EMERALD CITY #124

Issue 124 December 2005

A monthly science fiction and fantasy review magazine edited by Cheryl Morgan and available from her at cheryl@emcit.com or online at http://www.emcit.com

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Literary Fiction for People Who Hate Literary Fiction

By Matthew Cheney

There is a stereotype of literary fiction shared by both science fiction readers and non-science fiction readers: that academically-sanctioned, "serious" contemporary fiction is all about dull middle-class people having affairs, and that the writers of this fiction do such things as use a couple hundred pages to describe events that could quite easily be described in a paragraph. This stereotype is not entirely inaccurate — such books do exist. But just as it is unfair to condemn all SF as clunkily-written space operas for people who are hiding from puberty, so it is unfair to dismiss all literary fiction as unimaginative hogwash for people who yearn to be seen as sensitive.

A reader only interested in a narrow type of writing (hard SF, for instance) is not going to find much pleasure from any literary fiction, but a reader who is interested in experiencing new realities, strange visions, visceral horror, and supernatural events has plenty to choose from. What follows is an introduction to some writers who might appeal to certain types of genre readers. It is not a comprehensive tour, nor does it focus on the same elements for each writer: some of these writers are worth reading because of their plot devices, some because of their fantastic imagery, some because their approach to language and structure creates a wonder of its own.

The weirdness literary fiction can offer is, in general, of a different sort from the weirdness offered by most genre fiction, but the differences usually are not as much between idioms of writing as they are between the goals and purposes of different writers. There is, for instance, a writer like **Flannery O'Connor**, the best of whose stories are among the best, and most bizarre, ever written by an American. But O'Connor was not interested in weirdness for its own sake — she was a devout Catholic, and her faith allowed her to view the world in terms of sin and redemption. These two ideas fill all of her fiction, and if she spent more time writing about the first it was because she despaired of otherwise finding the second. Her characters and situations are often bizarre, and what feels allegorical is usually something more complex — something that, to experience its full resonance, must be viewed both literally and figuratively. Don't miss her stories "A Good Man Is Hard to Find", "Good Country People", "Everything that Rises Must Converge", and her novel *Wise Blood*. In these works, characters blind themselves, fanatics torture obnoxious families, a Bible salesman steals a woman's wooden leg, and a mother is killed by her own hatred and anger, leaving her son to fend for himself in a world of pain. Such tales bubble with gothic grotesqueries and ooze original sin.

While O'Connor could almost be considered a horror writer, other mainstream writers use the tools of different sorts of popular fiction. Myths and legends are familiar material to readers of Tolkien and Gaiman, but they are also used powerfully by a myriad of writers not usually associated with the SF section of bookstores. **Eduardo Galeano**, for instance, is best known for

his polemics about Latin America, but he has also written such evocative and unique collections of fable, legend, poetry, and story as *The Book of Embraces* and *Walking Words*. He is a master of poetic glimpses and suggestive fragments, and the worlds his words walk through are equally fueled by ancient and modern magics.

Rick Bass is one of the contemporary masters of the novella, but he is also a writer who understands the mythic sense that links American literature to the American landscape. The early short stories collected in *The Watch* are all worth reading ("Cats and Students, Bubbles and Abysses" is a fine send-up of writing workshops), but Bass really becomes a great writer when he gives himself over most fully to his more phantasmagoric sensibilities with the stories in *Platte River*, *In the Loyal Mountains*, and *The Sky, the Stars, the Wilderness* — each story feels imbued with the spirit of tall tales and legends, and yet most are based in something resembling a contemporary reality, although one where animals can talk and men can live for centuries.

If you mixed Galeano and Bass, the result would be **Barry Lopez**, who is primarily known as a nature writer (his *Arctic Dreams* won the National Book Award), despite his having written more books of fiction than nonfiction. Lopez has yet to publish a novel, but his short stories range from quiet regional tales to interplanetary science fiction. Among his collections, my favorite is *Light Action in the Caribbean*, which contains one absolute masterpiece, "The Mappist" (about a man who creates preternaturally accurate maps), along with such excellent stories as "The Deaf Girl" and "Emory Bear Hands' Birds" — fantasy and horror stories. Lopez's fiction is enigmatic, lyrical, and suggestive, and early collections such as *Field Notes* and *Winter Count* are most satisfying when read in full, rather than as separate stories. His most recent collection, *Resistance*, is a strange almost-novel, a work of what might be called speculative realism, about people who have exiled themselves from a politically repugnant United States.

Doctrinaire realism seems most beloved in the U.S., where many writers have not seized all the imaginative possibilities available to them. Thankfully, this disease seems more contained in other countries, and so a Portuguese writer like **Jose Saramago** is taken seriously (and given a Nobel prize) even though all of his books are fantasies. His novel *Blindness* is a shocking look at how thin the veneer of civilization can be (one by one, everyone on Earth goes blind), and his other books often feel like the sorts of things Kafka would have written had he gotten the chance — tales of ghosts conversing with people, of continents floating away, and, again and again, labyrinthine bureaucracies that consume individuals. Saramago has a few stylistic quirks that can make his work difficult to get into, but it is worth putting forth a little bit of effort in the beginning, because after ten or twenty pages, the books have taught you how to read them, and the experience is thrilling. Had he limited himself to the here-and-now, the possible-and-probable, Saramago wouldn't be half as interesting or powerful a storyteller as he is.

Another writer who seems to have never considered fantasy a limitation is **Gioconda Belli**. Unfortunately, only one of Belli's novels has been translated into English from the original Spanish: her first, *The Inhabited Woman*. It's a magical exploration of a woman's life before and during the Nicaraguan revolution of 1979, where the spirit of a native warrior woman inhabits the protagonist, giving her insight both into her immediate life

and into the cruelties of history, and providing her with the courage to join in the struggle against a dictatorship. Though it suffers from a few first-novel problems, overall it is both gripping and emotionally affecting. (To learn about the reality beneath the fantasy, be sure to read Belli's memoir, *The Country Under My Skin*, which is readily available in English, as is a collection of her poetry, *Eve's Rib*.)

And then there's **Bruno Schulz**. A writer and artist, Schulz reputedly started publishing when some imaginative chronicles of his everyday life came to the attention of a contemporary novelist. *Street of Crocodiles* (a.k.a. *The Cinnamon Shops*) is his most famous book, a kind of surreal memoir, and while it has a certain affinity to the writings of Kafka and Robert Walser, among others, it is not entirely like anything else you are likely to encounter.

Equally unique and evocative as Schulz's writings, the stories of **Tatyana Tolstaya** are odd, eerie, and beautiful. I am particularly fond of the stories in her first collection, *On the Golden Porch* — stories in which cabbage soup talks to itself, and scratchy old records lead to a hallucinatory quest for love.

I can't talk about short stories without talking about **Alice Munro**. I know plenty of people who proclaim Alice Munro their favorite living short story writer, and I know a couple of SF writers who think her work has all the atmosphere of the best fantasy writing, despite being built with some of the oldest tools of mundane realism. Nothing supernatural occurs overtly in Munro's fiction, and yet her tales seem to take place in a world apart from our own. Her stories are miracles of emotion and character; they often start slowly and build toward devastating conclusions. It seems to me that Munro gets better with each new collection, but it's difficult to go wrong with any of it — the *Selected Stories* offers a good sampling of her early and middle work, but her most recent collections (*The Love of a Good Woman*; *Hateship, Friendship, Loveship, Courtship, Marriage*; and *Runaway*) are worth reading cover-to-cover many times. To discover how a short story can be as rich as a novel, to discover how realistic fiction can create a sense of wonder, to discover the possibilities of fiction, read Munro.

Paul Bowles, an American composer and writer who lived most of his life in Morocco, may be best known for such Poe-inspired horror stories as "The Delicate Prey" and "A Distant Episode", but he was a writer of many styles and interests. Bowles has been called a nihilistic writer, a Beat writer, a monster, a genius. He first gained a reputation for the violent scenes in those early stories and in his first novel, *The Sheltering Sky*, but there is much more to Bowles than brutality. He was an avowed surrealist and existentialist who reveled in the sense of always being in exile. He wrote clear, accessible prose in an attempt to capture inaccessible realities: read "The Circular Valley" and "You are Not I" for stunning approaches to point of view; read "The Time of Friendship" and "Too Far from Home" for their melding of landscape and character, read *The Sheltering Sky* for its grotesque imagery and portrayal of civilization's madness, read *The Spider's House* because of the magnificence of its structure and the depth of its sad compassion. Bowles is a writer the mainstream world of literary opinion has sometimes loathed and sometimes embraced, but he is a writer any afficionado of dark fantasy should be familiar with, because he demonstrates how much can be accomplished by a careful crafting of tone and pace.

At the opposite end of the spectrum of restraint from Bowles sits **Stanley Elkin**. You have to have a tolerance for long sentences and an overabundance of detail when you read Elkin, but he rewards the sympathetic reader generously. I don't know of another novel like *The Magic Kingdom*, in which terminally ill British children go on a tour of Disneyworld, and lots of sex and jokes ensue until, like life, there is death. In terms of content, if Philip Jose Farmer and R.A. Lafferty had ever had a child together, it might have grown up to write Stanley Elkin's novels. But content is only one of the remarkable qualities Elkin offered. Style is what any reader notices first. Elkin could easily be accused of inefficient writing: in addition to long sentences, he writes long paragraphs and long scenes. I found, though, that once I'd developed a taste for such writing, I didn't want Elkin's stories and books to end. Elkin loved language; he wielded it with gusto and grace, and he spiced even his most mordant ideas with a sense of humor that was broad and silly, but also smart.

Another lover of language, **Jeanette Winterson**, has probably never been accused of having a sense of humor, because in essays and interviews she seems to have an ego large enough to petition for membership in the United Nations. Much of her fiction is truly extraordinary, though. Her public image has drawn some attention away from the merits of her work, which is unfortunate, because there is just nothing out there quite like *The Passion*, *Written on the Body*, *Art and Lies*, and *Sexing the Cherry*. Her writing is lush, imaginative, and often erotic; it digs into the humanity beneath history and art, and it offers word-dreams of many worlds. It is impossible to say what Winterson's best work is "about", because most people who become addicted to her writing have the experience of reading quickly through the first book of hers they encounter, despite feeling at least mildly bewildered the entire time, and then going back to reread it to get a better grip, and discovering that the bewilderment is an integral, and even exciting, part of the experience.

Ben Okri has a similarly lush sense of language as Winterson, and his writings also build entire worlds — worlds of gods and spirits, of myths and history — but his work is not nearly as structurally adventurous as Winterson's. Okri's Booker Prize-winning novel *The Famished Road* (wherein African spirituality creates a multiverse, and a paradise exists on the other side of a sad and desperate reality) is so richly fantastic as to be exhausting. I admire Okri most for the short stories in a slim collection, *Stars of the New Curfew* — the imagery is as vivid and plentiful as in *The Famished Road*, but it is less overwhelming in ten- or twenty-page tales than in a 500-page novel.

Some writers marketed as writers of literary fiction seem like they could fit quite easily into another camp, given the opportunity. For instance, whenever I try to think of writers to compare **Jim Crace** to, I think of SF writers: Ian MacLeod, Jeff VanderMeer, Michael Bishop… While each of those comparisons feels at least vaguely accurate, there just isn't any way to say, "If you like X, you'll like Crace." He is a sensual writer — the descriptions of markets in *Arcadia* are as vivid as any such description I've encountered — but he is also an efficient writer, one who is able to find the most evocative words so that he doesn't have to go on at length. None of his novels are long, and yet they evoke worlds that seem at first to be familiar, but are full of anomalies. It's the kind of writing that is just strange enough to make you reconsider what you considered real before reading it.

