

# EMERALD CITY #122

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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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*Emerald City* is a non-profit venture supported by the kind donations of our subscribers. For information on supporting the magazine please see: <http://www.emcit.com/subscribe.shtml>

This month's subscriber draw features a hardcover copy of Jon Courtenay

Grimwood's fabulous new novel, *9Tail Fox* (thank you, Gollancz!). That's certainly something well worth having. And there are three other books on the way as well. PS Publishing has promised us slipcase editions of Joe Hill's *20th Century Ghosts*, *Nowhere Near An Angel*, by Mark Morris, and *Secret Stories* by Ramsey Campbell. These are currently still at the printers, but if they arrive in time they will go into this month's draw. That draw will take place on November 19th.

What is more, we have an offer for everyone, whether you are an *Emerald City* subscriber or not. Just head on over to this page of PS Publishing's web site <http://www.pspublishing.co.uk/subscribe.asp> and take out a subscription to *Postscripts* (any format or currency). When you get to the order page note that you saw this offer in *Emerald City*. The first 50 people to do so will receive a free paperback edition of a PS Publishing novella.

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## Return to Westeros

By Cheryl Morgan

When George R.R. Martin finally announced that *A Feast for Crows* was ready for publication he apologized to his fans that he was only producing half a book. The other half, apparently, will come next year.

Other half??? *A Feast for Crows* has almost 700 pages of story in it. Martin's half a book is two or three novels for some writers. And of course it is merely the fourth book in the Song of Ice and Fire series. If the crows of Westeros feast on this lot they are going to be seriously obese very quickly.

Thankfully actual crows do not have to devour this book. That task is left to Martin's legions of adoring fans, and the only weight they will put on as a result will be due to the time spent sitting and reading when they could be getting exercise. They will sit and read though, because Martin has produced another winner.

In my review of *A Storm of Swords* I talked about how Martin has created a fantasy soap opera. *A Feast for Crows* continues in the same vein. As the cover of the UK edition proudly notes, Martin has created "characters so venomous they could eat the Borgias." And in some cases that means the supposed good guys. J.R. Ewing and Dirty Den would not last 10 minutes in some parts of Westeros. But there is much else besides the nasty scheming. And now that we are a couple of years into the plot we are starting to see quite a bit of character development. So what exactly (hopefully without too much spoilerage) goes on in the new book?

*A Storm of Swords*, you will remember, was the Book of Five Kings. As the struggle to succeed Robert Baratheon to the Iron Throne developed, Westeros was plunged into civil war. The book ended with vast amounts of slaughter, many of the pretenders dead, and poor little prince Tommen playing the role of puppet king for his manipulative mother, Cersei Lannister.

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*"Crows will fight over a dead man's flesh and kill each other for his eyes." Lord Rodrik stared across the sea, watching the play of moonlight on the waves. "We had one king, then five. Now all I see are crows squabbling over the corpse of Westeros."*

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With so much death in war in the previous volume, it is perhaps not surprising that many of those crows are

female. Whereas *A Storm of Swords* was a book of kings, *A Feast for Crows* is a book of queens. In particular it is about vain, venal, stupid, paranoid Cersei, but it is also about other women who would be queen, or at least knights. In Dorne Princess Arianne Martell worries about being disinherited because she's a girl, and wonders if having Myrcella Baratheon, Tommen's elder sister, as a hostage might help. Asha Greyjoy, despite being the most sensible and competent longship captain around, knows she has little chance of beating her warlike uncles to succeed to her father's throne. In *The Eyrie*, Petyr Baelish keeps Sansa Stark safe from Cersei's prying eyes in readiness for the time when the armies of the North might rally around the heir to Winterfell. Brienne, the woman who would be a knight, searches for Sansa to try to fulfill her (potentially conflicting) vows to Catelyn Stark and Jamie Lannister. As usual everyone she meets laughs at her, though many find themselves laughing with a sword point in their guts. And looming over everything, though temporarily offstage because this is only half a book, is the shadow of Daenerys Targaryen.

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*"You would not believe half of what is happening in King's Landing, sweetling. Cersei stumbles from one idiocy to the next, helped along by her council of the deaf, the dim and the blind. I always anticipated that she would beggar the realm and destroy herself, but I never expected she would do it quite so fast."*

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Oh dear, yes, it is bad. Cersei has always been her own worst enemy, and no one in their right mind would leave her in charge of a kingdom. But in charge she is, and being terminally vain and proud she is blind to her faults. Master character builder that he is, Martin finds

ways for her to justify everything that goes wrong to herself on the grounds of chauvinism.

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*When she was small she would sometimes don her brother's clothing as a lark. She was always startled by how differently men treated her when they thought she was Jaime.*

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Now that she is older, Cersei has a ready-made excuse for why everyone treats her like an idiot.

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*When Tywin Lannister spoke, men obeyed. When Cersei spoke, they felt free to counsel her, to contradict her, even refuse her. It is all because I am a woman.*

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And the point is, this being a mediaeval society, for the most part she's right. Cersei has a mountain to climb before she can begin to be taken seriously as Regent. In some ways it is rather a shame that Daenerys is absent from this book, because she faces many of the same challenges as Cersei and copes with them much better. It would have been interesting to be able to observe the contrast. As it is we are left just watching Cersei. And being Cersei, all she can think of doing about men refusing to take her seriously is throwing a tantrum and having someone killed. Petyr Baelish understands the problem all too well.

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*"In the game of thrones, even the humblest pieces have wills of their own. Sometimes they refuse to make the moves you've planned for them. Mark that well, Alayne. It is a lesson that Cersei Lannister still has yet to learn."*

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Don't go away thinking, however, that Cersei is the only character in this book. A Song of Ice and Fire is a vast tapestry and a Dramatis Personae is essential to follow what is going on, especially after the long wait for the new book. Thankfully Martin provides one (it is at the back of the book and I didn't notice it until it was too late). Less helpfully it is around 70 pages long.

Yes, you did read that aright. Seventy pages. I shudder to think how many characters are listed. I certainly wasn't going to count them. How does Martin keep track of them all? I used to run a very large role-playing campaign, but I don't think it ever had quite that many named characters, even including the NPCs.

More to the point, Martin makes many of them unique and vibrant individuals. The mark of a really good writer is that he can make a character leap out of a page with just a few lines of dialog. As you read through the book, watch with admiration as Martin introduces us to Jaime's remarkably sane (for a Lannister) Aunt Genna and her grasping husband, Emmon Frey. Here they are discussing how Jamie might winkle the rebel, Brynden 'Blackfish' Tully, out of his stronghold of Riverrun, a castle Tommen, at Jamie's father's behest, has granted to Emmon.

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*"You will have seen the siege engines, Rams, trebuchets, towers. It will not serve, Jaime. Daven means to break my walls, smash in my gates. He talks of burning pitch, of setting the castle afire. My castle." He reached up one sleeve, brought out a parchment, and thrust it at Jaime's face. "I have the decree. Signed by the king, by Tommen, see, the royal seal, the stag and lion. I am the lawful lord of Riverrun, and I will not have it reduced to a smoking ruin."*

*"Oh, put that fool thing away," his wife snapped. "So long as the Blackfish sits inside Riverrun you can wipe your arse with that paper for all the good it does us."*

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Slowly but surely, he's also becoming good with worlds. One of the failings of the earlier books in the series was that they tended to sound as if Westeros was populated almost entirely by kings, noblemen and knights. *A Feast for Crows* sees rather more interaction with ordinary people. Indeed, the ordinary people have come out in force. Martin appears to have been reading about the Millenarian movements of medieval Europe, and has used that to add a touch of religious fundamentalism to his already flavor-packed stew of plot devices.

In addition the world of Westeros is taking shape before us. The different cultures of places like Dorne, the Iron Islands and Braavos are becoming much more defined. A map would have been very helpful, but there isn't one. Earlier books in the series do have them but if, like me, those books are stranded half a world away, there are scans available on Elio and Linda's very useful fan site, [www.westeros.org](http://www.westeros.org).

And finally, of course, there is story. There are an enormous number of subplots going on. My favorite piece of the book is the chapter called "Cat of the Canals" which details something of Arya Stark's life as a seller of shellfish in Braavos. There is some fabulous description, and a beautiful shock ending. If it were not for the necessity to understand much of the background of *A Song of Ice and Fire* for context it could almost stand as a short story in its own right.

Ultimately, however, we have to return to the fact that the story is not all there. Yes, this is only another book in the

series, so we can hardly blame Martin for leaving several major characters in very sticky situations. But after 700 pages of marvelously entertaining writing you still come away with the feeling that you have only scratched the surface. So little time has passed. So much is clearly yet to happen. And where is Tyrion? Why have we seen so little of Jon Snow? What is happening Beyond the Wall? And above all, where is Daenerys? Where are her newfound pets?

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*"I see them in my dreams, Sam. I see a red star bleeding in the sky. I still remember red. I see their shadows on the snow, hear the crack of leathern wings, feel their hot breath. My brothers dreamed of dragons too, and the dreams killed them, every one."*

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Somewhere in the future is *A Dance with Dragons*. Somewhere in time there is more of this beautiful, addictive drug called *A Song of Ice and Fire*. But not now. Not until next year at least. On reaching the final page of *A Feast for Crows*, Martin fans will know that this is not the end. It is nowhere near over. And before they can partake of more they will once again have to wait. With one voice they rise and cry,

Noooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!!!!!!

Dear George, we know this is hard, and we really appreciate the quality when books arrive. But please, do not make us wait so long again.

*A Feast for Crows* - George R.R. Martin - HarperCollins - hardcover

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## War and the Media

By Cheryl Morgan

Sometimes I get into a real quandary when writing reviews of books in a series. The authors and publishers clearly want to have the reviews out when the books are published, whereas I'd much rather wait to review the whole thing. That is particularly the case where the early books are so full of shock material that it is hard to say anything about the later books without indulging in massive spoilerage about the early ones. All I can say about this review is that if you haven't yet read Karen Traviss' superb *City of Pearl* and *Crossing the Line* then you should go and do so **now**. Don't read what follows until you have done so. I've tried to keep the biggest spoilers out, but I just can't talk about the book without giving a lot away.

So where were we? Those of you who have read the first two books will know that everything revolves around *c'naatat*. This is the alien parasite that takes such good care of its hosts that it renders them practically immortal. Aras, the Wess'har super-soldier, has lived hundreds of years thanks to its influence. Shan Frankland recovered from a bullet through the head. *C'naatat* is very useful stuff.

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*So this was c'nnatat at work. A fall that would have killed or crippled him was now a temporary but painful – and terrifying – inconvenience. It didn't take a genius to work out how valuable c'naatat was or how open it would be to abuse.*

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The parasite is native to the world of Bezer'ej. Also resident there are the local intelligent species, the squid-like berzeri, and a small colony of Christian humans, devotees of Saint Francis determined to

live a simple life. The Wess'har, who like to see themselves as the galaxy's environmental police, tolerated the human colony because of its ethics. But when the spider-like isenj tried to colonize Bezer'ej, building a huge city and polluting the seas where the bezeri live, the Wess'har wiped them out; every last male, female and infant. The Wess'har take a strict view of environmental crimes.

Everything fell apart when a new Earth mission arrived on Berzer'ej. Humans are insatiably curious, so it didn't take long before Aras had to execute one of the mission's scientists for killing and dissecting a bezeri baby. Then the humans found out about c'naatat, and all hell broke loose. Shan Frankland ended up spacing herself rather than let a greedy earth government get its hands on the parasite in her body. And human soldiers, led by Naval Lieutenant Lindsay Neville and the spy, Mohan Rayat, let off a bunch of very dirty nukes on Bezer'ej to make sure that no one else had access to c'naatat.

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*The sand had once been white. Now it was blackened and vitrified in places by the blast of cobalt-salted nuclear devices.*

*And every few meters there were more decaying bodies of bezeri beached by the tide.*

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Book three therefore starts with Earth (or rather the Federal European Union, though it is debatable whether non-humans will understand the distinction), accused of the genocide of the bezeri. At the end of *Crossing the Line* we discovered that the determinedly pitiless Wess'har who, let us not forget, wiped out millions of isenj in retaliation for an environmental crime, are actually the namby-pampby, bleeding-heart left-wingers of their species who left their homeland in protest at the

interventionist policies of their government. Faced with a species as monumentally selfish and arrogant as mankind, the Wess'har feel that they have no option but to call back home for help. Book three, called *The World Before* after the Wess'har name for their planet of origin, therefore, introduces us to the Eqbas Vorhi, distant cousins of the Wess'har, who are about as technologically superior to humans as humans are to chimps, who are as ruthless as the Wess'har, and who believe it is their moral duty to step in and punish badly behaved species on other planets. Earth, as the humans might put it, is deep in the shit.

