are starting to catch up with the stable of Richard Morgan novels. *Woken Furies* will be available in October. This is a Takeshi Kovacs novel and, well, you know, lots of people die messily. Morgan is very good at this stuff.

Pyr is producing a US edition of Justina Robson's fabulous debut novel, *Silver Screen*. It has a wonderful John Picacio cover. The book was short-listed for both the Clarke and BSFA awards.

Talking of Pyr, they are also releasing a US edition of *Context*, the second book in John Meaney's Nulapeiron series. That's another one well worth reading.

Jeff Vandermeer tells me that the Bantam edition of *Veniss Underground* should be available about now. That edition also includes three pieces of short fiction set in the Veniss universe and previously published in *Secret Life*.

Finally Gollancz has produced a new edition, in their Science Fiction Masterworks series, of Geoff Ryman's excellent novel, *The Child Garden*.

*Viriconium* - M. John Harrison - Bantam Spectra - trade paperback

*Bold as Love* - Gwyneth Jones - Night Shade - hardcover

*Woken Furies* - Richard Morgan - Ballantine Del Rey - hardcover

*Silver Screen* - Justina Robson - Pyr - trade paperback

*Context* - John Meaney - Pyr - hardcover

*Veniss Underground* - Jeff Vandermeer - Bantam Spectra - trade paperback

*The Child Garden* - Geoff Ryman - Gollancz (Science Fiction Masterworks) - mass market paperback

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## Miscellany

### Tähtivaeltaja Award

This year's Tähtivaeltaja Award, for the best SF novel published in Finland, has been awarded to *Valo (Light)* by M. John Harrison. The Finnish version of the book was published by Like Publishing and translated from English by Hannu Tervaharju.

The award, named after Toni Jerrman's excellent magazine, is given by the Helsinki Science Fiction Society. It has been going since 1986 and has been won by some excellent books. Here's the complete list:

2004 - J.G. Ballard: *Super Cannes (Super-Cannes)*

2003 - Ray Loriga: *Tokio ei välitä meistä enää (Tokyo Doesn't Love Us Anymore)*

2002 - Jonathan Lethem: *Musiikkiuutisia (Gun, With Occasional Music)*

2001 - Pasi Jääskeläinen: *Missä junat kääntyvät* (original Finnish short story collection by Pasi Jääskeläinen)

2000 - Will Self: *Suuret apinat (Great Apes)*

1999 - Stefano Benni: *Baol (Baol)*

1998 - Dan Simmons: *Hyperion (Hyperion)*

1997 - Theodore Roszak: *Flicker (Flicker)*

1996 - Mary Rosenblum: *Harhainvalta (Chimera)*

1995 - Iain M. Banks: *Pelaaja (The Player of*

Games)

1994 - Simon Ings: *Kuumaa pää* (*Hot Head*)

1993 - Philip K. Dick: *Oraakkelin kirja* (*The Man in the High Castle*)

1992 - William Gibson: *Neurovelho* (*Neuromancer*)

1991 - Philip K. Dick: *Hämärän vartija* (*A Scanner Darkly*)

1990 - Brian Aldiss: *Helliconia-trilogia* (*Helliconia trilogy*)

1989 - Flann O'Brien: *Kolmas konstaapeli* (*The Third Policeman*)

1988 - Greg Bear: *Veren musiikkia* (*Blood Music*)

1987 - Joanna Russ: *Naisten planeetta* (*The Female Man*)

1986 - Cordwainer Smith: *Planeetta nimeltä Shajol* (a collection of Cordwainer Smith's short stories)

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## Albion Web Site

Regular readers of Emerald City will know that I have been enthusing for some time about the comic, *Albion*, which uses a bunch of very old British comic characters such as Robot Archie and The Spider. The books are positively drowning in interesting and obscure references, most of which people won't get because they were born much too late or because, like me, they can't remember that far back very well. Now a couple of Irishmen, Damien Gordon and Pádraig Ó Méalóid, have set up a web site to annotate the comics. *In The Fifty-Pee Box*

<<http://www.comp.dit.ie/dgordon/albion/>> is obviously very much a work in progress, but it has already produced some great material. I was particularly grateful for the investigation of the "toys" in Bad Penny's basement (and am deeply ashamed at having missed the Smash Martian). I can see I'll be going back to this site every time I read a new issue. Huge thanks to Damien and Pádraig for producing it.

By the way, for brevities sake *Albion* generally gets described as being by Alan Moore (or as I generally put it, Alan Moore et al). But let's not forget that while Alan did the plot outlines, the majority of the scripting was done by Leah Moore (Alan's daughter) and John Reppion, and that artist Shane Oakley has had a huge creative impact on the books.

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## Editorial Matters

By Cheryl Morgan

Things have moved along fairly nicely in the past month. There were a few days when I was worried I'd have to give back the small amount of money I'd got in and fold, but thankfully money kept coming and I'm now pleased to say that we have enough revenue to cover the next year's running costs. The next job is to get in enough to start paying contributors.

Talking of which, we have a couple of new names on the contributors list this month. A very warm welcome to Karina and Juliet. Hopefully more will follow.

The main point, however, is to say a huge Thank You! to everyone who sent money. I am very grateful. Interestingly, although numbers are still quite small, we have subscribers in nine different countries on five continents. Somehow I don't expect to get anyone from Antarctica, but if there's anyone from Africa reading this I'd love to hear from you.

I've also been busy on the web site, and if all has gone to plan there should be something of a new look in various places. Most of what I have done, however, has been invisible. The primary objectives have been to convert

to using CSS for formatting and to change from static pages to dynamic pages. You'll notice that the individual issue files now have an extension of "php" rather than "shtml". What this means is that the site is becoming much easier to maintain and to upgrade.

By the way, if you are having trouble with the smaller size of the text, you should be able to find an option in the menu of your browser to increase the text size. That should work without any great damage to the layout.

Obviously with such developments there is always a possibility of errors, particularly as people use so many different browsers on several different operating systems. If you do have a problem with the web site, please let me know.

Talking of the web site, the blog <<http://www.emcit.com/wordpress/>> now accepts comments, so if you want to air your opinion on anything in this issue, or about the changes happening with the magazine, that's a good place to do it. I'll put an entry up for comments on this issue. Please note that until I get a good handle on how to keep out comment spam I will be moderating all comments, so what you write will not appear immediately.

The next month or so is going to be all about talking to publishers, writers, etc. about how we can work together more effectively. That will hopefully result in some sponsorship for the site, and some cool stuff that I can offer to subscribers. This means my going to industry-oriented events like FantasyCon and World Fantasy, which is going to eat up all of my con-going budget for quite a while. But if you do happen to be at either event please come and say hello.

Next issue should finally see the new Kim Stanley Robinson. I also have books lined up from Al Reynolds, James

Lovegrove, Cherie Priest, Greg Keyes, Chris Dolley and Zoran Živković. Juliet will be back with more vampires. And we'll be featuring the launch of a brand new series of fantasy novels by mainstream writers. The long-awaited new George R.R. Martin novel, *A Feast for Crows*, might just be available in time. I'm also expecting a review of the Dave McKean / Neil Gaiman movie, *Mirrormask*. See you next month.

Best wishes,

Cheryl

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