His best book is *Being Dead*, a spiritual novel written by an atheist, a Darwinian paean to the ages of man, and a story of the wonders that happen to bodies when they rot.

The closest thing I know of to a genre writer working outside the marketing labels of genre writing is **George Saunders**, best known for his short story collections *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline* and *Pastoralia*. Saunders routinely publishes in major U.S. magazines like *The New Yorker* and *Esquire*, yet almost all of his stories could have appeared in *Interzone* or *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* — indeed, he has recently been included not only in *The Best American Short Stories* and *O. Henry Awards* volumes, but *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror* and Karen Haber and Jonathan Strahan's *Science Fiction: The Best of 2003.* He writes about virtual realities, about bizarre corporate theme parks, about grandmothers coming back from the dead to haunt their loser grandkids into doing something productive with their lives. His stories are blisteringly satirical, but also moving, a combination rare enough to have garnered him a considerable amount of attention for a relatively small body of work.

Science and technology may not be the main themes of literary fiction, but they are major concerns for dozens of writers, including some of the most lauded (and occasionally detested) American writers of our time: **Thomas Pynchon, Richard Powers, Don DeLillo,** and **David Foster Wallace**. Powers in particular is a novelist whose work is imbued with science and speculation, as well as just about every other realm of human knowledge and endeavor. These are difficult writers, though, sometimes frustrating in their obsession with erudition, sometimes more pathologically encyclopedic than even Neal Stephenson.

Though science is not alien to literary fiction, there are, of course, things SF writers do that writers of lit-fic don't, and vice versa. It is rare, for instance, to find a writer of literary fiction who includes interstellar travel in their work, because such props as space ships and black holes tend to be seen as irreducibly science fictional. Similarly, it is rare for a book considered literary fiction to also be considered traditional epic fantasy. And that's what we have science fiction and traditional epic fantasy for, and what we love them for — for those moments that could not appear in any other kind of story.

Those moments are few, though, and just as anyone who limits their reading to the literary mainstream is missing out on a lot of magnificent writing, so the reader who reads only what gets marketed as science fiction or fantasy is missing a universe of marvels beyond those borders.

Hornblower the Dragonrider

By Cheryl Morgan

Marketing is a strange discipline. Everyone knows that there are certain themes that appeal to book readers. For example, Anne McCaffrey's Pern novels have a huge following within the science fiction community. Napoleonic naval stories, as produced by the likes of C.S. Forester and Patrick O'Brian, have a rather wider market, and there is a fair degree of crossover interest. But how many of you would have thought of putting Captain Hornblower on the back of a dragon rather than on the deck of a

frigate? And how many of those would have expected it to work? Getting such an idea right not only requires a fair amount of bravery to even try it, but also a significant degree of writing talent. Having both of these is about to make Naomi Novik very famous.

Three weeks out from Madeira, HMS *Reliant* encounters a similar-sized French vessel. Captain Will Laurence decides to engage the enemy, and after a short fight succeeds in capturing her. Much to his surprise, the *Amitié* has cargo: one rather large dragon egg. His ship's doctor, Mr. Pollitt, knows a little about dragons and pronounces the egg close to hatching. It would appear that the *Amitié* had bad luck with the weather in its journey, leading to a starving crew and a serious problem with their treasure. Still, there is nothing for it; His Majesty's forces are not well supplied with dragons, and if they are to resist Bonaparte's planned invasion they need every beast they can get. That means that one of Laurence's officers will have to impress the dragon when it hatches and become an aviator.

The more recent Pern novels have become so bogged down and predictable that I have stopped reading them, but there is no doubt that McCaffrey's invention of impressing dragons was a stroke of genius. Captain Laurence's first encounter with Temeraire is just as good at bringing tears to the eyes as that of Lessa and Ramoth. Novik has dragons, and their deep relationships with their riders, down pat.

"I suppose you are one of those hoarding creatures," Laurence said, looking affectionately up at Temeraire; many dragons had an inborn fascination with jewels and precious metals. "I am afraid I am not rich enough a partner for you; I will not be able to give you a heap of gold to sleep on."

"I should rather have you than a heap of gold, even if it were very comfortable to sleep on," Temeraire said, "I do not mind the deck."

All together now, "Awww!"

Temeraire is quite the cutest and most lovable dragon I have encountered in a long time. Obviously he's going to grow into a huge, ferocious fighter, but fresh out of the egg he has the same enthusiasm for life and wide-eyed innocence as a human boy. He's also a lot smarter. He likes nothing more of an evening than to have Laurence read to him, and he has a fascination for mathematics. That Mr. Newton had some very interesting ideas.

Anyway, duty must be done, and therefore Captain Laurence and Temeraire are retired from the Navy and signed up for the Royal Aerial Corps. They are quickly dispatched off to a training base in Scotland to learn the finer arts of fighting aloft. Novik has clearly been reading the likes of Forester and O'Brian, and has the style of Nelson's navy off pat. But I suspect she has also been reading a little of Captain W.E. Johns. Her aviators are distinctly more rumpled than Navy officers, and are disinclined to stand on ceremony. They are definitely more Biggles than Hornblower, much to Captain Laurence's discomfort. And then, of course, he discovers the dreadful secret of the Corps, a truth so shocking that it must be kept hidden from the general public. Certain breeds of dragon, including the Longwing, one of Britain's best fighting breeds, will only accept women as riders. I suspect that even Biggles might have been horrified by that.

A book like this will only work if the military side of it makes sense. Novik can draw on many sources for

information on Napoleonic naval warfare, but how would dragons be used in conflict? I should note at this point that Novik's dragons are very big indeed. The dragons that Richard the Lionheart took with him on the Crusades might have been ideal mounts for brave knights, but by Captain Laurence's day they have got much bigger. Rather than thinking of Biggles in his Spitfire, you should be thinking of the captain and crew of a Lancaster or B52 bomber. Laurence has a lot of men aloft with him, including riflemen for protection and bombardiers to drop stuff on enemy ships or soldiers. Of course that doesn't stop the pernicious Frenchies from adopting standard aerial warfare tactics.

"Enemy above! Enemy above!" Maximus's larboard lookout was pointing frantically upwards; even as the boy shrilled, a terrible thick roaring like thunder sounded in their ears and drowned him out: a Grand Chevalier came plummeting down towards them. The dragon's pale belly had allowed it to blend into the heavy cloud cover undetected by the lookouts, and now it descended towards Lily, great claws opening wide; it was nearly twice her size, and outweighed even Maximus.

The idea of men clambering around on a dragon's back in combat, and even boarding enemy dragons to try to capture them, makes for some pretty hairy scrapes, though of course it is not that much more dangerous than Laurence has seen with men in the rigging of fighting ships.

The other thing that the author of such a book has to do is fit her new idea (in this case the dragons) into the real world. She has to move beyond the combat scenes and consider how dragons affect society, international politics, and even history. Novik does seem to have thought about all of these things. For example, the prodigious size of modern-day dragons is no accident; it is the product of the same selective breeding techniques that fueled the Agricultural Revolution in the 18th Century. And one of Temeraire's favorite bedtime stories is the tale of how Sir Francis Drake and his dragon helped see off the Spanish Armada. I was a little surprised to see mention of Roman remains at a site in Invernesshire, though I can see why Novik wanted the baths. Furthermore, this is an alternate history she is working with. Perhaps Agricola had a dragon or two to help him in his campaigns against the Picts. If he did, I'm sure that Tacitus would have written about it, and perhaps one day Ms. Novik will provide a translation.

Not that there is any shortage of potential stories in the present timeline. The first book is all about the run up to Trafalgar. While Nelson is chasing Villeneuve all over the Atlantic, Laurence and Temeraire, and their colleagues, have to keep the French army from invading. Future books may well have titles such as Temeraire and Wellington (about the Peninsula War) and Temeraire at Waterloo. In addition there is a much wider world to explore. As this extract makes plain, the American colonists are just as rebellious as ever.

"Some of the laws which I have heard of make very little sense, and I do not know that I would obey them if it were not to oblige you. It seems to me that if you wish to apply laws to us, it were only reasonable to consult us on them, and from what you have read to me about Parliament, I do not think any dragons are invited to go there."

"Next you will cry out against taxation without representation, and throw a basket of tea into the harbour," Laurence said.

It occurs to me that in a future volume Temeraire will have to go to China to meet his family. But the story that I'm really looking forward to is the one being trailed by the occasional mention of Inca breeders. I can quite see that dragons would like living in the Andes, and it is by no means inconceivable that a large force of dragons would have helped the Incas fight off the Conquistadors. Even Napoleonic dragons don't have the stamina to fly across the Atlantic, doubtless much to the relief of General Washington, and I doubt that Cortez or Pizarro would have had the resources to take many with them.

I don't expect that *Temeraire* will set the literary world on fire, but the book is very readable and Novik's characterization is excellent. She also knows just how to manipulate the emotions of her readers. I do, however, expect the book to sell in vast quantities, and for there to be lots of sequels. I'm hoping that they stay as fresh and interesting as the first volume for a long time.

The book is being released by HarperCollins in the UK in January. US readers will have a little longer to wait. Del Rey has opted to delay the launch until March. More importantly, they appear to have decided that American readers will be unable to cope with a book called *Temeraire*, so they have changed the title to *His Majesty's Dragon*. Please remember this when you are ordering the book in shops. But before you order it, do remember also that I have three copies of the UK edition in this month's subscriber draw.

Just to complicate things further, there are two more Temeraire books almost ready to go. Del Rey is going to release all three in quick succession (March, April and May). Therefore US publication will overtake the UK, and UK readers will be rushing to get hold of the later books from the US. The UK dates for parts 2 and 3 are August '06 and January '07. And if that wasn't enough, Del Rey is only doing mass-market paperbacks, but HarperCollins UK is doing hardcovers. Don't blame me; I'm just the messenger. And of course none of this would matter if I didn't think that *Temeraire* and its sequels were going to be very popular indeed. But I do. Enjoy!

Temeraire – Naomi Novik – HarperCollins – publisher's proof

Subscriber Draw

By Cheryl Morgan

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 .

Those of you who have subscribed (or do so in the next few weeks) will be in with a chance of winning a copy of the UK trade paperback edition of *Temeraire*. HarperColllins have kindly given us three copies to give away, which makes your chances pretty good. And Naomi Novik has kindly provided signed inserts for each copy. The draw will take place on January 22nd.

Stealing a Moon

By Cheryl Morgan

One of the classic devices of science fiction is the generation of sense of

wonder. Writers who are good scientists as well can come up with seriously "Gosh! Wow!" ideas that enthrall their readers. This year we've seen a fair amount of that from people like Charles Stross and Robert Charles Wilson. Not to be outdone, Alastair Reynolds has produced his own offering, *Pushing Ice*.

The small world called Janus is a moon of Saturn. Thanks to the Cassini probe, we have good pictures of this small, unremarkable, misshapen rock. But Janus is an odd world, for it shares its orbit (in the gap between Saturn's F and G rings) with another moon, Epimetheus. Why are there two moons in the same orbit? Any number of reasons could be advanced, but it is the duty of the science fiction writer to come up with the unexpected.

"Or rather," Bella interrupted Svetlana's thoughts, "Janus used to be one of Saturn's moons. Now we have to redefine it. About thirty hours ago, Janus's orbit began to deviate from its expected trajectory around Saturn."

Oh my! So maybe Janus isn't a moon at all. If it is a moon, why would anyone steal it? And if it isn't, then maybe it is an alien spacecraft in disguise. A spacecraft that has been hanging about in Saturn's orbit at least since 1966 when Janus was first noticed by Earth. And we are now in 2057.