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*Even now they didn't understand. Aras wondered how he could ever have thought gethes could learn that their lives were no more special than that of any other species. It was their single defining belief; the colonists even said all gethes were modeled on their god. It was a staggering conceit.*

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Retribution, then, is on the way. But the realities of inter-planetary travel mean that the problem is currently 25 years away from Earth. This gives Travis breathing space to sit back and take stock after the emotional pounding she gave readers in *Crossing the Line*. The pause in the action is most important for Eddie Michallat, the BBChan journalist who accompanied the mission to Bezer'ej. In the earlier books Eddie was too caught up in reporting on the dramatic events unfolding to think much about his role in the story. But with things calmed down he gets to see consequences. When Eddie broadcasts film of the arrival of a massively powerful Eqbas Vorhi warship it triggers bloody anti-European riots across Earth. Sometimes telling the truth can get people killed.

Eddie also gets mixed up in events on Umeh, the isenj homeworld. He has befriended Ual, the isenj minister for alien affairs. The isenj have a population problem that makes Calcutta and Mexico City look like open, unpopulated parkland in comparison. Ual hopes that the Eqbas Vorhi can use their superior technologies to help, but most isenj have not forgotten the massacre of their colony on Bezer'ej and brand Ual a traitor. Drafted in to help, Eddie finds himself making news rather than covering it.

Much of this doubtless originates in Traviss's past life as a defense correspondent for UK newspapers. Not to mention her time in political PR. When you've seen this sort of stuff from the inside it is very difficult to present it heroically, no matter how well-intentioned your characters might be. Real life isn't like books, and neither is *The World Before*, which is a very good thing.

Given the enormity of what went on in *Crossing the Line*, it is hardly surprising that *The World Before* feels a little flat in comparison. I'm sure that Traviss will up the tempo again in whichever later deals with the Eqbas Vorhi arrival on Earth. If you read all of the books in sequence you'll probably be grateful for the breathing space. Reading the books with several months between them will inevitably make *The World Before* seem more downbeat, but that's hardly a serious criticism compared to what has gone before. Besides, it is an interesting meditation on the relationship between the media and the wars they cover, and along the way it also manages to be a rather different love story. Inter-species sex? Polyamory? Where is the Tiptree jury when I need them?

*The World Beyond* - Karen Traviss - Eos - publisher's proof

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## Terraforming Earth

By Cheryl Morgan

A few weeks ago *The Guardian* ran an article complaining about how writers were ignoring the problem of global warming. The article's author complained that literature had been in the forefront of the battle against the atomic bomb and it had to stand up once more to save the planet from disaster. No one was writing about global warming, he complained. (Original article:

<http://books.guardian.co.uk/review/story/0,,1576251,00.html>; and letters in response:

<http://books.guardian.co.uk/review/story/0,12084,1581259,00.html>.)

Of course by "no one" he meant "proper" writers, not those terrible science fiction people, not people who might actually understand the scientific issues and be able to explain them to a non-scientific audience. Which is presumably why he's missed the fact that only the week before the same newspaper had run a long interview with Kim Stanley Robinson about his new novel, *Fifty Degrees Below*. Robinson is most definitely writing about global warming, but can he save the world?

Of course if your understanding of "science fiction" is limited to "sci-fi" then it is reasonable to assume that any SF author who looks at the global warming issue is likely to produce some melodramatic nonsense like *The Day After Tomorrow*. And looking at the cover of Robinson's book, which shows the dome of the White House peeking forlornly out of an Antarctic landscape, you could be forgiven for thinking that Robinson has produced exactly that sort of treatment. Regular readers of his

work, however, will expect something very different and that is what they get.

As most of you will know, the new book is a sequel to *Forty Signs of Rain*. That was a book I felt didn't need a sequel. It ended with Washington DC submerged in a vast flood (the city is built on a swamp; it is a very believable event). As the book closes, Senator Phil Chase, the good-guy politician of the story, says, "I'll see what I can do." As readers of the book know by then, this is his standard code phrase for, "it is politically impossible to do anything about this." That so perfectly encapsulated the whole US attitude to climate change that I felt any subsequent books would be irrelevant.

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*...the President was firm in his insistence that it was everyone's patriotic duty to support rebuilding, demonstrating a brave and stalwart response to what he called 'this act of climactic terrorism.' 'From now on,' the President continued, 'we are at a state of war with nature.'*

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Robinson, however, refuses to give up. Hence *Fifty Degrees Below* in which, while the weather problems get worse, his characters try to do something positive. Yet what exactly can be done? Charlie Quibler spends most of the book helping Phil Chase campaign for the Presidency. He and Chase correctly conclude that if they can get someone with a bit of sense, and less in the pocket of the big oil companies, in the top job they can at least start replacing the oil company puppets running the nation's major government agencies. Chase, however, worries that one man might not be enough, and that he may not survive the process of winning.

*'Every day people come to me because I've got some power, and I watch them debase themselves or go silly in some way. I see them go corrupt right before my eyes. It's depressing. It's like having the Midas touch in reverse, where everything you touch turns to shit.'*

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Meanwhile the scientific community is launching its own little revolution. This is no job for Charlie's wife, Anna, who hates anything that isn't a controlled experiment. Therefore attention shifts to Frank Vanderwal. He is given the job of finding ways in which to fund projects that might do something positive to halt or even reverse the changes in climate that are being seen, in particular trying to re-start the Gulf Stream. It is a very science-fictional approach to the problem. Having done all of that work on how one might terraform Mars to make it inhabitable, fixing the Earth's climate would perhaps seem to Robinson to be a trivial problem in comparison. But is it really wise?

Robinson makes a number of interesting arguments as to why this gung ho approach might be workable. The first is simply that something of that size and scope might actually catch the imagination of the American public in a way that austerity measures would not. Secondly any really big scheme is likely to get the backing of the US Army Corps of Engineers, who will probably have to do most of the work. They are guys who like to think big, and to be given an impossible challenge. An ally in the Pentagon could be very useful. And thirdly the scientists themselves need to be brought inside. Left to their own devices they may just play along with the Administration's denial policy.

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*Conference proceedings on another page spoke of 'climate change adaptation,'*



actually development agendas, with only a few very revealing admissions that 'adaptation' had no meaning in regard to actual technologies, that the whole concept of 'adaptation' to climate change was a replacement for 'mitigation,' and at this point completely hollow, a word only, a way of saying Do nothing. Whole conferences were devoted to that.

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On the other hand it quickly becomes clear that Robinson believes that the solution has to come through science, or rather cannot come through economics. It may well be the case that the American people will never stand for artificial economic incentives designed to encourage them to consume less. But to leave economics out of the argument altogether seems foolish. A good example is the case of photovoltaic cells. Robinson concentrates exclusively on the problem of increasing the efficiency with which they convert sunlight into electricity. Yet even a miraculous doubling of efficiency would only halve the cost of photovoltaics as a source of electricity. There's no way efficiency improvements will make that form of solar power competitive with fossil fuels. Economies of scale in production, however, could see the cost of solar power fall by a factor of ten or more. Given the right incentives, computer chip manufacturers could probably get this done fairly easily. Robinson ignores this issue entirely.

Of course it might be a good thing that Robinson steers clear of economics. Some of the ideas he had in the Mars Trilogy were decidedly odd. At one point in *Fifty Degrees Below* one of his characters suggests, as part of a program to tackle climate change, that the government set up a department whose job it is to assess the value of each citizen's worth to the economy and ensure that they are compensated

accordingly. Thankfully Robinson has this fellow's colleagues bury their heads in their hands in response.

Robinson is on much firmer ground when he is dealing with individuals and their response to a difficult environment. The change of focus in the book to Frank Vanderwal, who appears to be something of a spare part in *Forty Signs of Rain*, reveals a whole new aspect to the story. Robinson is in fact thinking about adaptation himself, in a fairly extreme way. With decent housing being in short supply after the flood, Frank opts to sleep rough, and eventually builds himself a tree house in Rock Creek Park. After a long day at work in the nation's bureaucracy he comes home and plays chess with the local hoboes. But as the effects of climate change roll on and a freak winter approaches, Frank's choice of lifestyle starts to become increasingly dubious.

The point of putting Vanderwal in this strange position is to allow Robinson to examine mankind's relationship with nature more clearly. The Quiblers are fairly safe in their well built, centrally heated home. Anna worries about food hoarding – ordinary people are so unscientific about assessing their needs – but they are in no great danger until the power goes out. Frank, on the other hand, is right at the sharp end of nature's assault. And Robinson has the chance to get all practical about exactly what he needs to do to survive. Robinson fans will love this.

Occasionally Vanderwal's communing with nature goes a little far. There are times when I felt I wanted to dump a bucket of cold water over his head and dose him up with bromide. He had clearly been reading too much Robert Bly and as a result had developed a passion for swinging through the trees, making loud primate noises and

thinking endlessly about ensuring the survival of his genes.

Another less effective strand of the Vanderwal story is that during the book Frank discovers that he is under surveillance by a secret government agency. Living in the park helps him avoid this. But of this aspect of the story all that is necessary to be said is that Robinson is not Neal Stephenson. If you have read *Cryptonomicon* you will be disappointed.

Interesting facets of the story aside, the important question is still whether Robinson gets the job done. Has he marshaled the tools of science fiction in such a way as to inform the general public about the dangers of global warming and encourage them to take action? With *Forty Signs of Rain* he did a good job of laying out the basic problem. With *Fifty Degrees Below* he explains quite well why the US government has such difficulty tackling the issue. But he also launches into what appears at first sight to be a rather naïve “big science can save the world” approach. Is this his answer? We don’t know yet.

You see, one of the best things about Robinson is that he’s far too subtle to present easy answers early on. He knows that a planetary environment is a complex thing in which much can go wrong. A good example is that after the flood many animals from Washington Zoo escaped. Lots of them are living wild in Rock Creek Park, so Frank Vanderwal gets to share his home with eland and gibbons and tapirs. Robinson describes the general feeling in Washington that the animals should be allowed to stay free. It is a typical knee-jerk environmentalist attitude. Robinson leaves this mostly unchallenged, though Vanderwal, who has joined a Zoo program to monitor the animals, worries about those creatures who can’t find their normal foods in the park, and for

whom the Zoo has to put out food parcels. And then, when the cold snap comes, most of the animals die, because they are used to such a climate. A lesson is learned.

So what Robinson really thinks the world should do about global warming isn’t at all clear yet, because there is, of course, a third book planned. I’m looking forward to it, because I want to know what story he really wants to tell.

*Fifty Degrees Below* – Kim Stanley Robinson – HarperCollins – publisher’s proof

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## Modern Horror

By Cheryl Morgan

I first heard of Joe Hill when Jonathan Strahan posted a note on his blog to the effect that PS Publishing were finally doing something near a mass market version of one of their books. Well at least something that was not solely aimed at a collector’s market. That book was Hill’s collection, *20<sup>th</sup> Century Ghosts*. Strahan thought this was significant, and I could only agree. If Peter Crowther thought that highly of a book then it had to be good.

The book was launched at Fantasycon, so I snagged a copy from Crowther and sat down to take a look. I opened it at the title story, “20<sup>th</sup> Century Ghost”, which turned out to be one of the best short stories I have read in a long time. OK, so it was a horror collection, but I was hooked.

I’d like to say that all of the other stories in the book were equally as good, but miracles like that simply don’t happen. The rest of the book was merely good to very good. And from someone who doesn’t normally like horror or short

fiction much that's very high praise indeed.

The thing that strikes you most obviously about Joe Hill is that he is very smart. He knows a lot about a lot of different things, from movies to mainstream literature to baseball, and he fills his stories with this knowledge. The stories are, in addition, very well written. Let's take a look at a few of them.

The standout story, as I've already said, is "20<sup>th</sup> Century Ghost". It is about a young woman who loved movies and wanted to be an actress but who now haunts a movie theatre because she died suddenly half way through *The Wizard of Oz*. The story is infused with a love of cinema, and might easily be something that Elizabeth Hand had written. It grabs at the heartstrings. I was not surprised to learn that it had won Hill the 2002 Ray Bradbury Scholarship.

Leading off the book is "Best New Horror", which is about a successful anthology editor who finds out the hard way just where the new author he has discovered gets his truly gruesome ideas. It is much more what you expect from "horror" (and opposed to "dark fantasy"). Yet while it is rather stomach-churning at times, Hill manages the impressive feat of both poking fun at literary academia for being too squeamish about horror, and poking fun at the horror community for turning a blind eye to just how depraved some of the things they write about actually are. Not to mention their predictability.