The point is that someone really ought to investigate, but Janus is accelerating at a fair lick and is heading out of the solar system. The only spacecraft with much chance of intercepting it is the *Rockhopper*, a comet-mining vessel. It is crewed by miners and engineers, not scientists, soldiers, or anyone with experience of first contact theory, but it is the only ship available and its owners have been offered a substantial amount of money by their government to undertake the mission to Janus. Thus Captain Bella Lind and her crew find themselves co-opted onto a scientific mission.

It isn't long, however, before things start to go wrong. In pushing their craft to the limit to chase the fleeing moon/aliens, the crew of the *Rockhopper* finds problems with their vessel that suggest that they may not be able to make it back home. Then they find out that a rival vessel flying a Chinese flag is also headed after Janus, and that hostilities are expected. Also the boffins back on Earth have plotted the course that Janus is following. Taking a close look at the star system it is heading for they find something no one had noticed before.

"The structure appears to be floating somewhere close to the Lagrange point between the two stars, where their gravity fields cancel each other out. If that's the case then the object is truly enormous: seventeen or eighteen light-seconds wide, and nearly three lightminutes long. If you placed the Earth at one end of that tube, the other end would reach to the orbit of Venus."

If that wasn't scary enough, the crew of the *Rockhopper* soon has cause wonder what exactly the purpose of the aliens is. Did they want to steal a moon? Did they want their survey vessel back? Or was the whole exercise simply a ploy to enable them to capture something else entirely, a spaceship full of humans.

The usual expectation for a book like this is that the brave human crew will unravel the secrets of the alien civilization and somehow manage to save themselves and Earth from an awful fate. Reynolds, however, does not take the expected route. To start with he makes it clear very early on that the alien technology is way beyond the ability of

the *Rockhopper's* crew to understand. In addition, while he doesn't shirk the necessity to talk engineering every so often in order to convince his readers that his characters can survive the situation he has dumped them into, he really telling a character-based story. For the most part, *Pushing Ice* is not about aliens, but about two human women, Bella Lind and her chief engineer, Svetlana Barseghian.

This is a brave decision by Reynolds. I'm sure that there will be some hard SF fans who will be irritated by the fact that he spends more time examining the relationship between his two heroines than coming up with neat ideas for alien science. Also the plot tends to drag a bit if you go into the book thinking it is a first contact or Big Dump Object novel. But there are plenty of good scientific ideas throughout the book, and Reynolds has also done a good job of writing about people. The way in which the relationship between the *Rockshopper's* crew and their employers falls apart once the former realize that the data they have been sent after is more valuable than their lives is very believable. So is the way in which this discovery poisons relationships between the crew. I think that *Pushing Ice* is a book that is more like *Chasm City* than like *Revelation Space*, but whereas I had trouble believing in some of the characters in *Chasm City*, *Pushing Ice* is very well done indeed. Provided that you know what you are getting into, it is well worth a read.

Pushing Ice – Alastair Reynolds – Gollancz – publisher's proof

Short and Bitter-Sweet

By Cheryl Morgan

One of the things that frightens a reviewer most is coming late to a book that everyone else has already raved about, and which is a multiple award winner. Sure you trust those other reviewers, and the award judges, but you never can tell. Some writers and books you just have blind spots about. It is therefore with considerable relief that I can tell you that *Black Juice* by Margo Lanagan is indeed as wonderful as other people say, and thoroughly deserving of its awards. It may yet get more. I'll come back to that later, but first a few additional general observations.

One of the common items of conversation at World Fantasy Con this year was the way in which so many writers these days are disavowing the term "horror" and adopting "dark fantasy" instead. This is largely a publishing phenomenon: the word in the posh offices of New York is that "fantasy" sells whereas "horror" does not. Who wants to read another Freddie v Jason splatter novel? So if you write creepy stuff you have to market yourself as "dark fantasy".

Now, far be it from me to ignite yet another Internet flame war by suggesting that I have precise, or even approximate, definitions of these two genres, but I would like you to think for a while about the difference between Joe Hill and Margo Lanagan. Hill is, of course, happy to be called a horror writer, but he could hardly be anything else. *20th Century Ghosts* is full of the sort of marginal characters that we expect to find in horror stories: sadists, murderers, people who turn into monsters, and of course the dead. Lanagan's stories are often just as disturbing as Hill's, but they are disturbing in a very different way. There are murderers in her book: a

young woman who kills her husband, a political revolutionary. But even those are disturbing not because they are freaks or social outsiders, but because they could so easily be us. Lanagan's stories are disturbing precisely because they are about such ordinary things and people.

Even so I worry a little over the term "dark fantasy". Sure, Lanagan's fiction is dark, but fantasy? There are no elves or princes, no dragons or unicorns, not even a friendly wizard. Lanagan's stories are fantastical only in that they contain clues — sometimes quite subtle clues — that indicate they do not take place in our world.

More of that later, but I have one more general digression to make, one which may shed some light on why I think I am a much better reviewer of novels than of short fiction. When you review a novel, one of the basic questions you have to answer for the reader is, "what is this book about?" But with Lanagan I often found that asking what a particular story was "about" was about as helpful as asking what a strawberry cheesecake is "about". (Answer: it is about 8" across. Also circular, brown and crispy on the bottom, white and creamy above that, red and sticky on top.) Lanagan's stories can (mostly) be understood on an intellectual level, but their true impact is emotional, and in the patterns of language that she weaves. "About" misses way too much.

The book starts with the now famous story, "Singing My Sister Down?" What is it about? Well, it is about a young boy watching his elder sister being publicly executed for murder. To be more precise, she is being slowly drowned in a tar pit, while her family sits round trying to keep up both her spirits and theirs during the hours it takes her to sink. The story starts with the girl stepping out onto the tar, and ends with the boy trying to come to terms with family life, and life in his village, after what he has witnessed. Everything is about people. The girl is apologetic but defiant. We never learn whether she acted out of revenge or self-defense, but she has no regrets, and her mother does not blame her. The smug and self-righteous way in which the dead man's family oversees the execution suggests that we should have sympathy with the girl. Then there is the story of the girl's favorite aunt who is finally persuaded to forgive the shame that has been caused to her and come to say goodbye (or perhaps more accurately is persuaded that she will suffer more shame by boycotting the execution than by attending it). There is clearly a lot going on here, but to simply state what it is about just won't do, you have to read it.

I note in passing that *Black Juice* came out in Australia 2004, which is how come it has just won a World Fantasy Award. The US edition from Eos came out in early 2005, but "Singing My Sister Down" has been granted an eligibility extension for the Hugos. I'm certainly going to nominate it, and I hope you do too. But I suspect it is too far from traditional Hugo material to actually win. There are clues in the story that suggest it takes place in our future rather than in some primitive tribal culture, but that is the sole fantastical element to it. Besides, it is by no means warm and fuzzy, and does not feature any cats.

Not that Lanagan has anything against putting cats in stories. "Perpetual Light" is another story involving death. It is about a young woman attending the funeral of her grandmother, which as usual with Lanagan tells you almost nothing. It is perhaps the most Australian story in the book, with its images of driving vast distances through a wasteland that is, in part, suffering the sort of traumatic environmental collapse

that might lead to the Mad Max films. But it also hints at a very different, more disturbing world, as best exemplified by this short memory of the dead grandmother's cat.

Every night Taw brought in something different. Mostly they were broken inside, with the outer layers still bright and their remaining movements natural. But sometimes he lost his head and ate half, and brought us the rest, the light gone out of their eyes and the mechs and biosprings trailing.

That is pretty much all we are told. Perhaps all of the animals and birds are long dead, and have been replaced by simulacra to keep people happy. Perhaps this Australia is not ours at all. Lanagan leaves us to wonder.

One or two stories are more conventionally fantastical. "My Lord's Man" is about a noblewoman who absconds with a band of gypsies. "Rite of Spring" is about a young man performing a religious rite. "Earthy Uses" actually features "angels", although they are not the sort of angel any medieval person would recognize. But mostly the stories are fantastical in their strangeness, their not-here-ness.

Take "Sweet Pippit" for example. It is a story about a group of elephants. They live in captivity: a zoo, circus or theme park. One day an elephant goes crazy and a human dies. Their handler, whom they all love dearly, is made a scapegoat and loses his job. So the elephants decide to break out and go to find him. The entire story is told by one of the elephants whose understanding of humans, as if the case with all of them, is somewhat limited.

Then there is "Red Nose Day". It is the story about the aforementioned revolutionary. His job is to assassinate rich people. Except in his world all of the rich people dress as clowns. This makes them both more laughable and more scary, for as every child knows, the easiest way for a clown to get a laugh from a group of children is to pick on one kid who seems to be an outsider and persecute her. At first I couldn't quite get my head around the story; all these clowns where dropping dead from a sniper's bullet and no one seemed to notice. But then I asked myself, why am I worrying about that? This is a story in which rich people dress up as clowns. What makes you think it should make sense?

Another story I particularly liked was "The House of Many". Ostensibly it is about a young boy who escapes from a strict religious community and makes a success of his life. But actually it seems to be more about his mother. She was forced to take refuge in the community when her husband was killed and no one else would take her in. The patriarch treated her very badly (well, he treated everyone badly, as such people tend to, but her worse than most) and she got her revenge by living a far more holy life than he ever could, by showing up his arrogance, brutality and hypocrisy, which destroyed him in the end.

That just leaves two tales. "Wooden Bride" is, I think, a meditation on the utter foolishness of the whole bridal business. "Yowlinin", apparently another post-apocalyptic Australian tale, is the story of an outcast girl in a village community. I can't say much more than that without giving the whole thing away, although it is a fairly common motif.

OK, so *Black Juice* only contains ten stories, but there isn't a bad one amongst them. Given the amount of really bad short fiction I have read since I started *Emerald City*, I am surprised and

delighted to have found someone as good at the form as Margo Lanagan. I hope she produces more stories.

Black Juice – Margo Lanagan – Eos - hardcover

Kids Forever

By Cheryl Morgan

When I saw the short list for this year's Endeavour Award (http://www.osfci.org/endeavour/) I was impressed with the quality. There are a lot of good writers living in the Pacific Northwest, which is the official catchment area for the Award. I have read *Two Trains Running* by Lucius Shepard and *The Secrets of Jin-Shei* by Alma Alexander, and I knew them to be good books. Patricia McKillip was also on the short list. To be honest, I would not have predicted *The Child Goddess* by Louise Marley as the winner. But then at that time I hadn't read the book.

Having now done so, I can see why Marley's book won. It is a classic piece of science fiction of a particular type that traces its ancestry back to Ursula Le Guin. Something odd is found in the society on a far planet, and the heroes of the book solve the mystery of that oddness.

Some readers may find Marley's book a little dated, but I think a better conclusion is to recognize that much of the Pacific Northwest, at least along the coast, which is where most people live, is what Americans might call "blue state" country. It is inhabited by people who did not vote for Mr. Bush. Let me explain.

The set-up of the book involves a group of engineers from Extra-Solar Corporation (ESC) who have been sent to build a fuel refinery on a distant and, as far as anyone knows, uninhabited planet. Doing some routine survey work, they spot smoke coming from a small island and investigate. Given that they are engineers, and have no training in diplomacy or first contact, the results are inevitable: they are attacked by the natives, and kill one. Worse still, the "natives" are human children.

Now, had the engineers in question been employed by Haliburton they might simply have slaughtered the rest of the kids and covered the whole thing up. End of story. But in Marley's future even the bad guys have some sense of morals. They rescued (or kidnapped) a child they had injured, took her back to their base and nursed her to health. Which just goes to show that shooting everything in sight is not always the best policy, because once the camp doctor had got a good look at the girl he realized that she was potentially very valuable indeed.

Valuable in what way? Well, Marley didn't get round to telling readers that until page 125, but someone at Ace decided they would sell more books if they blew the whole plot in the back-cover blurb so there's no point in keeping it a secret. ESC might have found the remains of a lost human colony, but they have also found Neverland — the island of kids who never grow up.

The problem for Dr. Adetti is working out why this happens, so that he can patent and exploit the anti-aging mechanism. Unfortunately there's a reason why Adetti is the camp doctor for a bunch of construction engineers — he's not very bright. The sole smart thing that he does is tell his boss back on Earth. And Gretchen Boreson is both smart and utterly ruthless.

What Boreson needs is a convenient patsy who can be persuaded to help look after the captured child and absolve ESC of any wrongdoing in the eyes of the Earth public, while giving Adetti time to work on the problem. She fixes on the recently founded Catholic Order of Mary Magdalene, a group that has ambitions to be the female equivalents of the Jesuits but is currently still finding its feet. Boreson should have known that the female of the species is more deadly than the male. And if she had dug hard enough she might have discovered that this Mother Isabel Burke she has been offered is also a very close friend of Dr. Simon Edwards, the chief investigative pathologist of World Health, who is absolutely the last person Adetti wants peering over his shoulder.

Isabel and Simon, then, set to work unraveling the mystery of Oa, the girl who can't grow up. Their quest is given an added dimension through the twin threats to their relationship provided by Isabel's vows of celibacy and Simon's unhappy marriage. Her skills in anthropology combined with his in medicine eventually solve the puzzle and bring the story to a conclusion.

Books like this tend to center around the fact that the heroes never think to ask the right question until it is almost too late. If the reader manages to guess the truth early on then the heroes end up looking stupid. I thought Marley did pretty well, though I did read the book in a couple of days. Those of you who take longer over it may manage to work it out.

The best bit of the book, however, is the characterization of the villains. Dr. Adetti is a stupid but ambitious man who falls into villainy because he is way out of his depth. Boreson is single-mindedly focused on her own needs (in particular the fact that she is dying from a degenerative disease of the nervous system). They are very human villains, and all the more believable because of that.

If I have a criticism it is that not enough attention was paid to matters of religion. It becomes clear during the book that the un-aging children were regarded as demons by the original colonists and badly treated as a result. Isabel is also badly treated, by members of her own faith who disapprove of women priests. And then there is the whole celibacy thing, which Isabel just about manages to explain in her own terms but still doesn't make sense to anyone who isn't religious. I felt that more could have been done with all this.

Also Marley's Australian geography is a little suspect, but not many people will notice that. Of course having an Australian character called Foster is about on a par with having an American character called Ronald McDonald, but it is surprising how many people around the world believe the Fosters advertising.

In summary, *The Child Goddess* is a fine example of a well-loved style of SF that I suspect still has a large following. I can understand exactly why it won the Endeavour Award, and I recommend it to fans of anthropological SF everywhere.

The Child Goddess – Louise Marley – Ace – mass-market paperback

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Fiery Passions

By Cheryl Morgan

The new book by James Patrick Kelly, *Burn*, from Tachyon Publications, reads more like a novella than a novel. It is very short — a mere 178 pages — and it has none of the subplots and sidetracks

that form such an important part of the novel-writer's toolkit. Also it has the sort of sting in the tail that normally works well for shorter fiction but falls flat in a novel. I was not surprised, therefore, when Kelly told me it was only 39,000 words, and therefore definitely a novella by the Hugo rules. Short though it may be, however, it certainly does not lack for punch.

The world of Walden has not always been so known. The original settlers called it Morobe's Pea, because it was so small. They worked it hard, and when Jack Winter purchased the planet it was on the verge of environmental collapse. That suited Winter perfectly, because he wanted somewhere cheap where no one would mind his building a paradise.

The world according to Chairman Winter is to be a paen to simplicity. Settlers must agree to abandon their past lives and commit to a regime of agricultural life that forswears most technological aids, and absolutely forbids body enhancements. Walden is to be the last refuge in the universe for the purebred human being. Unfortunately, some of the original settlers, despite generous inducements, refuse to leave. These "pukpuks" insist that Walden is their home, they are staying, and they are not going to change their way of life. This proved very useful to the colonists when they were struggling to gain a foothold on the wasted world they had purchased, but as time went on they found that the pukpuks were a constant source of Temptation. The next generation, rather than following their parents in committing to Winter's Transcendent State, were asking to leave. Something had to be done.

So Winter and his people accelerated the terraforming. They brought in a type of tree that grew phenomenally quickly, and soon began to encroach upon the barren areas where the pukpuks lived. The pukupks, naturally, fought back. They burned the forest. For the most part they did not deliberately attack people, but a forest fire is not easy to control, and in any case the Waldenese did their best to put the fires out. People died. And the pukpuks died too, because some of them were so desperate to keep their homeland that they would immolate themselves during their fire-raising raids. They were, Chairman Winter pointed out, terrorist fanatics.

Prosper Gregory Leung is a successful farmer, a well-respected grower of apple trees. He lives in the aptly named Littleton, has married the sister of his best friend from childhood, and ought to be able to look forward to a long, happy, and very simple life. But reality has a habit of spoiling such dreams. To start with, his beloved Comfort appears to have been rather too aptly named. She's not cut out to be a farmer's wife. Bedsides, someone has to fight the fires. Spur, as he is known to his friends, and Vic, Comfort's brother, volunteer for the fire brigades. Which is where Spur discovers that Vic is a pukpuk sympathizer, and that neither of them are very good soldiers. When Spur next wakes up, Vic is dead, and Spur is in a very high tech hospital recovering from serious burns.

Suddenly having access to sophisticated communications gear, Spur tries to trace his ancestry, which is how he manages to make accidental contact with The High Gregory of Kenning (Gregory L'ung to his friends). What is clear to Spur is that he has mistakenly phoned a rather intelligent 10-year-old boy. What isn't clear to him is that this kid has sufficient political clout to demand to be taken to Walden to meet Spur in person so as to learn more about that sorry world. Everything goes downhill from there.

There are two important lessons to be found in the book. The first concerns the nature of isolated communities and human curiosity. As the High Gregory's guardian puts it:

"We've always wondered how isolation and ignorance can be suitable foundations for a human society. Do you really believe in simplicity, Spur, or do you just not know any better?"

The other lesson is all about wars and fires. A forest fire is a truly devastating event. It kills just about everything in its path: trees, other plants, animals, birds, even fish boiled in the streams. But when it is over, nature rebuilds. The forest takes life again, and after a few generations there is no sign of its passage. Wars are devastating too, but unlike the forest, humans remember. Indeed, they build memorials. In part, of course, those are to remember the dead, but they also serve to preserve hatred. In the wrong hands they can be used to ensure that the sins of the enemy are visited upon their sons, and on the sons of their sons, yea, even unto the utmost generation. Trees can't talk. Humans can, but sometimes it takes a lot to get them started. Then again, if you get the right group of humans, all it takes is a game of baseball.

All of which is to say that Kelly has produced a very thoughtful book in *Burn*, and one that I am sure you can see has particular relevance today.

Burn – James Patrick Kelly – Tachyon Publications – publisher's proof

Epic Tales

By Juliet E. McKenna

Never mind the width, feel the quality.

Multi-volume fat fantasy comes in for a fair amount of disparagement these days. Fantasy mathematics, where a trilogy ends up in seven parts, is easily mocked. There are too many series, say the critics, where a many-layered tale with a cast of umpteen becomes an incoherent sprawl. Personally I've always found it easier to find exceptions rather than examples that confirm the naysayers' opinions, but it can't be denied that there are considerable challenges for the author in this kind of writing.

An epic tale needs a big theme to justify its existence. These days, dark lords intent on taking over the world just because it is there simply won't do. The author must work harder than that from the outset. Having found an all-encompassing threat, its scale must warrant the broad canvas of a multi-faceted world. This must avoid the twin pitfalls of either lacking sufficient detail and thus interest, or collapsing under the stultifying weight of its own realism. Yet the big picture isn't enough. The story must be brought home to the readers by engaging their emotions with the lives and deaths of fully realized individuals. The danger here is that too many separate plotlines will hare off in different directions and everyone loses sight of the overall picture. When authors take pains to get all this right, they are inevitably going to be taking some considerable time over it. Early volumes may come out at regular intervals, but the publishing gaps tend to get longer and longer. The onus on the author to keep faith with loyal readers increases. The story must progress with new twists and concepts at the same time as offering sufficient reminders of what has gone before for those of us who just don't have time to go back and

reread earlier volumes before picking up the new one.

Kate Elliott's Crown of Stars series has dealt with a big theme from the outset; the exile of the Ashioi, akin to elves, from a world akin to medieval Europe. Those desperate to see Ashioi magic permanently removed from the human sphere come into conflict with those who come to realize this will end in cataclysm for all. This is a game for the highest stakes, and for the few who know just what's going on it must be played out amid all the complexities of mortal struggles for territory, political power and influence. This all takes place in a world both readily accessible and fascinating in its strangeness, drawing on myriad historical, archaeological and mythological sources. Kings rule in a recognizably feudal system where, for example, the roles of women and religion are wholly yet plausibly different. It is a world where the heavenly spheres of medieval astrology are real yet the nature of their magic is something original. From goblins and trolls to griffins and dragons, a host of mythological creatures live and breathe unencumbered by the dead weight of anyone else's storytelling because they are woven so coherently into the story.

Kate Elliott shows the same deftness in handling multiple plot lines. Key characters' paths run in parallel throughout the series, crossing and re-crossing in established and in novel combinations. Such meetings often throw new light on events elsewhere, offering hope or threatening danger while neatly ensuring the reader stays current with developments in everyone's lives. Successive volumes have brought in new characters who come and go or replace those whose course is run, constantly renewing the tale without unraveling it.

So much for the story so far. What of this sixth volume, *In the Ruins*? It is nigh on impossible to offer a coherent summary of a book this far into a series but I shall try for several reasons: to give a flavor of the richness of the Crown of Stars for those who haven't yet read the books; and to show those who have how Kate Elliott has kept faith with her readers and what they will be missing if they don't follow the story. I found this just as absorbing and satisfying a read as the previous volumes.

At the start of this book, all the people whose fates we've been following are widely scattered through the ruins of their world. Because the Ashioi have returned. Their land, once forcibly and physically cast into the outer spheres, has been brought home by the unstoppable cycle of the stars. This catastrophe happened at the end of the fifth volume and some readers might have anticipated this would be the final book, wrapping up loose ends and bringing the overall tale to a tidy conclusion. Kate Elliott shows her quality by confounding any such expectation. As she begins with the necessary, and by this stage considerable, recapping she does so through the eyes of the exiles who have returned. Thus the familiar becomes fresh and we see the life and culture of the Ashioi on their own terms. Before they were hostile and alien, either trapped as shades between worlds or exiled beyond the spheres. Those who were trapped, who have not aged, are determined to re-establish their dominance over mankind. Those who were exiled to cling to life in a barren land have suffered too much to risk such a fate again. Things are certainly not winding down to any kind of conclusion just yet.

Humankind is largely unaware of this threat. One of the strengths of this series

has always been the recognition of the impact that the high and mighty have on the poor and powerless, with their wars and alliances made in service of their own heedless ambitions. Now the ordinary people and their rulers alike are struggling under sunless skies with food in short supply. The physical consequences of the Ashioi land's return have been eruptions filling the sky with ash to blot out the sun, and tidal waves devastating shorelines all around the known world. The magical consequences have also been significant; many enchantments that have been used by all sides throughout the story are no longer working. Others, especially some used for vilest evil, are as potent as ever.