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*He didn't finish most of the stories he started anymore, couldn't bear to. He felt weak at the thought of reading another story about vampires having sex with other vampires. He tried to struggle through Lovecraft pastiches, but at the first painfully serious reference to the Elder Gods, he felt some important part*

*of him going numb inside, the way a foot or a hand will go to sleep when the circulation is cut off. He feared the part of him being numbed was his soul.*

From "Best New Horror"

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That story also includes an episode at a horror convention containing what sounds suspiciously like a true anecdote about Neil Gaiman being wonderful with kids.

It would appear that Hill reads SF as well, because in "Voluntary Committal" he notes that his autistic genius character has been reading *Flatland*. The same story contains a single mention to the Plateau of Leng. There's nothing remotely like Chambers or Lovecraft in the story, except that occasionally people disappear, or at least go somewhere else. So Hill suggested that they might have gone somewhere famous.

"You Will Hear The Locust Sing" is a riff off Kafka's "Metamorphosis", but whereas Gregor Samsa was a rather dull traveling salesman, Hill chooses to make a giant cockroach of a nerdy American kid who loves B Movies and rather fancies the idea of being a Monster. The results are both gruesome and funny.

As far as I am concerned the other really spectacular story in the collection is "Pop Art." In it Hill plays with the idea that beauty, goodness and intelligence are fragile things adrift in a cruel world. He illustrates this by making one of the characters, Art Roth, an inflatable being. Young Art is quite literally a blown-up person with a plastic skin who can be killed by a close encounter with a pin. Apparently he was born that way. Other people are too. The horror in the story comes from seeing how vulnerable Art and his family are when viewed through the eyes of a kid from a much rougher background. Our narrator likes Art and tries to help him through his painful

childhood, but the other kids, the narrator's brutal father, and his inappropriately named dog, Happy, have other ideas. To them Art is simply a very convenient target for relieving boredom through cruelty.

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*It is my belief that, as a rule, creatures of Happy's ilk – I am thinking here of canines and men both – more often run free than live caged, and it is in fact a world of mud and feces they desire, a world with no Art in it, or anyone like him, a place where there is no talk of books or God or the worlds beyond this world, a place where the only communication is the hysterical barking of starving and hate-filled dogs.*

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Of course *20<sup>th</sup> Century Ghosts* is a book of horror stories. Some pretty nasty things happen to characters in those stories. But it is not a book with no art in it. On the contrary, it is a book filled with art of different types. In a genre that all too often abandons itself to images of hate and destruction, Joe Hill makes things of beauty.

*20<sup>th</sup> Century Ghosts* – Joe Hill – PS Publishing  
– trade paperback

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## A Family Affair

By Cheryl Morgan

After having read two of his novels, the one thing I am sure about regarding James Lovegrove is that his next book will be different to anything he has done before. The new novel, *Provender Glead*, does not disappoint.

The book is set in a strange alternate now in which the entire world is run by rich merchant families. Oh, governments still exist, but they have so little

economic influence compared to the Families that they have to do what they are told. What is more, the Families are worshipped as celebrities by ordinary people. They are encouraged to do so by the media, all of which are owned by one Family or another. The whole thing apparently dates back to a cusp point when the Borgias and Medici decided to put aside their differences and work together to rule the world.

Our story concentrates on the Gleeds, the richest Family in England. Although fabulously rich, the Gleeds are in a bad way. The head of the Family, Prosper, is a notorious playboy and gambler whose primary ambition in life is to commit adultery with one woman from each country in the world. His only son, Provender, is a useless lad who spends most of his time mooning around and feeling guilty about his riches. Every attempt that his hard-working mother, Cynthia, has made to find a bride for him has met with disapproval. If Provender doesn't get his act together soon, the Glead family might die out. What is worse, the Gleeds' mortal enemies, the Kuczynski Family of Poland, are much better businessmen. Ancient Great Glead, the Family patriarch, is probably seething with rage, except he's so old and sick that he's confined to a wheelchair and cannot speak.

The crisis is precipitated when Provender is kidnapped during the annual Glead summer party. We, as readers, know that he has been taken by Damien and Is, two anti-Family revolutionaries. But they are not acting alone. Someone paid the security guards to look away when they made their escape. Someone who is obviously very rich. Is this the beginning of a rebellion against the families, or a plot engineered by the Kuczynskis to humiliate their enemies?

The two kidnappers are an interesting pair. Damien is strong, sullen and consumed with hatred for the Families. He's a typical revolutionary footsoldier: just smart enough to know he's being exploited by the rich and be angry about it, but not smart enough to spot anything beyond that. Is (the name is short for Isis) is his one-time girlfriend, a nurse by trade, and much smarter than he is. It quickly becomes obvious to Is that a) they have something of a Patty Hearst situation on their hands, and b) Damien is being manipulated by someone who might not have the best interests of the working classes at heart.

Meanwhile the Gleed family is trying to find their missing heir without the story turning into a major scandal. Carver, the family butler, hires Merlin Milner and Romeo Moore, the Anagrammatic Detectives, to work on the case. This pair of sleuths solves crimes by making anagrams of phrases and names associated with crimes.

If, at this point, your brain is starting to spin don't worry, mine did too. For much of the book I wasn't at all sure what Lovegrove was trying to do. Is the book a political allegory of some sort? Or is it supposed to be a clever farce about two bumbling detectives cut with an excuse for the author to show his facility with word puzzles? It was all rather confusing.

It does soon become clear that Lovegrove is not making a political point. On the one hand, Damien's plans are hopelessly naïve. He thinks that money extorted from the Gleeds can be used to help do up the housing estate where he lives:

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*It could be better than this, Damien had promised her that. With money extorted from the Gleeds, Needle Grove could be brightened up, smartened, cleaned, made more liveable.*

*There could be green areas – foliage-green, not paint-and-neon green. There could be improved lighting, and some kind of system of security patrols, maybe, to keep the kids off the streets...*

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Clearly Damien's ideology doesn't extend much further than patching up immediate local problems. He's not aware that unless the people of Needle Grove have some genuine hope of economic improvement they are likely to just trash whatever improvements are made.

At the same time, Lovegrove makes it clear that the one country in the world that is free of Family rule, China, is in no better condition than the UK. Mr. Ho, the proprietor of Damien's local convenience store, whose family fled Hong Kong after the Chinese threw out their local Families, explains:

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*"The great revolution," Mr. Ho sneered. "When the Four Acquaintances took power and the people of China became a single, billion-strong Family. And my own family, like many others, was obliged to... 'pool our assets', the phrase was. 'Had our assets stolen by the government', more like."*

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Politics, then, is just background. The Families are clearly bad, but the alternatives are neither terribly intelligent nor even any better. If anything Lovegrove's message is that of, "a pox on both their houses."

What we are left with is a story. Specifically, a story about a family of absurdly rich people who are going through a bad time. That's a perfectly legitimate thing to write a book about. Indeed, as Lovegrove notes in passing, similar things have been done at least as far back as when someone wrote a play about a disaffected young Prince of

Denmark. *Provender Gleed* is that type of story, complete with a bunch of flawed characters, some romance, and a comedy duo.

The reason that the book has ended up with a science fiction publisher is that, for very good reasons, Lovegrove chose to set it in a world that might exist, rather than the one we know well. And sadly far too many mainstream publishers (and readers) lack the imagination to deal with anything so radical. As a result, they've missed out on a rather good novel.

*Provender Gleed* - James Lovegrove - Gollancz - trade paperback

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## Southern Gothic

By Cheryl Morgan

*Sing a song of breath mints,  
Banana cream pie.*

*Four and twenty blackbirds*

*Take to the sky.*

*When the sky is filled up*

*With all the feathered wings*

*The birds will come protect me*

*From all those other things.*

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That isn't exactly the original version of the rhyme, but it is apparently a powerful charm against ghosts when used by thirteen-year-old girls from Chattanooga. It is, after all, a basic rule of magic that if you believe in something enough then it will work.

Tor is not known for believing in horror novels, but one of their forthcoming releases is an interesting piece of Southern Gothic from debut novelist, Cherie Priest. *Four and Twenty Blackbirds* centers around Eden Moore, a young woman who has seen ghosts since she was a little girl. As is the way with

ghosts, these spooks turn out to be family. Their interest in Eden seems to be because they believe her to be a reincarnation of someone they knew at the time of their untimely demise. Unfortunately for Eden, someone living has this theory as well. He happens to be a religious nut who is convinced that she's an evil sorcerer whom God has ordered him to destroy. And yes, he's family too. It is all very Southern.

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*I'm afraid of some things - spiders, drowning, needles, and the like. But I'm not afraid of Malachi. He simply isn't intimidating, even with his True Faith to bolster his aggression. He hides behind God and guns, and ineptly at that.*

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One of the best things about *Four and Twenty Blackbirds* is its frequent changes of mood. Eden, for most of the book, is a confident, self-assured young woman who is determined to put to rest the skeletons in her family closet before they get out and start annoying anyone else. She has no truck with her lunatic Christian Avenger of a cousin, nor with her eccentric Southern Dame of an aunt who looks down with contempt on Eden's half-breed side of the family. On the other hand, seriously spooky things happen.

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*She opened her mouth but did not yet speak. Instead it seemed every sound in the forest was pulled inside her gasping lungs and I was standing in the vacuum. I knew my friends were only yards away but I did not hear their small, fast feet shuffling through the undergrowth. No birds sang and no squirrels knocked winter nuts down into empty trees. Even the shadows stopped crawling across the rocks as the sky held the clouds above in place.*

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The downside, as ever with horror, is the risk of stepping over the line where things become real. In a movie that is the point where the monster is finally seen on screen and is very obviously a bloke in a bad rubber suit. In a book it is the point where the author stops skirting around the issue and starts writing about the ghosts, magic spells and so on in exactly the same way that she talks about ordinary things from the real world. Priest crosses this line occasionally, but not often enough nor far enough to spoil the reader's enjoyment of the plot. Given that this is her first novel, it is probably something she'll get much better at handling with time.

As for her debut, *Four and Twenty Blackbirds* is an engaging page-turner of a book. Despite some of the content (ghosts, slavery, Voodoo, teenage pregnancy, religious mania) it doesn't have the emotional impact you might expect. This book is not another *Perfect Circle*. But that is probably the way it should be, given Eden's attitude to life.

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*When day broke, when light crawled under the heavy hotel curtains and spilled onto the floor, I was finally able to sleep a few hours more. Otherwise, I spent the night angry and afraid, curled in a rag-doll bundle with the covers up under my ears. Who did these ghosts think they were, harassing me like this?*

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That's Eden, Ghost Hunter, a heroine for the Buffy generation. I'm sure she'll sell well. And besides, when it comes down to it, if you can deal with a family like hers, what's a few ghosts and evil sorcerers to be scared of?

*Four and Twenty Blackbirds* - Cherie Priest - Tor - trade paperback

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## Broadband Fiction

By Sandy Auden

They're popping the champagne over at PS Publishing as their quarterly collection of short stories, *Postscripts*, reaches its end-of-first-year milestone. And there's been an impressive stream of stories from notable writers during that time, including giants like Brian Aldiss, Ray Bradbury and Gene Wolfe. This latest edition continues to showcase quality writing.

Alastair Reynolds is a relatively new boy on the SF block and an author with a talent for wide reaching space operas. In "Zima Blue" he demonstrates his skills at the short length. This is a story about memory, and how we can deal with the loss of it when our lives are extended over ever-increasing lengths of time. It's a thoughtful trip that considers how memory recall is organic, non-perfect, and whether this is preferable or not. It's also an interesting look at what is considered Art. If our current day and age already accepts half a cow in formaldehyde as Art, then imagine the far future. Reynolds does so, with style.

In a change of style, Eric Brown's "Life Beyond" is an homage to Clifford D. Simak. Brown's traditionally high-action stories find a calm center in this emotional and nostalgic tale featuring Simak's trademark themes of rural family life and alien intrusions. Brown's own preferences still influence the story though, and his love of SF television slips into the text with a quiet mention of *Star Trek*. "Life Beyond" ultimately delivers a pleasant surprise at the end, but some of the characterization didn't quite ring true. The main character, Gramps, was a little too sprightly for an 85 year-old and not as physically

impaired as perhaps he should have been.