Amid this chaos, Prince Sanglant must establish himself as ruler in the place of his father Henry, now dead after being betrayed into demonic possession by the wife he had married in hopes of becoming Emperor. Sanglant's own wife, Liath, faces renewed hostility as his elevation brings her to unwelcome notice. With Sanglant half Ashioi and Liath half daimone, there are plenty of people fearful of such rulers. Duty means Sanglant cannot go in search of their lost daughter, Blessing, whose knack for finding trouble does not desert her. Fortunately, neither do her faithful servants. As Henry left in search of imperial glory and Sanglant went east to find some means of combating the Ashioi, Biscop Constance, Princess Theophanu and other nobles were left behind in the north. They must decide who to support, while other nobles such as Lady Sabella and Duke Conrad seize as much power as they can, heedless of the starving populace. In these trying times, heresy is increasingly challenging the authority of the church. The great powers are fortunate that minor nobles and the junior ranks of the religious like Ivar and Baldwin are not backward in plotting with faithful troops to launch audacious strikes against would-be tyrants.

In the south, Adleheid, who dreamed of being Henry's Empress, is left with her ailing daughters amid the utter devastation of her kingdom. Her only powerful allies are enchanters who survived the lethal magical backlash of the cataclysm. The previously disregarded sorceress Antonia looks for power as Holy Mother, setting herself against Sanglant. She thinks she has the whip hand over Hugh of Austra, who was a key mover in the attempts to permanently exile the Ashioi. What Antonia doesn't realize is that Hugh has found a way to use the changed nature of magic to his own advantage and his heart is as vile as his face is handsome. Hugh has no hesitation in using the innocent and helpless to further his own aims of devastating revenge on Liath. Rosvita and the other scholars once of Henrys court, whose knowledge could undo Hugh and answer so many questions, are still lost among the Arethousans. Alain, whose links to the rock-born Eika and whose knowledge of eons past could answer other puzzles, charts his own path through all this confusion.

I will admit to a degree of frustration when the story breaks off here. I really want to see everything brought to a resolution. Which is where the author's note at the start of the book is worth reading. Kate Elliott offers some admirably honest insights into the writing of this series and assures us that the seventh book will conclude it. This is most welcome in one sense; I can eagerly look forward to what promises to be a fitting climax. On the other hand, I know I'm not going to want to leave this world behind. This is one of the very few big fantasy series that I can see myself going back and re-reading from the beginning.

In the Ruins – Kate Elliott - Orbit – trade paperback

Nostalgia Rules The Land

By Karina Meerman

Grab your dictionaries. Stephen Donaldson revisits The Land in *Runes of the Earth*, part 1 of the Last Chronicles of Thomas Covenant.

When I was 18 and innocent even to Dutch standards, I moved to England for a few years. For love. Ah yes. What I found, among other things, was a country of cheap books. Books at home were expensive and lived mainly in libraries. Not so in the UK, where publishers rarely have to worry about translation costs and a relatively small local-language market. Very quickly I was on the slippery path of wanting to own fantasy. I still blame *Weaveworld* by Clive Barker for setting me in that direction.

The Old Chronicles

Things went from bad to worse when I discovered a small shop selling second-hand books. I bought my first trilogy, The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant by Stephen Donaldson. I stayed up nights, reading, eager to know what would happen to Covenant and The Land. I had never read anything like it. The hero was a miserable leper, who growled and cursed and whom I could not relate to at all. He made himself suffer a lot and took forever to understand how his own magic worked, but it was epic! The different people, the creatures, the Earth Power! I struggled with a lot of the words and never quite grasped the meaning of things, but I didn't care. I was hooked and went back for the Second Chronicles.

Now I'm twice the age I was then and have read and bought many trilogies since. Thanks to the Internet, I am no longer limited to Dutch libraries or musty second-hand shops. Those days are in the past and they should stay there to be fondly thought of, in brief moments of nostalgia. Like this one, brought on by Stephen Donaldson and his Last Chronicles of Thomas Covenant. Why people want to go back to what they left behind twenty years ago I don't know. The world should have changed since then. But not so for Donaldson.

The start of the story

The Second Chronicles finished with the death of Thomas Covenant, and with his beloved Linden Avery (The Chosen) becoming the hero of The Land. *The Runes of the Earth* (first of four books) picks up her story ten years later. She is now the head of a psychiatric hospital and one of her patients is the crazy Joan Covenant. She is Thomas' first wife, who left him because of his disease and took their son Roger with her. Roger turns up fairly early in the book and he is crazy too. (Or to quote Donaldson, he suffers from "incipient madness or prophecy in his eyes.") He kidnaps his mother, who went even crazier after Linden gave her back her white-gold wedding ring back a few months earlier. Roger also kidnaps Linden's son, Jeremiah. He is an autistic boy whom she rescued from the crazy people who killed Covenant in the previous trilogy. Yes, there's a lot of craziness going on.

In an attempt to rescue Jeremiah and Joan from Roger, Linden is shot, and an outburst of Roger's evil magic transports everyone to the Land. Linden arrives alone at Kevin's Watch where she witnesses some kind of cloud hanging

over The Land. She has a conversation with Lord Foul through the muddled mind of Joan, and learns a bit about his devious plans. A crazy man crawls up from underneath the fog, begging for protection. A migraine-like phenomenon in the sky called a caesure, causes Kevin's Watch to come crashing down. Linden uses white magic to protect herself and the man, who is called Anele. They survive the fall and Linden realises she is bound to him.

Bloodguard

Three thousand years have passed since Linden last visited. The curse from the previous Chronicles has not returned, but caesures roam The Land and destroy the structure of things. The cloud hanging over The Land cuts all people off from their magic senses. The Bloodguard of old are now the Masters of The Land and they despise all earth power. Anele is full of it, and that is why they hunt him. Linden teams up with a Haruchai called Stave and a Stonedownor called Liane. She has decided to protect Anele. She also discovers the Staff of Law has been gone for thousands of years and decides to go and find it, comforted by the reassurances of Thomas Covenant, who occasionally speaks through Anele. As does Lord Foul, which rather complicates matters. Linden also wants to find and rescue her son Jeremiah who is held by Roger, though she doesn't tell anyone about that.

During the course of the quest, which includes a long, long visit with the Ramen, all the old names are mentioned and a lot of the old creatures turn up. Fans may be comforted by this, but I felt I was being lectured. The Haruchai, the Ramen, the Ur-Viles, the Demondim, they're all there. One new element is the conflicted character of Esmer, son of the Haruchai, Cail, and a Dancer of the Sea. I thought he was quite intriguing, trying to find a balance between help and betrayal. Towards the end of the book, when Linden has firmly established her position of Ur-Lord, everyone gathers in Revelstone and we get a nice little surprise on the last page.

Dictionary

The Dutch edition is a big floppy book that makes reading easy. Nice size, spacious typeface, smooth paper. Other than that, I don't have a lot of positive things to say about this book. Take Donaldson's use of difficult words for one. I read the story in Dutch, but had to order an English copy to be able to write about it (and grab a dictionary to understand it). It's not just the litany of fantastic names and creatures, it is also the use of obscures words and illogical metaphors. It slows down the pace of the book, which is at a near standstill in places anyway.

Then there's the weird psychology of people. I don't know anyone who acts and thinks and feels they way these characters do. Like Linden. Why not tell people your son has been kidnapped? Why still grieving for Covenant as if it were yesterday? She seems rather unstable and insecure. One moment she is ready to rule the world, the next she is a whimpering wreck, paralysed by fear for her son. She wants to sleep, but doesn't; she wants to cry, but doesn't; she wants to make a decision, but isn't sure. For goodness sake, she's the managing director of a hospital, she's been through hell and back last time she was in The Land, she's saved the world, what's wrong with the woman?! In the first chapter she considers quickly driving away to get away from hassle at work, but she says to herself, "If she had wanted to be a woman who fled

whenever her job became difficult, she should have bought herself a more reliable vehicle." As if bravery prevents you from buying a new car? Geez.

Time

Another thing that bothers me is the way Donaldson handles time. Linden has been away for millennia and The Land has hardly developed since. The Ramen and Haruchai have flawless memory, yet nobody remembers earth lore. And nothing seems to have developed since Linden left. They still haven't invented the wheel, so to speak. Three thousand years have past and historical figures (like Brin and Cail, Sunder and Hollian) are remembered correctly, without anything being written down. A very successful game of Chinese whispers, if you ask me. Mind you, they talk so much about the past, maybe that is why it still so alive. Every single character from the previous books gets at least one reference. Not remembering who they were just meant I hadn't studied hard enough.

I felt as though Donaldson has taken all the elements of his previous books, mixed them up a bit, added a few new features, a thousand or so extra words and rearranged all that for a new generation of fantasy readers. No doubt fans will love this book and I must admit, for nostalgia's sake I'm curious how it will all develop. But what are the chances of Donaldson unfolding his story in less flowery prose?

Eerste Kroniek: De Runen van Aarde (*Last Chronicles: The Runes of the Earth*) - Stephen Donaldson (tr. Annemarie Lodewijk) - Luitingh Fantasy, 2005 – hardcover?

Subterranean Dreams

By Anne KG Murphy

I have not read the first issue of *Subterranean Magazine's* premiere volume but, judging by its second issue, this has the potential to be a quality magazine. *Subterranean* is a new quarterly produced by (appropriately enough) Subterranean Press (www.subterraneanpress.com), a small press founded ten years ago by Tim Holt and William Schafer, the latter of who is the Publisher/Editor of the magazine. *Subterranean* does not accept unsolicited submissions for the magazine, so it is no surprise that the majority of the material in this issue is by authors whose books they publish or are due to publish soon.

The first section of the issue is devoted to Caitlín R. Kiernan, with an interview of her by Anita W. Nicker in between Caitlín's stories "Bradbury Weather" and "Andromeda Among the Stones." I'm afraid I find that Kiernan's writing is not to my taste. Technically ept and imaginative in descriptions of characters, creatures, places, and moments, I find it lacking in compelling plot. In "Bradbury Weather" I also found myself wondering at the lack of explanation for why Mars appears to have a nearly completely female population. As a story about a woman driven to try to save her lover from a cult of priests and a quest likely to remove her humanity, it's interesting enough. In both that and "Andromeda Among the Stones" Kiernan addresses themes of transformation and expresses much of the inner concerns of the characters in dreams. In the latter story it's sometimes hard to tell which sequences are dreams and which are not, as the somewhat Lovecraftian narrative jumps around the timeline of a family that is struggling to contain some hideous yet indescribable doom that threatens humanity from the cavern

under their house by the sea and seems somehow related to the first world war. It's probably clear I didn't feel sure what Kiernan was getting at with that story. Despite my confusion both stories ended predictably. Like I said, not for me.

Charles Coleman Finlay's "The Slug Breeder's Daughter" is a standard bit about a girl who wants to escape from the tedium of her father's slug farm and trade slug herding for the wonders of travel with a merchant who told her ailing mother he'd take her away. In order to do so she must outwit the monster dog set to guard her by her besotted "father" and navigate the suspiciously intense interest of the goat-footed boy spirit across the creek. Wait; are some of these story components other than standard? Imaginative flurries of image and dialogue provide moments of delight and intrigue in an otherwise somewhat empty adventure story.

The reprint of Robert Silverberg's 1956 "Choke Chain" was the first case where the ending was at all surprising to me. A classic SF tale about a highly capable protagonist who dreams of making a difference in the solar system: he hears of trouble on Jupiter's largest moon and goes to Callisto to deal with it. Stiff as many of those old stories were, with cardboard cutout characters, it's nonetheless an enjoyable read.

The best story in the magazine follows: "Last Breath," by Joe Hill. This was such a satisfying little story I happily read it again right before writing this review. A couple and their son visit a Museum of Silence where, as the doctor who runs the place explains, they can listen to a collection of last breaths. The point isn't to hear the last thing someone said, but to not-hear the last thing they *didn't* say.

"Wait. There are all different kinds of silence. The silence in a seashell. The silence after a gunshot. His last breath is still in there. Your ears need time to acclimate. In a while you'll be able to make it out. His own particular final silence."

Some silences are more disturbing than others and not every visitor to this museum has a positive reaction. I can't promise everyone will like this slightly dark tale, but I found in it the delightfully rare piece where everything that is in there furthers the story and the ending is somehow exactly right. I will be watching for Hill's work in the future.

The issue's fiction is rounded out by the perfectly respectable "The World in a Box" by Charles de Lint and "Henry James, This One's For You" by Jack McDevitt. McDevitt's short story is a little disappointing for me in that it depicts a violent knee-jerk rejection of technological development, but for all that it is decently written. De Lint offers us an exercise in why omnipotence can be dangerous when lacking omniscience to guide it, set in a really pleasantly detailed environment of friendship and association. Something of a tautology, but an enjoyable philosophical excursion carried out by believable characters that were easy to like.

Subterranean #2 – Subterranean Press – magazine

Asimov's: Year in Review

By Anne KG Murphy

In November I started reading through the year's worth of *Asimov's* magazines. There are many stories I did not finish and/or did not care for; my purpose here is to highlight stories I particularly

liked and not to fix much attention on works I might have less positive things to say about.

"To me, the scientific point of view is completely satisfying, and it has been so long as I remember. Not once in this life have I ever been inclined to seek a rock and refuge elsewhere." -H.L. Mencken

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The jewel of the January 2005 issue of *Asimov's*, for me, was "Inside Job", by Connie Willis. To those well versed in Willis' work, the structure of the story will feel very familiar: a comic romance in which two people delve into a mystery and in the process discover each other. The particulars of the story feel appropriate to this year, however — a supposed spirit channeler appears to be channeling H.L. Mencken (a skeptic and debunker of charlatans best known for his coverage of the Scopes Monkey Trial), who proceeds to make unflattering remarks toward her and her profession. Is it real? Willis takes advantage of this vehicle to comment on the resurging tendency for "Boobus Americanus" to believe all kinds of scams and frauds while failing to value or apply scientific reasoning. She peppers the story with quotes from Mencken and supposes he would be disappointed in current affairs.

He couldn't believe there were still addlepated ignoramuses around who didn't believe in evolution, and what the hell had they been teaching in the schools all this time.

I bet he would too. Let's hope for more journalists who aim to tell it like it is. Enjoyable as it is inspiring, Willis' story should not disappoint her fans. It is also available as a chapbook from Subterranean Press should you wish to purchase an individually bound copy.

February's novelette "The 120 Hours of Sodom", by Jim Grimsley, is a very adult exploration of the emotions that stimulate us to feel truly alive. The protagonist, Figg, is turning 300, and his friend Sade, who has recently renamed himself after a certain Marquis, wishes to throw him a huge, high-profile party. This will not be just any party: it will reproduce orgiastic scenes and themes from the literary piece *The 120 Days of Sodom* over four days, culminating in the licensed suicide of Cherry, a young woman from the Reeks, one of the Third Tier areas crammed with people who mostly have no hope of escape. Cherry's dream is to purchase the escape of her brother with her death. She and Figg connect over the course of plan-making and the party in a way that seems all too rare in post-Transit society. That connection is threatened in an unexpected way by Sade's plans, and Figg finds himself aroused to a strength of emotion he'd despaired of ever feeling again.

This is a story that *earns Asimov's* new warning that it contains scenes some people may find disturbing, but I thought the narration did a perfect job of reflecting the jaded detachment of the protagonist, and I was delighted by many imaginative constructs. Figg has a cybernetic spider that lives on him and acts as bodyguard and pleasure stimulator in a nicely twisted relationship that, as he observes, is not that distant from the pairing of the bloom slave in the Marmigon restaurant and the plant that is slowly consuming her. Penelope feeds on Figg even as she protects him and is as much of a companion to him as Sade. This is a more mature story than the sexual themes alone suggest and I commend

Grimsley for what he accomplished with it.

In the March *Asimov's* I appreciated David D. Levine's "Tk'tk'tk", about a salesman struggling to stay afloat on an alien planet where the culture spins him so off-balance he finds himself re-orienting. Do you ever find out what "Tk'tk'tk" means? Read it and you may see; sometimes you have to let go of your goals in order to accomplish them.

Asimov's was a double issue for April/May. For all that, the only story that caught my attention and rewarded it was "California King", by Michael Jasper and Greg van Eekhout. That was an accomplishment because it is an example of what some call the New Weird — a Tim Powers-style hallucinatory fantasy of geographically resident magic and a power struggle between generations in a bleak, possibly future landscape — which isn't one of my favorite sub-genres. For what it is, it's done well. Since I didn't expect it to be Deeply Meaningful, my only issue with it is the ending, where it shifts narrators without a noticeably good reason; clearly the authors were playing with the structure of what roles the narrators have in the story, but I found it a bit jarring. Still, if you like the New Weird, you may enjoy this for its imagery and characters. The cast members are few, but colorful.

In June, Kage Baker presents "Bad Machine", a story about how Alec Checkerfield's AI "Playfriend" attempts to guide and protect the lad as he discovers (and takes good advantage of) his ability to woo young society women into activities his elders would investigate and punish. Grown bold and wily, the pirate Captain AI (a character whose nature was defined when his master was but five) acts outside the bounds of society yet takes full advantage of being integrated into society's infrastructure. Slightly black comedy as all good pirate stories are, this novelette leaves the reader eager for more about Alec and why he is curiously long in the tooth and "endowed" with abilities that give the ladies no end of pleasure.

In the same issue, James Van Pelt takes us into the truck of "The Ice Cream Man" in a story about both crossing and preserving borders in a society torn apart by mutation and scarce resources. For its creativity and humanity I could see this one making the Hugo ballot. (No really, it's about an ice cream man. The title is straightforward. Now go read it and think about the tranquility and continuity suggested by the ice cream bell's return.)

James Patrick Kelly also had a good story in the June issue. His novella "The Edge of Nowhere" is one where it's all set up and laid out in the wonderful first paragraph.

Lorraine Carraway scowled at the dogs through the plate glass window of the Casa de la Laughing Cookie and Very Memorial Library. The dogs squatted in a row next to the book drop, acting as if they owned the sidewalk. There were three of them, grand in their bowler hats and paisley vests and bow ties. They were like no dogs Rain had ever seen before. One of them wore a gold watch on its collar, which was pure affectation since it couldn't possibly see the dial. Bad dogs, she was certain of that, recreated out of rust and dead tires and old Coke bottles by the cognisphere and then dispatched to Nowhere to spy on the real people and cause at least three different kinds of trouble.

What follows is in part about imagination itself; Kelly does an excellent job of drawing this small town called Nowhere and its inhabitants, who

transcend its limitations in their own ways.

Good stories come in waves and I found just about every story in this issue interesting. If you're into Third World Cyberpunk, check out Ian McDonald's "The Little Goddess" too.

"The Real Deal", by Peter Friend, was my favorite story in the July issue. The ending is a little weak given the rest of it, but Friend presents a well-realized relationship between the physically variable and slightly mysterious "Picasso" aliens and the "Monkeys" who accompany them on their collecting explorations. Jayk is an Earth-born assistant to five-legged Flegg. They meet Flegg's three fiancées and their two humans on an Artifact that the alien quartet is hoping will make their fortune. While the Picassos dance, the humans compare notes on their employers; an unexpected find stands to change all of their lives, and their understanding of one another.

Michael Swanwick's short fiction, which has already won him many Hugos, hardly needs more promotion, but I have to admit the pheromonally-implemented deities and genetically modified nymphs, satyrs and other characters in "Girls and Boys, Come Out to Play" present an interesting and fun if stereotypical milieu. If you're into male masturbatory science fiction, replete with eager and nubile young women and an insane ~~sorceress~~ female scientist, by all means check it out. The symbolic importance of the wicked witch's sexual inaccessibility in her genetically-ensured childlike body (with its companion young brain, still able to absorb knowledge at a rapid pace) is something I will let the reader ponder on his or her own.

I rather prefer the emotional sensitivity of Kristine Katherine Rusch's admittedly saccharine "Killing Time", about an old woman's decision whether to retire into a replay of a single decade of her younger years or to stay in the present day and see what may lie ahead. Staying active in life (or rediscovering a reason to do so) is also the theme of Samantha Ling's "Waking Chang-Er", an "and then what happened?" continuation of a classic Chinese folktale about the immortal woman in the Moon Palace, told by her jade rabbit companion.

August was another issue dense with quality reading, starting with the second story in it, "Softly Spoke the Gabbleduck", by Neal Asher. Though there are no editorial warnings at the beginning, some may find the frankness of the narration and the perversions of a couple of the characters disturbing, perversions like incest, and killing sentient life forms. Sentient life forms whose loss will not go unnoticed in the jungle. The cruel nastiness of the bad guys is matched by the sturdy determination of their guide as he tries to pull himself and another employee through a bad situation gone horribly worse. The descriptiveness with which the creatures and struggles are depicted in this literal cliffhanger of an adventure gives the admittedly much-revisited theme of Mysterious Alien Justice a good run for the money.

Catherine Wells' "Point of Origin" is about another character who knows what it's like to face mortal danger. Ozzie works for the Department of Wildland Resources (DWR, pronounced "Doo-Wer"). The only survivor of a recent fire, Ozzie is summoned to investigate a similar fire by a grizzled Forestry Service veteran. She tells him it was arson and that she believes she's seen the perpetrator's work before. Initially suspecting she's wasting his time, he starts to appreciate how much use she hopes to make of the DWR-level

toys he has access to, like satellite surveillance and image pattern recognition. Unbeknownst to him, she is planning to draw on a more personal aspect of his position and experience. Struggling to deal with flashbacks to his last fire, Ozzie must overcome emotions and apply all the resources at his disposal if he hopes to see justice applied. This is near-future science fiction that extrapolates from current technology very effectively in support of an engagingly personal conflict.

Tim Pratt's story "Bottom Feeding" is also very personal, but harder to describe. Pratt riffs on an ancient story (really, there must be many) about a fish that's old and full of knowledge that will be imparted to the person who catches and eats the fish. The fish in this story is a huge and very odd catfish, being pursued by a man who's suddenly lost his brother and returned to his hometown in the absence of any other direction to go in. He rents a house and, sorting through his brother's leftover things, finds a fishing rod and remembers the tranquility of going fishing. Thus, seeking peace, he finds action and confrontation, not only with the fish but also with what he's lost in life.

The last impressive story in the August issue is "The Summer of the Seven", by Paul Melko. Think you know what pod people are? Think again. Melko composes a world in which many humans have evolved off-planet in a singularity-style jump, and the majority of those left behind are pods — individuals who are actually a combination of multiple siblings, genetically engineered with the ability to communicate most intimately (almost telepathically) through coded pheromones. Enjoying a summer of chores and biological experiments on a family farm, a teenage sextet has to deal with their own jealousy and confusion when a septet — a larger pod than ever before achieved — joins them at the farm and threatens to compete with them in the science contest. Many themes of adolescence and responsibility are explored in this marvelously imagined story. Pheromonal messaging may be a popular topic in SF for a while, but I expect Melko's work to hold its own in an expanding field.