Master Lao is also an old man and author Lawrence Person sets him up to face the Flying Horror in a tale of Taoist magic. After a death in the village, the local Temple is haunted by the floating head of the dead man. When a second death causes another gruesome head to attack, Master Lao reveals an ancient myth that will come true if a third person is murdered. "Master Lao and the Flying Horror" is as much a story about Taoism as it is about the character flaws of Lao's Number One Apprentice, Chou Lin. He's a philandering, lazy, good-for-nothing who still manages to be likeable, and his unexpected attitudes contribute to many of the story's witty exchanges – except for the possessed roast chickens; they carry (and dance through) the scene for themselves. Engaging, detailed and downright fun, this one's a little gem.

Taoism features again in Barry Malzberg and Paul Di Filippo's "Beyond Mao". The tale is, as Di Filippo explains, "a 21st Century version of Malzberg's seminal 20th Century tropes." And sure enough there are a number of familiar aspects to be found, including the space program, isolated protagonists and existentialism. The story involves the fate of four Chinese taikonauts on their way to Mars – one dies a slow death and returns in spirit-form, two might not be what they seem, leaving the fourth with a huge choice to make. The whole story is told with such rich language that you have to read it again, just for the pleasure of the prose.

The thought of yet another King Arthur tale isn't always a pleasurable prospect. Fortunately, "And Future King" by Adam Roberts is tonic for the weary reader. Examining what would happen if someone reconstructed Arthur's personality and dropped it into a future

multi-cultural society, Roberts gives us a glimpse of a charismatic leader toppling peaceful governments and setting up second-class citizenship for the Saxon interlopers. Told skillfully in interview sound bites designed for streaming broadcast, "And Future King" nonchalantly steamrollers over Arthur's squeaky-clean reputation and leaves it in pieces on the floor. Delightful stuff.

Picking up the pieces of James Dean's life, Jack Dann's "Dharma Bums" uproots Dean from home turf and drops him into a foreign culture. It's a favorite story mechanism for Dann and, on this occasion the story is also becomes an alternate history where Dean didn't die in the 1955 car crash but survived to travel with Jack Kerouac to Tangiers to visit William Burroughs. In Tangiers, the story becomes a big round of drugs and sex (gay and hetero), with Dean and Kerouac getting into late night trouble in town. The lack of SF content in this story illustrates the range of stories *Postscripts* embraces. It also shows the standard of writing: there are some excellent scenes shown through psychedelic eyes and some insightful and intense character scenes.

The intensity levels go off the meter in Zoran Živković's "The Cell" (Translated from Serbian by Alice Coppole-Tošić). Told from inside the single room of a cell on death row, a prisoner receives a series of visitors who drink his orange juice, take credit for actions not their own and tell him strange stories about a fabulous, feathered bird. There's a real sense of anticipation with this story, the promise of a revealing and surprising conclusion. The single location for all the conversations and the closeness of the cell walls create a narrowing of focus that absorbs the reader totally. Unfortunately the ending doesn't quite deliver to expectations and it leaves a



slightly let down feeling to end the fiction on.

The non-fiction offering in this edition – an interview with Richard S. Prather by Graham Andrews – investigates the world of detective fiction. Prather is clearly a witty man and this translates well into his Shell Scott, Hollywood Private Detective novels. The topics under discussion jump around a bit through the interview but it's worth sticking with it to hear Prather's opinion on American politics.

Overall, there's a definite nostalgic feel to this issue, a tipping of the hat to writers born in the first half of the last century. But there's a balanced and diverse range of subject matter in *Postscripts* 4, which offers the opportunity to try something new, however broad your tastes.

*Postscripts* #4 – Peter Crowther (ed.) – PS Publishing – digest magazine

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## Fractured Mirrors

By Peter Wong

Why would the mundane world be preferable to the dream life? That's the question posed by writer Neil Gaiman and artist Dave McKean in their newest collaboration for intelligent children, *Mirrormask*. Unlike such previous efforts as *Coraline* and *The Wolves In The Walls*, *Mirrormask* marks the creative duo's first collaboration on a feature-length film. More importantly, McKean takes the creative lead as the film's director.

Helena Campbell (Stephanie Leonidas) lives a highly artistic life. She's both a skilled juggler and a talented artist. But she's also the only child in a small traveling circus staffed by adults and run by her parents, Morris (Rob Brydon) and

Joanne (Gina McKee). Life on the road means lacking peers or even a boyfriend.

Helena's resentment at her constantly uprooted life leads her one evening to get into a terrible argument with her mother. It ends when Helena wishes she could be the death of Joanne. Later that night Joanne mysteriously collapses.

Helena's life soon implodes. Joanne's illness causes the circus to suspend operations, leading the other Campbell circus personnel to consider finding performing work elsewhere. The adults around Helena hide from her the seriousness of Joanne's problems. Helena herself feels trapped between guilt at not properly apologizing to her mother and her desire to lead a more rooted life.

On the night Joanne undergoes a chancy brain operation Helena enters a strange dream. It conflates her mother's operation, the circus, and her own laughing reflection. On awakening, the young performer wanders through a city both familiar and different. A chance encounter with the juggler, Valentine (Jason Barry), introduces her to some of the mores of the White City. Here, people wear masks to hide their feelings. Helena's unmasked face marks her as a freak. The bigger danger in the city, however, comes from the shadow tendrils. These menaces frequently appear to consume parts of the city and any inhabitant unlucky enough to be touched by them.

Helena begins to wonder if she's dreaming. The city's sights resemble her sketches come to life. The White Queen, the Dark Queen, and the Prime Minister resemble her mother and father. Helena even sees herself through windows, sleeping in her bedroom.

But this supposed dream is a terrible one. The White Queen has fallen into a coma. The Dark Queen attempts to

correct the mystical imbalance by sending shadow tendrils to slowly absorb the White City. Back in the real (?) world, the other Helena argues violently with her father and dresses like a punk. Accompanied by the possibly untrustworthy Valentine, Helena resolves to restore both worlds' balance by finding a stolen but unknown charm. The Dark Queen isn't interested in Helena's quest, yet she's determined to capture her...

*Mirrormask's* theme is foreshadowed by the Finnish Tumbler's line to Helena: "Dreams take you only so far, darling. After, you need cash." Helena's Coming Of Age does not involve rejecting life's centipede cages or page-eating sphinxes. But her maturation comes after she looks beyond the limits of dreams to find answers to her life's problems.

Some viewers' eyes will roll heavenward at *Mirrormask's* apparently unoriginal setting of a White City and Dark Lands. Yet despite its name, the White City looks like a decaying slum with a fresh coat of paint. These opposing kingdoms are not simplistic good and evil metaphors. Rather the two lands represent the positive and negative aspects of Helena's relationship with her mother, Joanne. Both Queens offer comfort to the girl, but one of them puts a price tag on that comfort.

Are Helena's adventures real or part of a particularly elaborate dream? The magical land and its people look like Helena's (or actually Dave McKean's) drawings given life. Yet Helena's encounters lack the touch of anarchy or absurdity found in more ambiguous fictional dreams. Issuing butterfly nets to library patrons, for example, feels too logical.

Fortunately, the film offers enough wit to soften viewer disappointment. Helena traverses the white and black lands

wearing pajamas and a pair of bunny slippers. The "books are magic carpets" cliché gets an amusing application. An animated child's scribbling becomes an off-kilter creation myth. The old Carpenters song, "Close To You," becomes a sinister ode to emotional possessiveness.

Strong performances by the two lead actresses make *Mirrormask* a delight. Stephanie Leonidas may have been acting to a blue screen for much of the film, but her Helena can look at the empty space where a computer-animated stream of fish will swim through the air and make the viewer believe she's actually seeing this casual wonder. Leonidas' Anti-Helena, by contrast, captures the character's rebelliousness without always capturing her humanity.

Gina McKee offers a consistently strong performance in her triple roles. Joanne's strong will and compassion are balanced by her believable loss of control. The White Queen radiates unalloyed love without diving into bathetic sainthood. The Dark Queen chills the viewer by sounding as loving and reasonable as Joanne and the White Queen...even when she casually talks of executing a character.

Dave McKean's direction, though, noticeably fails the actors. His reliance on long shots and off-kilter framing generally keeps the characters emotionally distant from the viewer. Jason Barry's unmasked Valentine feels flat compared to the untrustworthy and proud masked man.

But McKean succeeds in bringing life to *Mirrormask's* visuals. His tight shots of the Campbell Circus performance fill the screen with excitement and a childlike joy. An elegantly curved angel juxtaposed against a crumbling apartment complex's utilitarian and

efficient lines emphasize the edifice's oppressive and tomblike nature.

*Mirrormask's* amazing computer-animated visuals will be the main attraction for lovers of fantasy cinema. One complaint often leveled against computer animation in movies is that the finished result looks cold and visually stiff. McKean provided the initial designs for the film's fantastic elements. A team of 15 computer animators at Hourglass Studios then translated these designs into what's seen on screen. Had McKean's creatures been rendered in bright day-glo colors, they would have been instantly forgettable. Creative employment of a darker color palette gives the creatures life via artful use of shadows without rendering the film as a whole visually oppressive.

McKean wisely allows viewers many opportunities to reflect on this strange world's wonders. The viewer can see a medium shot of dozens of observation staircases for the Giants Orbiting site. There is a close-up of a librarian whose neck is a vertical stack of books. Finally, the camera can slowly pull back so the viewer can see an extreme long shot showing the apparent city limits of the White City. McKean's visual style marks a welcome alternative to the typical Hollywood fantasy film approach, best described as roller coaster blur.

*Mirrormask's* unique vision depended on the Henson Company giving McKean total creative control. The film's tiny budget is a non-issue and does not reflect on the creative invention displayed here. Viewers will be more concerned with finding a film whose originality of vision hasn't been test-marketed to extinction. That film is *Mirrormask*.

*Mirrormask* - Dave McKean (director), Dave McKean and Neil Gaiman (story), Neil Gaiman (script) - Sony - theatrical release

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## Royal Blood

By Juliet E. McKenna

With vampire/werewolf chick-lit becoming an established sub-genre these days, any new arrival on the bookshelves has to challenge the competition with something inventive, and indeed, must bring an original slant to all those monsters that we're now so familiar with, from the days of black-and-white Universal Studios creature-features onwards.

Tanya Huff certainly does this, firstly by taking an entirely different starting point, that of the independently-minded female private eye so beloved of crime and mystery fiction, and secondly by setting her stories firmly in contemporary Canada. It should also be noted that, while the books are currently new to the UK, she began writing this series in 1991, well before the advent of Buffy or any of her literary sisters. This series is in no sense following a current trend but should be considered a forerunner of much that's followed.

In *Blood Price*, Vicki Nelson has been forced out of the Toronto Police Department by diminishing eyesight but, refusing to give in, she has set up her own investigations business. So when she finds a horribly mutilated body on a subway platform she isn't about to forget about it unless she gets some answers. The tabloids soon have their answer: a vampire is stalking the city. This happens to be true, only he isn't the one doing the killing.

This prince of darkness is indeed of royal blood, namely Henry Fitzroy, bastard son of Henry VIII, who would actually rather be left to his quiet, agreeable life as a writer of historical

romances. Faithful Catholic and moral being, he's as keen as Vicki to lay rumors of vampires to rest, so they join forces after meeting over a corpse freshly slain by a demon. Vicki isn't about to deny the evidence of her own eyes, even if they are failing her in other respects. Together they have two issues to address; firstly, since demons must be summoned, who's doing the summoning, and secondly, how is Vicki going to find an explanation that will satisfy the police, especially her erstwhile partner and some-time lover, the tenacious Mike Celluci?

In the subsequent stories in the series, these three protagonists tackle werewolves who are the hunted rather than the hunters, a revenant evil from Ancient Egypt, scientists with a Frankenstein complex and the unquiet dead demanding vengeance. All of these well-established classics are tackled with the same ingenuity and verve, and there are many more merits to these books besides such freshness of imagination.

There's the writing and the plotting. I want to use the word 'simple' but that risks being misread as 'simplistic'. 'Direct' is better, also 'focused' and possibly, 'minimalist,' in its very best sense. We learn what we need to know, and backgrounds are drawn in with deft strokes to give a solid grounding but there's no time wasted on irrelevant digression either by author or characters. The books are comparatively short, dialogue-driven and fluently written to make for rapid, easy reading. But that risks implying they are undemanding or unsophisticated and that's not the case either. These aren't one-dimensional tales of things that go bump in the night. Human agencies are at work alongside the supernatural, and evil, together with responsibility for it, remains rooted in the everyday world. Thought-provoking undercurrents run beneath the

adventures and won't be ignored. In the same way, the darker inevitabilities of Henry's nature aren't obsessed over, but nor are they glossed over for those who would prefer their vampires without the icky bits.

This same 'less is more' approach is used to considerable effect in drawing out the characters of Vicki, Henry Fitzroy and Mike Celluci. As their triangular relationship develops, each acts with a refreshing lack of adolescent angst as well as believable maturity and equally convincing petulance on occasion. These are people you can easily believe in. Those who don't feel the need to read about other people's sex lives in anatomical detail will be happy to learn that similar sparing use of telling detail suffices in the bedroom scenes. And the relationships between the three of them, together with others, grow and change over the course of these five books, in the light of self-knowledge grudgingly acknowledged as well as after wholly unforeseen events. But that focus I mentioned earlier doesn't waver. In each case, the story, with the challenge at its heart, remains central to the writing.

These are books that undoubtedly offer innovative ideas to keen readers of vampire/werewolf chick-lit. Equally, they deserve to be read for more reason than that. As pacy, skilful adventure stories, utilizing the strengths of fantasy, crime and thriller/horror writing, they'll appeal to a wide audience. Read them, and you'll find yourself plotting ways to get them into the hands of pals regrettably blinkered by genre bias.

*Blood Price* - Tanya Huff - Orbit - mass market paperback

*Blood Trail* - Tanya Huff - Orbit - mass market paperback

*Blood Lines* - Tanya Huff - Orbit - mass market paperback

*Blood Pact* – Tanya Huff – Orbit – mass market paperback

*Blood Debt* – Tanya Huff – Orbit – mass market paperback

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## Sensual Subculture

If you have read Octavia Butler's novel *Imago*, you have seen her craft an engaging tale wherein a unique child masters its heightened senses and other powers and figures out its place in both human and non-human society. In *Fledgling*, Butler does it again, only this time the child is already fifty-three years old when the story starts. Suffering from amnesia due to a violent attack, Shori must learn who and what she is in time to save herself and her family from an enemy that threatens to wipe them out. As she has already lost most of her close family, she must construct a new one, not least because she drinks human blood and requires at least five human symbionts in order to live off them without hurting them.

Yes, in case you hadn't guessed it from the dark brown splatters of blood marking the clean white cover, this is a vampire novel. Kind of. It's a science fiction spin on the familiar story, where the vampire role is played by a non-human species of people who call themselves Ina. And because this is Octavia Butler, it's about blood in more than one sense. It's also about genetics, and racism. Shori is a genetic experiment. Her family has combined their genes with human DNA and given Shori the ability to stay awake during the day and go out in sunlight without suffering more than minor burns. If you think about it, it's only logical that they chose the strongest human genes for sun protection, which means Shori is black.

Somebody appears to disapprove of what Shori's family has done, and they're using humans as tools in a war that could become a feud and threaten the safety of a species that needs to stay hidden within human society in order to survive. A Council is called to investigate what's happening, and Shori needs to learn everything she can about the centuries old Ina society in order to find allies and succeed in her quest for justice and safety for her family. She also has to demonstrate that though she is small and young and has amnesia, she is stronger than she looks and her intellect is intact; she herself might make a powerful ally, if they come to accept her.

Though Shori's amnesia makes her somewhat dispassionate about the people she has lost, she rapidly makes strong emotional connections to her new human symbionts and to the family that shelters her when she's on the run. If you enjoy the sensual interplay found in most popular depictions of vampires, you will miss none of it here; Shori pleases her people when she feeds on them, and their touch is something she needs in addition to their blood. This and other Ina ways effectively make an extended Ina family, including its symbionts, into a communal sort of group marriage. Butler explores the issues of jealousy and persuasion inherent to this situation with all of her usual insight, and offers a believable social structure for how conclaves of humans and Ina interact with each other and with the greater human world.

If you had not heard this book was coming, it may be because it was printed by a small, mainstream publisher: Seven Stories Press ([www.sevenstories.com](http://www.sevenstories.com)). Hopefully word gets around now that it's out on the shelves; it's a terrific book and could be a contender for next year's Hugo Award. Unfortunately *Fledgling* is somewhat poorly proofread, but not

enough to disrupt the very readable narrative. The physical design and execution of the book is otherwise handsomely done.

And I feel ready to forgive Seven Stories some ragged proofing, because they have also just released an expanded second edition of Octavia Butler's short story collection *Blood Child and other Stories*. It's good to see more of Butler's work in print. *Fledgling* is her first book since *Parable of the Talents* won the Nebula Award in 1999. I hope we don't have to wait as long for the next one.

*Fledgling* - Octavia E. Butler - Seven Stories - hardcover

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## Whingeing Soldier Saves The Day

By Karina Meerman

Loving Robin Hobb is not always easy. She is a clever, clever writer who creates rich worlds with intricate intrigues between the individuals and political factions that populate her books. I find her overwhelming sense of detail can be overpowering. Sometimes there's too much of everything: too much intrigue, too much description of clothes and landscapes. Hobb is not exactly light reading; it can take time to be drawn in. Not everyone who liked the Farseer trilogy liked the books about the magical living ships. Those who came to love Fitz and the Fool, however, devoured the second Farseer trilogy. Now Hobb has started a new trilogy and there's a new world and lots of new people to get to know.

*Shaman's Crossing* is the first book of the Soldier's Son Trilogy. It is the story of Nevare Burvelle. His land is called Gernia and he is the son of a soldier who

was rewarded with land and a title by the new king. The Burvelle family is now part of the nobility. This is unusual, because traditionally the roles of Gernian sons are predestined. The good god's scripture says that the sons are ordained to do as their fathers did. Soldiers' sons become soldiers, cobblers' sons cobblers. And in the case of nobility, the first son inherits the land and the title, the second becomes a soldier, the third a priest, the fourth will study arts, and so on and so forth. Every man knows his role in life. And every woman too: she just hopes to be married off well. It is a tradition-bound world where magic is not merely frowned upon but abhorred. Industrialization is the new magic. Free tribes who knew magic once roamed the plains but the 'civilized people', such as Nevare's father, have tamed them. Well, not quite all of them. In Nevare's youth, war breaks out with the Specks, a mysterious people who appear to be responsible for outbreaks of a strange plague at the borders of the country.

I didn't immediately warm to this book and I still don't quite know how to feel about it. I read it on holiday and finished it in a few days, even taking roadside coffee breaks as an excuse to catch up on Nevare's doings. So I did care. But I didn't much like Nevare.

The whole society feels rather Victorian. There's lots of talk of honor and doing what's right. An incident right at the start of the book, involving the young Nevare and a Plainsgirl, made me think the young boy was lucky to be raised by such an honorable father. But very quickly I realized what a cold heart the father really has. And Nevare learns too. When he is 15 his father hands him over to his archenemy, a warrior from the plains called Dewarra. The boy is to learn how to be the perfect soldier. But Dewarra has his own agenda; he is a

harsh man and Nevare suffers all sorts of physical and mental torments during his 'education'. By the end of the training period, when Nevare has to perform the Final Test, he is quite brainwashed. In a magical world, he meets the Tree Woman. In a battle of wills she convinces him to follow her and Nevare leaves something of himself behind. Dewarra is so angry at what Nevare has done that he almost kills him.

Back home with his parents, trying to overcome this traumatic experience, Nevare decides to forget it ever happened. He returns to his life as the soldier son, dreaming only of going to the military academy and marrying an airhead girl. This is about one third through the book, and here my dislike for Nevare started. He complains, he whinges, he is an old fashioned yokel in his attitude to women (though that is typical of his society). The story made me growl. Nevare goes to the military academy and I started to drift away from the story. Sure, it is intriguing to observe the gap between old nobility and new, the cruel way in which the teachers try to educate the boys, the friendship between Nevare and his room mates, the misery the senior boys inflict on the new ones. The way Robin Hobb describes relationships between people is very clever. Hobb knows humans. But what I didn't understand was this: Nevare had been through a horrible ordeal; he had been trained as a Plains warrior. Why was he still so naïve... and wimpy?!

Towards the end, however, it all comes together. Nevare's cousin Epiny turns out to be a very intriguing woman. The lad himself ends up playing a key role in how the Specks bring the plague to the civilized world. When Nevare regained strength, so did my involvement with the story. The final confrontation between him and the Tree Woman was fascinating and it explained a lot about

Nevare's personality. The final resolution seemed to go a bit fast, but now I'm back to where I am at the end of every first book: impatiently waiting for the second. And thanks to cousin Epiny, there may be hope yet for the women of Gernia.

I read the book in a Dutch translation. Peter Cuijpers has done a good job with Hobb's text as the book did not feel translated at all. The Dutch title, *Overgangsrutueel*, means 'transition ritual'.

*Overgangsrutueel (Shaman's Crossing)* – Robin Hobb (tr. Peter Cuijpers) – Luitingh ~ Sijthoff B.V. - hardcover

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## Comics Take Flight

By Stuart Carter

Comics, it's a funny old game, isn't it? All those blokes in tights working off all that testosterone while women wearing small lace handkerchiefs look on and quiver. Except... it doesn't have to be like that, and there have always been writers and artists out there who have embraced the genre whilst rejecting the superheroes. Writer Warren Ellis put it best in his *Old Bastard's Manifesto* in 2000:

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*F\*\*k superheroes, frankly. The notion that these things dominate an entire genre is absurd. It's like every bookstore in the planet having ninety percent of its shelves filled by nurse novels. Imagine that. You want a new novel, but you have to wade through three hundred new books about romances in the wards before you can get at any other genre. A medium where the relationship of fiction about nurses outweighs mainstream literary fiction by a ratio of one hundred to one. Superhero comics are like bloody creeping fungus, and they smother everything else.*

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Of course, these days even the UK *Guardian* sometimes reviews the latest comics (or 'graphic novels' or 'sequential art' – call them what you want; personally I'm in favor of reclaiming the term 'comics' for respectable use) by Joe Sacco or Art Spiegelman, and especially Daniel Clowes. So it's a shame that the anthology *Flight Two* isn't getting far more attention, because it brings together short pieces of work by over 30 different artists and writers, all pitched at a certain level of sophistication that's neither too abstract and difficult – as some of these collections can sometimes be – nor too childish and easily dismissed. In fact, probably the most striking thing about so many of the stories told here is that although they have a remarkably child-like sense of innocence about them, they're quite adult stories. If the fairy tale motif is a little overused then it's the fairy stories of Tim Burton. Actually, scratch that, because many of these tales do 'fairy story' considerably better than Tim Burton has recently.

Take the first piece, Michael Gagné's wordless "Inner Sanctum", a cute mix of SF and fable with echoes of Alexandro Jodorowsky's work. There's nothing particularly groundbreaking here (unless you've never read *anything* in comics except, say Tintin or X-Men), but there's real imagination at work, such that you don't know what might happen next. It wasn't my usual cup of tea, I have to say, being a bit too cutesy. As an opener, though, it's a good choice.

"Solomon Fix", the next piece, by Doug TenNapel, is a step to one side in terms of style and content: more *Ren And Stimpy* to Gagné's sweet anime. It's surreal, again like Gagné, but in a more traditionally Western comic book style – comic (ha-ha), rather than cosmic. And it's fun to read too, starting out

vaguely mirth-worthy and occasionally rising to slapstick brilliance (the scene with the butter and the cuckoo clock...I'm chuckling even as I think about it), and once again defying anyone to guess what could happen next.

The six pages of "Jelly Fruit", by Catia Chien, feel somewhat slight after the relatively wordy marathon (it's 27 pages) of "Solomon Fix", and this story, more than any other, looks and feels like it was written for children. However, the unhelpful cat is quite cute, and there's a quick and clean happy ending which means this story slips by easily enough.

I don't want to cover every single story in the book (there are 33!) so let's just pick out a few favorites that bob, raft-like, above the already-high average water level, shall we?

Well, funnily enough, it's the very next story, "The Little Robot", by Jake Parker, that was one of my favorites. Once again this is apparently a children's story, told with economy and simplicity that leads to a charming final panel that will make you stop and think, even if just for a moment. Jake Parker could teach many people in the comics business a thing or two about pace and timing, I think. There's still no great philosophical depth here, only a very sweet story to loosen the most rust-encrusted bolt amongst you.

The most stereotypically comic book story here, "Monster Slayers" by Khang Le, also deserves a mention. Set in a mythical Japan, there's a lot of visual and written humor running alongside a fun plot about hard-up monster hunters for hire.

It may tell you more about me than about Neil Babra's piece, "The Golden Temple", when I say that this did very little for me. I've noticed that this has been a favorite of others who've read *Flight Two*, but this tale of an Indian ex-



pat returning to a culture and place he perceives as somewhat alien to his (naturalized Canadian) experience rather slid past my eyes without making much impression. Blame the lack of monster-hunters or cute cats, or perhaps that, to a certain extent, it felt unfinished (it is the second part of a story begun in *Flight One*).