I feel I should also give a nod to Sandra Lindow, whose poem "An Alternate Universe Alphabet" was one of only two that I liked all year, the other being "Velocity", by Tracina Jackson-Adams, also from the August issue. And Liz William's spiritual sojourn, "A Shadow over the Land", is nearly poetry itself, so I'll give it a nod here as well.

September was comparatively slim pickings for my taste. "Second Person, Present Tense" by Daryl Gregory, was certainly interesting, especially for the "parliament and the queen" metaphor for the brain and the conscious mind. (Since the body may follow commands such as "move your hand" before the conscious mind has issued them, this is comparable to parliament's deciding something should be law, and the queen's declaration of the law that follows. The conscious mind is thus a titular head.) But I'm not sure I would say I enjoyed the larger story. Similarly with William Barton's alternate history "Harvest Moon". Both stories are about losses that are side effects of risks willingly taken. In the first a girl has lost her memory by overdosing on a drug. In the second a man has lost years and certain aspects of his family due to an unexpected extension of his time on the moon when the space program is struggling after its initial successes. I think Barton underestimates the resource issues caused by an unplanned-for extended stay on the moon, but other

aspects of the story are well done, if bleak.

October/November is another double issue, with a ghastly cover by John Allemand. The cover is for "Nightmare", by M. Bennardo, a story about a man who doesn't want to accompany his kids to see the exhibits in a sort of ghost zoo, full of poltergeists and banshees and such. Well, based on the cover, I didn't want to enter this magazine, either, but when I did I was rewarded with Ted Kosmatka's short story "The God Engine", about variations in an experiment to recreate a brilliant scientist who never finished his most important work. The variations all start as little boys, and the person who has helped them all grow and learn, and seen them all fail and burn out in their own bright ways, now tells the stories of them to the youngest, who will also be the last. This is a fabulous and touching story by a geneticist who knows that anyone who believes "what you see is what you get" has a lot to learn about genetics.

In that same issue, "Overlay", by Jack Skillingstead, is also worth a read. It's about a curious sort of timesharing, as the intro says; we follow a man who is trying to come to grips with how he's being used by a "patron" who "rides" his body while he's asleep. What, if anything, do the results of the other man's activity have to do with him, and is there something he should do about it? A noir sort of story, with an old-fashioned shutters-and cigarette-smoke detective story kind of feel.

And that brings us to December. Liz Williams returns with another inward-looking piece, "Ikyryoh", about a kappa, a guardian of children, who struggles to understand her new charge. The troubled little girl was brought to her from the goddess' palace, but the tiger-woman who delivered her would not explain her origin, saying only that she is *ikyryoh.* She eventually learns of the technique that created the child, a clone to carry the darkest elements of someone else's self. Then the kappa has to decide if she will take on the burden of dealing with the child's cruelties and fits, and why.

Chris Becker's "The Perimeter" explores how the world might look if most people's minds ran around a digital overlay on a city nearly empty of real life. A young man follows a mysteriously high-res hart through the city, leading to disturbing revelations about himself and his world. Awkward in its representations of class and economy in a digital system where one can imagine no reason for false resource scarcity, the interaction between the digital youth and some actual people makes this an interesting picture of an improbable future path.

The story I would like to leave you with is James Maxey's "To the East, a Bright Star", and not just because the title is appropriate to the season. Even more appropriately, the story is about an ending — the end of all life that isn't well-bunkered, anticipated for years by our man Tony, who has carefully selected where he's going to sit to watch the deadly comet's approach. He has hoarded a dose of the perfect drug, he's narrowed his music options down to a few selections, and when the day comes the sky is clear, just as he hoped it would be. He flips down into his boat (he was raised a circus acrobat, and the city's been flooded since the earthquakes) and makes his way through the nearly empty city toward his chosen perch, but not all goes as planned. At the last minute, he has to rescue a young woman who has been left behind.

Tony opened the door to the roof. The sky was black and silver, with a thin sliver of

moon. A dozen comets streamed from the direction of the vanished sun. And to the east, a bright star, brighter than the moon, with a halo filling half the sky.

"Wow,"" he said.

He looked back. Esmerelda was halfway up the stairs, looking at him.

"Come on," he said. "You don't want to miss this, do you? This is the kind of sky I dreamed about as a kid. A sky full of mysteries and wonders."

All of us have only a limited time here. Maxey reminds us that the wonder of life is simply *experiencing* it, eyes wide open. Eternities can be hidden between seconds. You can't always be in control; something will inevitably be interrupted, left unfinished. Lessons from walking the high wire are brought to bear throughout this story, and I thank Maxey for the reminder that sometimes you just have to relax into the fall.

Once you have read all the stories that interest you from this year's *Asimov's*, take the 2005 Reader's Award poll at http://www.asimovs.com/asimovreaders_2005.shtml. You have until February 1st.

Asimov's Science Fiction, January-December, 2005 – Sheila Williams (ed.) - Dell Magazines - digest magazines

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Comics Come to Brighton

By Stuart Carter

Being a review of Brighton Comics Expo 2005, which took place in the Brighton Metropole Hotel, Brighton, on November 19th-20th.

Dez Skinn, the brains behind industry magazine, *Comics International*, had an idea for a Brighton Comics Expo — sort of like a 'Second Foundation' to Bristol's 'First', at the opposite end of the year and nearly the other side of the country. A very impressive event it looked too, both inside and out. With a guest list boasting a remarkable array of talent, and something of a genuine coup in attracting Ultimate writer Mark Millar, as well as Furry Freak Brothers' creator Gilbert Shelton, 'Watchman' Dave Gibbons, industry godfather Sydney Jordan and Harry 'needs no introduction here' Harrison, not to mention over a hundred other comics names, this two-day event appeared to have something for everyone. Add to that a very fine venue in the seafront Brighton Metropole (venue of the 1987 Worldcon and now part of the Hilton group) during a beautiful sunny winter weekend and most people would surely have to agree that you'd be hard-pressed *not to* enjoy the weekend!

One of the nicest things about the event was the lack of any kind of discernible 'backstage'. I'd been in the convention for about three minutes when I spotted Mark Millar just hanging about chatting happily with ordinary mortal folk. And so it was for the rest of the convention — guests mingling easily with fans, and vice versa, and a convivial atmosphere throughout. The occasional Dalek would wheel about ordering you to take its photo, and all your favorite artists and writers seemed more than happy to answer questions, sign books and draw for you.

The ground floor of the convention area was kept primarily for sales folk, and there was a lot good stuff, new and old, single issue and collected edition, ready to trap the unwary possessor of a valid credit card. This was aside from the 'goody bag' that came with the price of entrance, including a helpful souvenir program, thinly disguised Forbidden Planet catalogue, two free issues of

2000AD (but of course!), and various other pieces of reading matter.

There was a varied schedule of events, too: Dave Gibbons chatting with Dez Skinn was an early highlight, both on good form, bouncing mutual anecdotes off each other. Sydney Jordan and Harry Harrison similarly had a number of tales to tell about life in the comics biz over the years, and waffled only the very tiniest little bit. My personal favorite appearance of the expo was by SF writer and new *Dr Who* scriptwriter, Paul Cornell, who gave a live 'writers' commentary' over the "Father's Day" episode from the last series — a humorous and genuinely fascinating insight into the making of this particular episode, and into the series in general. Even if you weren't a *Who* fan, this was excellent stuff. [This is quite possibly the same presentation that Paul gave at Worldcon, in which case it is great to see it being given to a different audience at the other end of the country – Cheryl]

Saturday evening saw a preview of UK micro-budget fantasy movie, *Soul Searcher*, as well as a showing of *The Mindscape of Alan Moore*. The former wasn't the best film I've ever seen, but considering it had no major backing and was made for such a tiny amount of money it's a goddamn masterpiece. I've seen a couple of no-budget films being made and I happen to know that it's a lot harder than it looks — go and see *Soul Searcher* if you can. As for the latter, well, come on — it's a film about Alan Moore, possibly the least-boring man on the planet. I actually saw this earlier in the year and was quite touched by it then. Moore's ability to make mad ideas seem quite sensible (or is it the other way round…?) is astonishing. Make *sure* you see this valuable record of the thoughts of a real wizard.

Come Sunday I was up bright and early to catch Rich Johnston's Live-ing In The Gutters, a live (obviously) edition of his weekly online gossip column, "Lying In The Gutter" (http://www.comicbookresources.com/columns/index.cgi?column=litg), and jolly pleased I was too, since quite a few chuckles were to be had — if no startling revelations. Graham Kibble-White's following chat with UK industry stalwarts John M. Burns and Bill Titcombe had fewer chuckles but more in the way of revelations about how British comics used to be made; and whilst there was nothing *too* startling I was intrigued enough to hang around until Mark Millar's Q&A began in the other hall. Millar seems like a lovely chap, a great lover and respecter of the medium he works within, but he, and many of the questioners, made me feel like a fraud for calling myself a comics fan, since I clearly knew next to nothing about comics in comparison to them (something my wife remains obscurely pleased about).

What else can I tell you? The Brighton Comics Expo was, to my mind, a great success — I hope Dez Skinn concurs, as it would be nice to do it again in 2006…

Think Like a Floating Transparent Pyramid

By Peter Wong

In *Lint*, Steve Aylett's "biography" of writer Jeff Lint, Aylett recounted Lint's aborted 1960's *Star Trek* script "The Encroaching Threat." The titular threat was the encroachment of a crazy and creative universe full of original ideas on the *Enterprise*'s gray bubble of unoriginality and blandness.

Lint's depiction of the *Enterprise* could just as easily describe much of comics

science fiction. That genre generally seems unable to devise ideas that haven't already been test-marketed in Hollywood films or violent video games. Warren Ellis' *Orbiter*, Alan Moore's *The League Of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, and Grant Morrison's *We3* are intelligent exceptions in a field dominated by sixth-rate *Star Wars* imitators.

In addition there is Matt Howarth's series *Keif Llama – Xenotech*. It may be set in outer space, but the series' heroine relies on her mental adaptability and dedication to finding long-term solutions to meet the problems thrown at her.

The series is set in a galaxy teeming with very non-humanoid civilizations. It may be a wonderland for fans of Hal Clement's science fiction. Yet the galaxy's diversity of life means nothing if contact cannot be established between very different species. The ubiquity of faster-than-light starship drives makes possible physical contact between divergent species. The communication problem is solved thanks to the Beal Vocoder Unit (a.k.a. a xeno-coder), whose models range in sophistication from translating simple human sensory functions to handling the complexities of communication via quantum motion.

The tricky part is establishing cultural contact. Very few beings can understand another species' thinking process without succumbing to frustration or incomprehension. The few gifted with this special ability are known as xenotechs. Titular heroine Keif Llama (pronounced "keef yamma") is a female xenotech who works for Confed, a.k.a. the galactic government, on problem-solving missions. But Llama's desire to find fair solutions to her tasks often clashes with both other beings' personal agendas and Confed's own desire for quick fix answers.

"Obscured By Clouds" takes Llama to the gas giant Vtaccek, home to Feed-U's nutrient cloud farming operation. Regularly emitted and powerful wide-band X-ray blasts have loused up Feed-U's spacelane guidance circuitry, leading to frequent spaceship collisions and the serious gumming-up of the company's business. The origin of these X-ray blasts is a number of towering objects known as the Brokk. These objects remind one of Sauron's tower from Peter Jackson's *Lord Of The Rings* adaptation.