Don Hertzfeldt's "Dance of the Sugar Plums' Or Last Month On Earth" certainly looks unfinished in comparison to everything else in *Flight Two*, using stickmen in a basic monochrome two-by-six panel grid. There's no connection between panels, nor much sense to be made of individual ones either. Fans of sleek, mainstream, continuity-obsessed, computer-colored comics might not like this, but acid casualty fans of Purple Ronnie or David Shrigley might. As will mad people. This little slice is crazy enough and sufficiently different to stand out here, although I'm really not sure I'd want to read a whole one.

We've had a cute cat, but even a feline-philiac like myself has to admit that Doug Holgate's cosmo-canine "Laika" is clearly top dog here. If this were a movie the words "based upon the life of the first dog in space" would be legally obliged to appear in large letters, since we depart from the actual events of the real Laika's five hours spent in orbit right after panel one. Then it turns into a Tex Avery cartoon in space, albeit with a sting in its tail. Wonderfully hilarious stuff that had me laughing out loud at the visual jokes that proliferate throughout.

Johanne Matte and Ghislain Barbe's "Mousetrap" is a not dissimilar piece that works almost as well (just without such a cute protagonist), and I have to mention "The Flying Bride" by Giuseppe Ferrario — an utterly manic slapstick comedy done in homage to the silent movies, complete with onscreen

dialogue (an irony in itself, since comics can *only* use onscreen dialogue).

Pirates: not exactly an evergreen subject for comics, but recently they've been undergoing something of a renaissance within the genre (think *Scurvy Dogs* or *My Monkey's Name Is Jennifer*) and *Flight Two* was never really going to get away without splicing a main-brace and keel-hauling a mizzen-mast or two (ahem). Who'd have thought that the meanest marauder on all the seven seas would be a ten-year-old girl, however? Only Ben Hatke in "The Plank", I'll wager, and well done to him for bringing this piratical pre-teen to our attention in such colorful and occasionally hilarious style.

If you're not already a comics fan (or perhaps, *especially* if you're already a comics fan but have never even heard of Image Comics) then *Flight Two* is a superlative introduction to some of the dimly lit corners in such a bright and dynamic genre. I mean, good grief, there's only one tale of superheroes in the entire collection ("A Test for Cenri" by Amy Kim Ganter), and even that's more High Fantasy than high-flying, so even irascible old Warren Ellis *should* be reasonably pleased (there's not a nurse in sight!). And if the subject matter never really does more than scratch the surface that's more a limitation of the short form being showcased here and not necessarily of the genre itself. Indeed, it's certainly the great strength of this anthology: no single style, story or subject ever stays long enough or reappears sufficiently often enough for the reader to get bored. And, hey, if your jaded pallet should become wearied of a particular story then just skip ahead five pages to the next completely different one.

*Flight Two* - Various writers & artists - Image Comics - graphic novel

## Out to Get Me

By Cheryl Morgan

The hero of Zoran Živković's latest novel, *Hidden Camera*, is definitely something of a loner. He works as an undertaker — a profession that pretty much ensures people will avoid you. He lives on his own, he appears to have no friends, and he keeps tropical fish as pets because he can't face the prospect of dealing with any more intelligent and social sort of animal. As for women, well, they might as well be from another planet.

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*I actually know very little about women. I haven't had many opportunities to get to know them better.*

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I've known people like this, and it seems to me that they go one of two ways. Some of them become utterly slovenly and uncaring of anything or anyone. Others go the other way, and become obsessed with propriety. Živković's narrator, presumably because of his job, is very much in the latter camp. He obsesses over proper behavior, and suffers massive panics at the thought of doing something embarrassing in public. He is pathologically middle class.

What is one to do with such a fellow? Why, if one is a cruel and heartless author who loves torturing his characters in the hope that it may do them some good, one plays practical jokes on them, of course.

Coming home after work one day, the narrator (who is never named) discovers an envelope wedged in his front door. It soon becomes clear that this is no failure of the postman, for there is no address on it. Opening it up, he finds a ticket for a movie. He assumes that this is some clever promotion, and decides to check it

out. As the film progresses, however, he realizes that someone has been surreptitiously filming him, and that is why he's been invited to the screening. Further subtle ploys follow, and it is not long before our hero is quite paranoid.

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*No one paid any attention to me. At least that's how it appeared. But I had to be careful. Looks can be deceiving and I was under close and crafty supervision. The only thing I was sure of was that no one there was in disguise.*

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This being a Živković novel, things don't stop at ordinary weirdness. Soon the pranksters are doing things that seem improbable, at least without a lot of expenditure on special effects. And as time goes on the settings to which our hero is lured become more and more surreal.

The objective of all this strangeness is, of course, that the narrator should suffer some sort of life-changing experience. And indeed, so it turns out. But I wasn't convinced, and that is probably because Živković had done way too good a job of portraying his character as socially clueless. The paranoia and obsession with propriety are beautifully described. But when we get to the end and are asked to believe that his bizarre experiences have turned this fellow into a functional human being the temptation is to say, "no, don't believe it, he's got too far to go."

This small niggle notwithstanding, *Hidden Camera* is a very fine piece of fiction. Indeed, as I said, it is precisely because Živković's study of his central character is so good that I wasn't quite able to swallow the ending. We should also remember that Živković writes in Serbian, and much praise is due to Alice Copple-Tošić for helping render his prose into fine English. (I'm sure that

Živković has a hand in this too – his emails to me are always in impeccable English.) *Hidden Camera* is not usual genre fare by any means, but it is a fine book and recommended to anyone who likes creepy, surreal narratives.

I have an English language version of the book produced by Živković's Serbian publisher, Polaris. However, you won't have to buy the book from Serbia. In November a new edition is being produced by Dalkey Archive Press, a US company that specializes in producing English translations of foreign literature.

*Hidden Camera* - Zoran Živković - Polaris - paperback

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## String Theory

By Cheryl Morgan

It is always a pleasant surprise to get email from a British author who has made his first novel sale in the US. The way the world market for SF goes, of course, that probably means the first sale anywhere. This is the case for Chris Dolley whose debut novel, *Resonance*, is due out from Baen any time now.

The cover of *Resonance* makes it look like a typical Baen book. I can see the marketing wisdom in having a house style. Baen books are very recognizable on the shelves, but I have no idea the cover is supposed to be depicting, other than some vague notion of science fiction-ness. However, don't, whatever, you do, pick up *Resonance* expecting a typical Baen book. There are some interesting things happening here.

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*He checked their progress against the tube map over the carriage window. He knew there were two stops to go but he liked the*

*confirmation – you never know when a new station might appear.*

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To start with, the book is set largely in London and is largely about British people. There are a number of British turns of phrase in there that I'm sure Anne would not allow me to get away with in *Emerald City* in case they were not understood by an international audience. Don't let that put you off either. Hopefully it will give the book an even greater air of weirdness.

The strangest thing about the book, however, is the lead character. Graham Smith is not your ordinary science fiction hero. While he's not actually mentally impaired in any way, he has had such a traumatic childhood as to be almost totally socially dysfunctional. He hardly ever talks, he has no friends, and his life is filled with strict ritual. Graham has a set routine as to exactly what happens at what times in his daily life. He always eats the same meals on each specific day of the week. And he takes great care to always take the exact same number of steps in walking home from the tube station.

Given his lack of social skills and obsessions, it is hardly surprising that he ended up working as a messenger in a big Civil Service office, trusted with nothing more complex than taking packages between the mail room and the people to whom they are addressed. Graham's colleagues all think he is weird, or at least retarded, but he has very good reasons for what he does.

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*Don't step on the cracks – everyone knew the sense of that. One of the first things you learned as a child. But too many people forgot. Or didn't care. Graham Smith cared. He knew that paving stones set the cadence of a street; that cracks regulated the stride length and set the resonance that kept*

*everything stable and harmonious. Step on the cracks and the street slipped out of kilter. Imperceptibly at first. Minute changes around the edges, a new person living at number thirty-three, a strange car outside number five. Step on the cracks too oft en and . . . well, anything could happen. He'd seen houses turned into blocks of flats overnight. Parades of shops come and go. Terraces demolished, office blocks erected. All overnight when no one was looking.*

*The world was a far more fragile place than people realized. And every now and then a thread would work loose and something or someone would unravel.*

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It is no wonder Graham is a little strange. His father has died three times. It is hard to go through all that grieving only to find that a few months, or even years, later your father re-appears as if nothing ever happened. He just comes home from work one day, hale and healthy. And everyone except Graham determinedly maintains that he has never been away.

So Graham has learned to cope with life by inventing rituals. As long as he sticks to them, weird things are much less likely to happen. And if he never mentions anything he sees, no one will get angry with him for talking about when the world unravels. Everything is going perfectly according to design, until he meets the girl.

Her name is Annalise Mercado. She has a passion for different hairstyles and colors, changing on a regular basis. She comes from Boston, or Virginia, or Minneapolis, depending on the hairstyle. She claims that there are lots of her: at least 200, and that she can talk to each of her selves by telepathy. And she has come to London specifically to look for Graham Smith, because her voices told her that he is Important.

Annalise has several theories as to how she can do what she does, and why Graham's world keeps unraveling: probably as many theories as she has selves. One of her believes that she is a medium, and that her other "selves" are lost dead souls pretending to be her to get attention. Another Annalise is convinced that she and Graham are trapped in some massive virtual reality experiment. A third has been convinced by the idea of parallel universes.

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*"We all handle the voices in the head differently," said Annalise. "Annalise One became a medium, Annalise Sixteen discovered religion and I discovered chocolate." She laughed. "I think I made the best choice. What d'you think?"*

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Whatever the real explanation, two things in Annalise's many lives are constant. One is Graham Smith. The other is ParaDim (pronounced "paradigm"), a fast-growing high tech company that claims to have made a massive breakthrough in AI. ParaDim's sophisticated computers gather data from all over the world, analyze it, and produce ideas. ParaDim has produced a wealth of patents on everything from cures for cancer to advanced weapons systems. Governments are falling over themselves trying to be nice to the company. Which is good for the UK, because the British government has something that ParaDim desperately wants: Graham Smith.

Around a third of the way through the book most of this weirdness gets explained, and from then on we are into fairly standard thriller territory, except with a variety of backdrops. Graham will be quite happily fleeing from ParaDim agents, helped along by the far more socially competent Annalise, and the next thing he knows the world has

unraveled, Annalise has a different hairstyle, and she is telling him that ParaDim are a bunch of friendly folks who only want to use their technology for good.

It is a lovely idea for a book, and Dolley has got the pacing pretty much right. You certainly get caught up in what Graham and Annalise are doing. But it was at this point I found myself wishing that Dolley had come up with this great book a little later in his career. There are way too many passages where we are told what Graham is thinking. When a new Annalise appears on the scene this is always carefully signaled. I found myself wishing that the book had been written by someone with a little more experience who can tell you all of these things in more subtle ways. What would Gene Wolfe make of this story, for example?

Of course I'm being really picky here. Dolley has produced a great plot, and here am I complaining that Gene Wolfe would have done it better. Sometimes ideas are so big that they need a really top class writer to make them shine the way they should. If Dolley hangs around for a few years, and on the strength of *Resonance* he deserves to, he'll doubtless improve his skills. If he can keep on coming up with good novel ideas like this, he'll produce some really spectacular books in the future.

*Resonance* - Chris Dolley - Baen - publisher's proof

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## Holy Blood

By Cheryl Morgan

Sometimes it is easy to tell when a fantasy novel is written by someone from the far side of the Atlantic. I really cannot imagine anyone in the UK

writing a fantasy series in which the heroine is named Princess Anne. No, not even if she does have a drooling idiot of an elder brother called Charles. It just wouldn't happen. Americans, on the other hand, have all sorts of strange views of British royalty. After all, they don't have to live with them. Thankfully, once you get past this slight weirdness, Greg Keyes produces some of the better fantasy available today.

By way of a recap you may want to go back and read my review of *The Briar King*, which sets out the basic background of the series. *The Charnel Prince* is book two, and picks up almost immediately where the first volume left off. At this point Anne's father and sisters have been murdered, she's on the run in fear of her life, her idiot brother is installed on the throne with various factions battling her mother for the Regentship, and the fearsome Briar King is loose in the forest. There appear to be four books planned in the series, so you can bet that things are going to get worse before they get better.

To give you some sort of frame of reference, Greg Keyes is more in the mould of George R.R. Martin and Tad Williams than of Steven Erikson. This is not formula fantasy, but at the same time it is still fairly safe. You can be pretty sure right from the start that most of the good guys are going to come out of their adventures OK, unlike an Erikson book in which there is a good chance that everyone will die horribly, at least once, before the end of the story. Like Martin and Williams, Keyes specializes in creating a cast of likeable characters with whom the reader can identify, or at least sympathize. His bad guys are rather less well done - certainly he has no one of the star quality of Cersi Lannister. But he makes up for this by putting a lot of effort into his world.

The setting for the books is a rough analog of late mediaeval Europe. It does actually have peasants and merchants populating it as well as knights and royalty. The different kingdoms have their own languages rather than some mysterious "common tongue". Keyes worries about how things work. He's bothered to find out about land reclamation in mediaeval Holland. He's researched how a duelist with a rapier might take on and beat an armored knight. And he's found a way in which a small merchant vessel can get away from a larger and faster warship. All this bespeaks rather more effort than simply assuming that your world works in pretty much the same way as that nice Mr. Tolkien's does, or even worse the same way as Mr. Gygas's world works. Indeed, Keyes has even thought about magic. He's concerned about the transition from a real mediaeval world, in which everyone believes in magic but few people have much actual experience of it, to one in which fabulous beasts such as griffins and basilisks actually begin to stalk the woods and kill people.

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*"It's clear that many things we once considered legend have a basis in fact. But no one has actually seen a greffyn or an utin since ancient times. Stories grow and change in the telling, so no, we can't trust them to be reliable. The only way to sort out truth from invention is with our own senses."*

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Rather more importantly for the casual reader, Keyes keeps the plot moving along at a steady pace and fills 500 or so pages with lots of interesting narrative. Entirely without my managing to spot him doing it, Keyes manages to bring three of his disparate plotlines together at the end for a satisfying conclusion to this current volume, while still managing to make clear that there is a long way to go yet before the World can

be Saved. He's got the hang of this writing lark all right. So provided that you don't mind your fantasy being fairly safe, and you don't mind authors who portray The Church as being full of nasty, corrupt demon worshippers who enjoy sacrificing children, then you are going to be very happy with Mr. Keyes' work.

*The Charnel Prince* - Greg Keyes - Pan Macmillan - trade paperback

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## **It Was This Big!**

By Cheryl Morgan

Fishermen have always been noted for their tall stories. Small boys too have a tendency to exaggeration. Especially when, like Jock Junior, they have what his teacher, Mrs. Big Nose, calls, an Overwrought Imagination.

Being nine years old, Jock Junior doesn't have a stuffed tiger with whom to have adventures, but he does have a loving, if slightly eccentric family. His Dad loves fishing, sitting in the Jacuzzi, and watching cowboy movies. His Mom loves baking and cleaning. His sister loves dying her hair strange colors and bursting into tears at the slightest provocation. And then there is Grandma Matchie, who lives in a cabin at the bottom of Rat Portage Lake and who loves putting the world to rights.

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*Girls. My face is scrunching up already, but I'm forcing myself because it's Important to start here. I like pretending they're not there most of the time, even though they wear pants with zippers and I'm pretty sure they don't need zippers. They're funny like that and don't ask me why because I don't know why.*

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That should tell you that Jock Junior is pretty normal for a nine-year-old boy, if perhaps a little precocious. But with a family like his it was perhaps unwise for Mrs. Big Nose to ask the children to write an essay on what they did during the vacation. Especially as Jock Junior has a serious commitment to Telling the Truth. And so he did, which meant telling how Sis was kidnapped by One-Armed Trapper. It meant the story of One-Arm's mother, the devil pike of Westerhawk Lake. There's Bjugstad, the King of the Buffalo, who is so big his droppings made the Rocky Mountains. And it could not possibly be without the time that Grandma Matchie decided to go fishin' for Satan Himself.

All of this Steven Erikson tells on Jock Junior's behalf in a voice that seems something of a cross between Calvin, Dennis the Menace and Huckleberry Finn. If you were hoping for another comic Malazan Empire story from Erikson's latest PS Publishing novella then you'll be disappointed, but only by the content, the laugh level remains the same. *Fishin' with Grandma Matchie* is wonderfully bizarre and entertaining, and at times feels like it is a Tex Avery cartoon.

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*The Major hovered over us, wearing his usual navy blues and polished boots. You could see the fire gleaming in his eyes and he grinned crazzerly, his big red nose purlsing and his giant moustache bristlering. The two gulls holding him up screewled loudly and beat their wings madly, and feathers floated down al around us.*

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You may have noticed that Jock Junior has a way with words that doesn't always involve a close relationship with dictionaries. He claims this is because he's still at school and hasn't learned spelling yet, but an equally entertaining

Introduction by Graham Joyce reveals that Erikson is suffering from a writerly disease for which a serious rash of neologisms is the primary symptom.

Heck, this is all just great fun. Buy it.

*Fishin' With Grandma Matchie* - Steven Erikson - PS Publishing - chapbook

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## Myths To Read By

By Cheryl Morgan

Meanwhile, in Edinburgh, something stirs...

It is, the PR material says, "set to be THE major literary event of 2005." Rather more confidently it also notes that it is the most ambitious simultaneous world-wide publication ever undertaken. IT, to be more specific, is *The Myths*, a new series of books from Scottish publisher, Canongate. The idea is deceptively simple: leading novelists have been asked to produce their own versions of their favorite myths. The undertaking is truly Herculean: at least 100 books, published simultaneously by twenty-four publishers worldwide. And it all begins with Karen Armstrong.

"Wait!" I hear you cry, "Karen Armstrong? Doesn't she write books about religion?" Well yes she does, and that is what makes her an ideal person to provide the introductory volume of *The Myths. A Short History of Myth* does exactly what it says on the cover: it provides a comprehensive, if condensed, overview of the history of mythmaking by mankind, and thereby sets a framework of both context and understanding for the series to follow.

Inevitably in a book like this Armstrong has to skimp. There are extensive references to more scholarly treatments of the field, which the curious reader can

follow up if she is unsatisfied or confused by some point Armstrong makes. But there is also enough of a statement here to make clear Armstrong's stance on many issues. For example, she obviously has no truck with the modern myth of an idyllic, non-violent, nurturing, matriarchal, goddess-worshipping state of mankind in pre-history, as promulgated by certain branches of the Feminist movement. In addition her portrait of Newton is a long way away from the enthusiastic alchemist we are familiar with from Neal Stephenson's *The Baroque Cycle*.

The main thrust of Armstrong's narrative is a clear timeline showing the development of myth-making from the hunting tales of prehistoric man up through the development of agriculture, cities, and science. Armstrong reiterates her commentary on the tension between *mythos* and *logos* familiar to readers of *The Battle for God*, and shows how this has led both to an abandonment, or at least debasement, of mythology and to the lunacy of fundamentalism.

Fine as the book is as an introduction to comparative mythology, *A Short History of Myth* would have little relevance to the series as a whole if it did not provide some guidance to the writers who are to follow. Thankfully, Armstrong does not disappoint. Indeed, by part way through page three she has already said pretty much everything that needs to be said. I take the liberty of quoting extensively:

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*Another peculiar characteristic of the human mind is its ability to have ideas and experiences that we cannot explain rationally. We have imagination, a faculty that enables us to think of something that is not immediately present, and that, when we first conceive it, has no objective existence. The imagination is the faculty that produces religion and mythology. Today mythical thinking has fallen into disrepute; we often*

*dismiss it as irrational and self-indulgent. But the imagination is also the faculty that has enabled scientists to bring new knowledge to light and invent technology that has made us immeasurably more effective. The imagination of scientists has enabled us to travel through outer space and walk on the moon, feats that were once only possible in the realm of myth. Mythology and science both extend the scope of human beings. Like science and technology, mythology, as we shall see, is not about opting out of this world, but about enabling us to live more intensely within it.*

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Why is this paragraph so significant? Because with very little re-writing it could be changed from a defense of mythology to a defense of speculative literature. Science fiction and fantasy are both heavily rooted in the imagination. They require both writer and reader to be capable of exercising their imagination and conceiving of something that has no objective existence. Yet such fiction has today fallen into disrepute; is often dismissed as irrational and self-indulgent. One of the ways in which people these days express surprise at a technological achievement such as landing on the moon is not to say that it was once the stuff of myth, but that it was once the stuff of science fiction. Both myth and SF are held to be equally preposterous and untrue.

Obviously much of which passes for speculative literature these days is purely intended to allow the reader to opt out of this world. The same could be said of a lot of religion. But used correctly, both speculative literature and mythology have the same purpose: they are designed to encourage the reader to use her imagination to examine her world, and her relationship to it, so that she might live more intensely within that world.



Armstrong is clearly aware of this. Towards the end of the book she sets up a challenge to the writers who will follow her. She notes the paucity of mythical thinking in the modern world, and claims that writers and artists, people who can still think symbolically rather than only literally, must take the place of priests in providing our modern myths to live by. She cites writers such as T.S. Eliot, Jorge Luis Borges, Italo Calvino, Angela Carter and George Orwell as people who have taken up this challenge. Now some of the world's brightest and best novelists will try to follow in their footsteps.

Will they succeed? It is an interesting question, for Canongate has not sought its contributors amongst the ranks of those already well versed in myth-making. Rather they have gone straight to what is perceived to be the top of the profession; people whose work is deemed to be good by mainstream critics precisely because they do not write "genre crap"; people who, to churn out a by now well known phrase, do not write books about "talking squid in space."

So, will Canongate's glittering array of star writers succeed in producing the feats of imagination that Armstrong calls for, or will they instead eviscerate the stories that they choose, making them "modern" by making them "realistic"? It remains to be seen, and I suspect that some will do much better than others. But in the meantime it is likely to be tremendous fun finding out.

Sadly the first volumes of *The Myths* will not be available until October. I had rather hoped that Canongate could launch at Worldcon. But with any luck there will be some presence at World Fantasy, and of course you will be able to find many of the books in the series reviewed here.

*A Short History of Myth* – Karen Armstrong – Canongate – publisher's proof

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## He Said, She Said

By Cheryl Morgan

Producing a book of science fiction quotations is something of a thankless task. To start with it is darned hard work. There is a lot of reading to be done, and a lot of very hard decisions to be made as to what to include and what to leave out. And then, when you finally have the finished book in your hands, all most people will have to say about it is, "Why didn't you include X?" We should therefore all be grateful to Gary Westfahl for undertaking this job on our behalf.

The book, conveniently titled *Science Fiction Quotations* is published by Yale University Press and is priced similarly to a new novel. This is refreshing for a reference work. There is a short and rather rambling introduction from Sir Arthur C. Clarke, but most of the book's 450+ pages are solid information.

With any book like this there is a choice to be made about how to present the material. Many books of quotations list the material by author. This tends to make quotes relatively easy to find, but it also makes the book less readable. Westfahl, mindful of the image of SF as a conversation between writers, has sorted the material by topic. This allows the reader to see Clarke's Laws immediately followed by corollaries to those laws by Asimov and Benford, or to see what different authors down the years have had to say about god or love. It is, perhaps, more of a coffee table book approach than a reference library approach, but it has its advantages and Westfahl covers most of its shortcomings by also including indexes by author and by publication. It is also worth pointing out that in the case of movie and TV scripts the reader may not know the

author, so a listing by author is of little use.

Having said that, the choice of categories is sometimes a little strange. One of the first things I would have done is have a section on famous first lines. There isn't one. So where do you find, "The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel?" First I tried "sky", but there was no such section. Nor was there a section on television. So I went to the publication index and trawled through all of the *Neuromancer* quotes until I found it in "media."

Similarly there is no section on "teleportation." To find, "In the nighttime heart of Beirut, in one row of general-address transfer booths, Louis Wu flicked into reality" you have to go to the section on "reality." There is a section on stars, but "Overhead, without any fuss, the stars were going out" is listed under "apocalypse." Mars does not rate a section of its own, so "Once upon a time there was a Martian named Valentine Michael Smith" is under "aliens." I can't help thinking that a book like this would be so much easier to use were it published on the Internet where multiple indexing and keyword searching is so much easier to do.

As I mentioned earlier, there will be inevitable arguments over what was left out. Westfahl has done a fine job in finding the first ever use of "He's dead, Jim" (it was in "The Enemy Within", by Richard Matheson, first shown in 1966). But I'm surprised that he didn't include the rather more SFnal, "It's life, Captain, but not life as we know it," (Spock to Kirk in *Star Trek, The Motion Picture*). Indeed, I would have included both that and the better known misquote from the "Star Trekkin'" song. I find it hard to believe that Joe Haldeman has written only one quote-worthy line, Ken MacLeod none, and all that Vernor

Vinge has written that is quote-worthy is the rather banal, "So high, so low, so many things to know."

(Indeed, I would have replaced that Vinge quote with this one: "Ad hoc, ad hoc and quid pro quo, so little time, so much to know" - Jeremy Hilary Boob, the "Nowhere Man", from *Yellow Submarine*.)

Other classic phrases are missing too. I was sorry to see that Westfahl had no room for the saying, "on the gripping hand" from Niven and Pournelle's *The Mote in God's Eye*. And quite frankly, and book of SF quotations that does not include the notorious line, "Our teeth grated and my nipples went *spung*," from Heinlein's *The Number of the Beast* is simply incomplete. But of course there are my preferences. You mileage will vary. Westfahl's did too. And he does note in his introduction that he had to cut seventy thousand words to fit his original draft into the space available for publication. There must have been some difficult decisions to make.

If I have a serious complaint to make it is about lack of publication information. Westfahl notes that he has used first editions wherever possible, but he doesn't list publishers. He includes a number of quotes from George Turner's excellent *Drowning Towers*, but doesn't mention that the book was published in Turner's native Australia as *The Sea and Summer*. I suspect that by "first edition" Westfahl might actually mean "first US edition."

In the end, however, all of this quibbling pales into insignificance beside the fact that the book exists. Indeed, the very fact that there is disagreement over what should be included is in some ways a strength. I'm sure fans will argue for hours (well, decades probably) about why certain quotes were included and others not. And they would not be able

to do that if the book did not exist. Besides, think of the parlor games you can play once you have the book. If you are trying to think of a Christmas present for the SF fan who has everything, this book should be on your list.

*Science Fiction Quotations* - Gary Westfahl (ed) - Yale University Press - trade paperback

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## Comics Round-Up

By Cheryl Morgan

There was no comics section in the last issue because *Albion #3* got delayed. This seems to have been a production issue, and not anything to do with ongoing disagreements between Alan Moore and DC, which is a great relief. The comic didn't hit the shops until after I got back from Fantasycon, and then I've had to wait until I could travel somewhere that had a decent comic shop so I could buy a copy.

The plot starts to get going in *Albion #3*, and more characters come out of the woodwork. I was amused to see the CIA agent revealed as "Zip Nolan, Highway Patrolman", a US character from British comics. I can see why he uses a zip code as a password, but does anyone know why he chose a Sacramento address?

Anyway, many thanks to the creators for the mentions of Noggin the Nog and John Peel. Why have they got it in for Tranmere Rovers? Must be a Liverpool thing.

*Neverwhere* continues along solidly. I'm still not convinced by some of Glenn Fabry's renditions of people, especially when he has a crowd scene to do. But he does a good job with Anaesthesia and I'm beginning to think that he draws

Richard badly on purpose to emphasize his gawkiness.

*Spaceship Away #7* sees a move away from Dan Dare with the addition of "Journey into Space", based on the 1953/54 BBC radio serial of the same name. The strip, by Charles Chilton and Ferdinando Tacconi, was originally published in *Express Weekly*, a rival comic to *Eagle*, as a direct rival to Dare. Chilton scripted the BBC series as well.

The new issue also has a fascinating background article on a feature of the Dare strips that might seem odd to modern eyes. Back in the 1950s there was much concern about pilots blacking out when subjected to high G forces. Which is why Dare and Digby are often shown piloting their ships in a prone position wherein the body doesn't have to work as hard to get blood to the brain. This concern went away with the invention of the G-suit. Interestingly, in "Journey into Space", Jet Morgan and his crew are shown strapped into acceleration couches, much like in a modern Shuttle.

A story that has been getting some attention in the blogosphere this month (although it actually broke at ComicCon) is that Neil Gaiman will be returning to comic writing shortly with a stint at Marvel working on Jack Kirby's *The Eternals*. I have to admit that I didn't think much of *The Eternals* when the comic first came out. Kirby might be the archetypal superhero artist, but his plotting left a lot to be desired. Gaiman, on the other hand, has shown his ability to write fabulous stories about the clunkiest of characters. Sadly we have at least half a year to wait before we find out what he manages to produce.

*Albion #3* - Alan Moore et al - Wildstorm - comic

*Neverwhere #3, #4* - Mike Carey & Glenn Fabry - Vertigo - comic

*Spaceship Away #7* – Rod Barzilay (Ed.) - Rod Barzilay – A4 comic

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## Out of Synch

Only two books to catch up on this month, but both significant ones.

Firstly, those of you in the US who did not go to Glasgow can now get your paws on a locally-produced copy of the latest novel by Ken MacLeod, *Learning the World*.

In addition Pyr have produced a US edition of the Michael Moorcock – Storm Constantine collaboration, *Silverheart*. I think that one's been out for a while – sometimes books don't turn up in the *Locus Online* listings, or I miss them. Another fabulous John Picaccio cover.

*Learning the World* – Ken MacLeod – Tor - hardcover

*Silverheart* – Storm Constantine and Michael Moorcock – Pyr - hardcover

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## Miscellany

### British Fantasy Awards

These were presented at Fantasycon in Walsall on October 2<sup>nd</sup>.

**Karl Edward Wagner Award for Special Achievement:** Nigel Kneale, creator of Quatermass;

**Best Small Press:** Elastic Press (Andrew Hook);

**Best Artist:** Les Edwards;

**Best Anthology:** *The Alsiso Project*, Andrew Hook (ed.), Elastic Press;

**Best Collection:** *Out of His Mind*, Stephen Gallagher (PS Publishing);

**Best Short Story:** Paul Meloy, “Black Static” (*The Third Alternative* #40);

**Best Novella:** Christopher Fowler, *Breath* (Telos Publications);

**Best Novel (The August Derleth Fantasy Award):** Stephen King, *The Dark Tower VII: The Dark Tower* (Hodder & Stoughton).

Many congratulations to all of the winners, especially Andrew Hook who managed the amazing feat of unseating PS Publishing as Best Small Press. This is on a level with beating *Locus* to the Best Semiprozine Hugo without any home field advantage.

Andrew tells me that he only has a dozen or so copies of *The Alsiso Project* left. If he has sold out by now, you may be able to get copies from a few online dealers such as Shocklines <http://store.yahoo.com/shocklines/alsioproject.html>.

Some of the other voting was very close indeed. I understand that Stephen King won the Best Novel category by a single point.

The British Fantasy Society has produced a new trophy design for the awards this year. I rather liked the old Cthulhu statue, but apparently it was deemed too phallic (how it can be any more phallic than a Hugo escapes me). The new design, produced by Arthur Payn, is a very cute demon. See the Photos section on the web site for a picture of the new award.

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### Celebrity Authors

There is a big row going on in the UK at the moment over plans by Waterstone's, the country's largest bookstore chain, to buy out Ottakar's, one of its main rivals. A particular concern is that, as a bookstore, Waterstone's has a tendency to concentrate on shifting large

quantities of books by top selling authors and not care much about everyone else.

The current trend towards what one might call the “celebritization” of authors can have good and bad effects. Some will argue that to have the media constantly talking about the likes of Dan Brown and J.K. Rowling can only have a good effect on book sales in general. Others claim that it is contributing to the decline of sales of midlist writers.

While I was at Fantasycon I picked up some second-hand evidence. This comes via a major UK publisher who was speaking at a Society of Authors meeting last week.

Life for celebrity authors is good. The company’s top 50 writers have seen sales increase by 28% in the past year.

But that trend does not continue down the list. The next 50 most popular authors saw their sales fall by 4% over the same period.

And authors 100-150 on the publisher’s list saw their sales drop by a massive 48% last year.

That is the way the book trade in the UK is going. If Waterstone’s buy Ottakar’s that will almost certainly accelerate the trend.

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### Sunburst Award

Canada’s judged award for speculative literature has gone to Geoff Ryman’s *Air*. Commiserations to Guy Gavriel Kay, whose *Last Light of the Sun* I also really loved. But *Air* is a fabulously imaginative and beautifully written book that, like all good SF, says a lot about our world. I’m delighted that it won.

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### SF in Asia

David Brin writes:

“I cannot express the excitement that my family and I feel about returning to Japan, in order to help celebrate the 65th World Science Fiction Convention, Nippon 2007, in beautiful and exciting Yokohama. Anyone who’s been paying attention knows that Japan has become a world center of future-oriented thinking, not only in technology and science but in fields of imagination, like anime, film and science fiction literature.

“In preparing for this wonderful event, I found myself pondering the long overdue occasion of a Worldcon in Asia and how it may reflect forward, upon the 21st Century. Anybody can see that the coming decades will feature profound shifts in the world’s “centers of gravity.” Especially in the realm of ideas. Might Nippon 2007 offer a special opportunity to explore and expand this theme?

“Since first mentioning this, I have been most pleased by the enthusiastic response from the Nippon 2007 organizers, as well as members of some other SF experts, translators and publishers in places like Beijing and Shanghai, who seem to think it a good idea to involve other Asian nations in a 2007 summer of celebration and reflection on the future. The 65th Worldcon should be the final and climax, culminating “SF and The Future” events across a vast continent where tens of millions are discovering – every day – how technology and forward-thinking can transform lives, uncover dangers and inspire hope for a better tomorrow.

“As an added bonus, this might help persuade more North American and European authors to fly over, especially if other Asian events occurred during the weeks leading up to Yokohama.

"Above all, what better way to spread messages of progress and peace? How better to overcome ancient animosities than by presenting the huge vista of future time? Do any of our petty rivalries matter, against such a vast perspective, that only SF can offer?"

"Of course, there are many factors to consider and there is little time. Sometimes the best of ideas stumble before implementation. Still, it's a notion to mull over.

"Science fiction serves as a powerful international medium for ideas. It encourages people to transcend short-term animosity by looking upward and outward, toward more distant horizons. I am excited by any opportunity to share the wonder."

This does sound like an idea whose time has come. There were Chinese astronauts in orbit the day David's email arrived, and over the past year I've noted a lot of SF activity in India. Above all it is another opportunity to establish the international credentials of Worldcon. If anyone has any ideas as to how to make this a reality I'd be pleased to give you some publicity and put you in touch with others who might help.

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### **Clarion lives!**

Clarion East, which you may remember had been experiencing financial difficulties, is now administered by The Clarion Foundation, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. That's exactly the same legal status as used by most American fan conventions. The directors of the Foundation are: Kate Wilhelm, James Patrick Kelly, Nancy Etchemendy, Leslie What, Walter Jon Williams, Karen Joy Fowler, Kim Stanley Robinson, Kelly Link and Cory Doctorow.

This year's Clarion will go ahead, and will be taught by: Samuel R. Delaney,

Gardner Dozois, Nancy Kress, Joe and Gay Haldeman, Kelly Link and Holly Black.

This all sounds very positive, and presumably means that Clarion's financial problems are now behind them, at least for a year. Here's hoping things stay that way.

Note that this applies only to the Clarion East workshop. The many other Clarion-style workshops springing up around the world are effectively franchises and are not governed by the Clarion Foundation.

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## **Editorial Matters**

By Cheryl Morgan

Fantasycon was pleasantly laid back, though rather small. There were about 100 people there. That's rather sad, considering the number of fantasy and horror fans there must be in the UK. Fantasycon ought to be able to do better than Eastercon, because it has a permanent parent body in the British Fantasy Society. But as with all these things, if there are not sufficient volunteers available to do the work (and one of the disadvantages of a parent body is that the same people get stuck doing the work ever year) then things just don't happen.

Anyway, I got some books, talked to a lot of people, and even persuaded a couple of publishers to sponsor *Emerald City* for a while. Here's hoping this happens a lot more. I'll be off to World Fantasy very shortly and will get to talk to more people there.

Meanwhile, as I'm now back in the US, Kevin and I can get on with setting up a proper non-profit organization to run *Emerald City*. That will hopefully

reassure people that the money I'm getting in is going to fund the magazine and is not going into my pockets. It will also mean that there will be someone who can take charge of things if, as currently seems possible, my personal situation deteriorates further and I can no longer take an active role in running *Emerald City*.

The new Al Reynolds novel didn't arrive in time to make this issue, though the Karen Traviss was early which made a pleasant surprise. Reynolds will feature in the next issue, alongside new novels from L.E. Modesitt and Steven Erikson. I'm expecting a first foray into fantasy by renowned British horror writer, Tim Lebbon, and I'll also be looking at a couple of new authors. Keep an eye on the blog too, especially on November 6<sup>th</sup> as I'm hoping to once again be first online with the results of the World Fantasy Awards.

Best wishes,

Cheryl

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