Llama's official job is to stop these intense X-ray blasts. However, completing that job soon requires her to determine whether the Brokk are actually living creatures. The xenotech gets hit with several theories answering that question. Director Ose, Feed-U's Nute-Farm director, believes the Brokk are not alive. But the director's judgment could be tainted by the need to protect Feed-U's interests. Dr. Leinoh, Feed-U's head of R & D, is convinced the Brokk are a new life form that deserves the chance to evolve. The scientist will attack doubters as genocidal scum. Ferrar Fungus, an ex-Feed-U employee who became a local priest, feels the Brokk are legendary creatures of spectacular evil known as the Brokkvalvadiccives. But that pronouncement comes from a being whose religious pronouncements seem nonsensical. To Llama, none of these theories explain why the Brokk awoke from hibernation or fail to display life signs.

The young xenotech makes an engaging futuristic civil servant. She has not become so jaded that she can't find joy in visiting her first gas giant. But her openness to encountering different alien species does not mean checking her skepticism at the door. Dr. Leinoh's theory about the Brokk causes her to roll her eyes or regard the scientist with a "you're wasting my time" glare.

Llama's dedication to her work shows the xenotech's lineage comes from the problem solving heroes who frequently starred in John W. Campbell era *Astounding Science Fiction* stories. Classic science fiction readers might be put off by how this tale shows Llama to constantly be a couple of figurative steps behind the aliens. Yet Howarth demonstrates that the xenotech's problem is not a slowness of wit but a constant struggle to distinguish between useful information and claptrap.

One of this series' joys is seeing what non-humanoid aliens Howarth creates. Director Ose resembles a transparent floating pyramid. Dr. Leinoh looks like a rolling cocktail glass with two small arms plus two wafers jutting out from its rim. Yet the most impressive alien in this story is casually introduced.

The series' other visual joy comes from seeing how Howarth's insane amount of artistic detail creates stunning visual effects. The hundreds of line segments needed to render an alien condo-pod gives the place the palpable texture of a cave with weathered ledges. Llama's first sighting of a Brokk is displayed in a panel which suggests a dead tree on a mossy hill surrounded by half a dozen dancing clouds.

Llama's bug-eyed looks and jaded grimaces may be mistaken for silent-film actor over-expressiveness. Her reactions merely show that she can still be surprised by what the universe throws at her, but not to the point that she is paralyzed into inaction.

Keif Llama – Xenotech may be a far cry from Keith Laumer's Retief series. Yet Llama's engaging blend of seriousness and playfulness and a philosophy of emphasizing problem-solving over politics shows the two series may not be so ideologically distant.

Keif Llama – Xenotech Vol. 2 No. 1 - Matt Howarth (script and art) - Aeon Comics - comic

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What is a Dealer?

By Marion van der Voort

The majority of dealers are primarily fans. People who enjoy what they sell and encourage others to find enjoyment in it, and they manage this efficiently enough to make a living at it.

This does not apply to every dealer, of course, in particular those at one-day fairs and comic shows. In several cases where the police have investigated a regular show, because of the sale of counterfeit or banned material, and they have brought the Customs and Excise, Inland Revenue and DSS with them, the majority of dealers (73 out of 75 in one case) have been found to be officially out of work, unregistered for VAT and not declaring any income to the Inland Revenue. We all know people who regard their customers as mugs, and cheat them as a matter of course, who are only interested in being known as big frogs in little tiny ponds, who lay the law down about those people who are worth knowing, and those who aren't, who suck up to the famous and who sneer at the little-known, regardless of talent or pleasantness, who draw unemployment money and make money on the side without ever paying commercial rates or taxes, even income tax.

Forget them, they usually come and go. The out and out dealer has usually started off in a small way, buying and selling to make room for more things they want to buy, finding new sources of supplies to fund their hobby, and maybe then paying their expenses at a

convention and having more money to buy more goods, and all the time learning. Maybe they start on a market stall, then finally a shop, or go online, but generally they have hit on a way of life they enjoy, taking the risks of being their own boss, as well as the benefits of not having a fool in charge, and become a fully fledged dealer — of books, CDs, jewelry, costumes, models, comics, weapons, anything — and although none of them get rich, they enjoy their life.

Book dealers usually read a good percentage of the books they buy and, with luck, enjoy reading them. They enjoy conventions, not just for the money they make, if any, but because they meet old friends and make new ones. They work long hours, have few holidays, always have someone asking for something to get there tomorrow, have customers who get ten times the salary they earn refer to them as "dirty dealers", and accuse them of making money out of innocent fans, are told often that they made a killing at some convention or other when they barely covered expenses.

If one looks at conventions from the business point of view, the cost for a dealer is very high. Consider an Eastercon. If the dealer runs a shop at least one person must be paid for covering the shop, and in the case of a biggish town two people, at least one of them a male. Usual cost for Easter Thursday and Saturday about £200. Petrol to travel, say to Hinckley from either London or Scotland, if you have a car of your own, £100+. Sending stock that won't fit in the car, and sending back unsold stock, £140. Hiring a van for the weekend otherwise £250. Registration fees £100 for dealer and wife. Double room for four days £240. Food and drink for four days for two people, £40.00. Four tables at £30 if lucky, £120. Total at least £780. To cover these costs one must sell at least £2,500, say perhaps 125 new hardbacks or 400 paperbacks. With second hand books you must sell more. Perhaps 500 fans come in the dealers' room, where there are a dozen or so dealers.

At the last Worldcon in Glasgow we needed to take £4,000 to break even. Our friend next door, who sold jewelry, needed only £2,000 to break even. This does not account for the time working at the convention, nor the time taken before to order books for authors coming, to pack them, and then unpack them on getting home. None of that is charged up to the business because it usually takes place in spare time. In business hours the dealers are busy taking orders, ordering and packing stock and ordering ahead for the weeks after the convention. We spent two hours a night for three months before the Worldcon checking on the authors coming, ordering their books, and sorting them in order, and just plain packing them into boxes, and we are lucky enough to have space in our home where we can store 90+ boxes.

It is fairly easy to understand why the big shops are not interested in coming. The wages for staff would be prohibitive.

Dealers are expected to pay full registration fees for a convention, plus fees for dealers' tables, and never see any of the program. They are expected to bring books for authors attending, many of whom don't bother to come to the book room to sign their own books, and are expected to bring their entire stock and fit it on three or four tables, changing it every night so people have plenty to look at.

They are expected to move their own stock from outside the hotel to the book room without help, often up a couple of flights of stairs, not to park in other

visitors' way, and sometimes to park at the back of the hotel because the hotel does not want your van cluttering up the forecourt, despite the fact that the book room is right at the front of the hotel. And half the time the trolleys used by the hotel do not fit in the lift, if the lift is working.

We could tell you horror stories. If there is a little ring of dealers laughing in the corner of the bar that is what we are doing: recalling the hotels where books had to be carried up three flights of stairs; where the lift got stuck as dealers were packing up; the signing where it poured with rain and nobody came; the GoH who was so drunk he had to be carried up the stairs before his speech; the security men who insisted on every box being opened; the book room without tables or chairs, where it turned out that the room was part of the official fire escape route and the doors could not be bolted throughout the night; the book room where a dealer could open the door with a credit card quicker than the manager could open it with a key.

The average dealer is a mug. Yes, we know that. The plus side is the customer from the other side of the world that you haven't seen for ten years, rushing up to say hello, and introducing two more customers; the new writer that thanks you for introducing them to a publisher or agent; the housebound customer who rings you up to say that their latest parcel was enough to cheer up their whole day; the charity convention who would like you to provide a bookstall, knowing that you will not make money, but asking you as a friend to give your time; the friend you make there who is still your friend ten years later; the fan who loves the book you sold her and asks for more by the same author. And you get to read the latest books by your favorite authors.

This year Ken Slater of Fantast (Medway) Limited semi-retires at the age of 87, having started his business while still part of the British Army of the Rhine to supply SF and fantasy to the fans that were out there with no facilities for getting books. But he's still dealing, sending out books and magazines to customers and friends, many of whom he's dealt with for over 55 years, he is the epitome of a dealer.

By the way, he is still dealing as Operation Fantast.

[Marion and her husband, Richard, run At the Sign of the Dragon (http://www.atthesignofthedragon.co.uk/) and are regular attendees at British conventions – Cheryl]

School for Monsters

By Cheryl Morgan

Some readers may remember that I was less than impressed with John C. Wright's science fiction series, The Golden Age. However, my concerns about the books were primarily political rather than literary, and Mr. Wright responded to my criticisms with such good grace that I really wanted to find some of his work I could be enthusiastic about. Recently he has taken to writing "fantasy" (and I use those quotes advisedly). His most recent book, *Orphans of Chaos*, has been well received in various quarters, and his editor, David Hartwell, assured me that it was free of Libertarian politics, so I gave it a read.

You can tell from the cover that something odd is happening. It features a young woman wearing a leather flying helmet and goggles, and clutching something that might be a crystal ball or

some sort of bizarre quantum device. In the background there is an ancient Greek warship. The cover might say "a fantasy novel", but somehow I didn't think I was in for another dose of elves.

What I got instead was something approaching a cross between the X-Men and Dan Simmons' *Olympos*. The book is set in an exclusive school in South Wales. There are just five pupils: Victor, who is cool and deliberate; Colin, forever larking about and causing trouble; Quentin, thoughtful and mysterious; Vanity, merry and flirtatious; and our narrator, Amelia, who is something of a tomboy. They are, to a certain extent, caricatures, because they are by no means normal children.

I twisted my hips into the fourth dimension to bring another aspect of my legs into this continuum. Centaurish, I now looked like a sleek silver doe from the waist down. I shifted the aspect of my back, so that my wings, made of white light and surrounded by little echoes of music, dipped into this dimensional plane, also.

Then again, the staff are not normal either. The Headmaster, Mr. Boggin, seems ordinary enough, except that he can't be if the rest of the staff are afraid of him. He seems perfectly able to cow the witchy old Mrs. Wren, and Dr. Fell, who acts like he'd rather be dissecting the children than teaching them. Then again, there is the incredibly beautiful music teacher, Miss Daw, or the loathsome groundsman, Mr. Glum, who is always leering hungrily at the girls.

If you are planning to read this book, it would be helpful to have a dictionary of classical mythology to hand. Like Simmons, Wright is playing with the Olympians, but to keep the reader guessing he uses their variety of names to the full. And I don't mean just swapping between Greek and Latin. Aphrodite, for example, is generally referred to as "Lady Cyprian", the origins of which I'm sure you can all work out.

More to the point, while Simmons' "gods" were just a bunch of bored post-humans playing at being Olympians, Wright's gods are the real thing. Except that they are still functioning in 21st Century Britain. This means that they have to come to terms with both modern science and with more recent developments in religion. The former Wright copes with by assuming that the Olympians always knew this stuff, and at least in some paradigms their divine powers can be understood scientifically. Hesphaetus, for example, is very happy with such a view. As for the latter, Wright has developed his own theology, which I don't want to go in here because it is by no means clear where he is going with it. Suffice it to say that one of the characters is a siren who is a devout Christian.

The book is, of course, the first part of a series, so there is potential for lots of development. And book one is primarily introduction. We learn about the children, who they really are, and why their "school" is more of a prison than an educational establishment. There's a lot going on amongst the Olympians, and sometimes it seems that the only reason the kids are still alive is because to kill them would upset a delicate political balance. Naturally the kids don't like this much, and are keen to escape.

There are a few irritations with the book. As with so many novels written by Americans but set in the UK, things are not quite right. Wright does the usual thing of writing "England" when he means "Britain", and he seems to think that everywhere west of Bristol is part of Cornwall. British kids are unlikely to use the word "plaid", or even know what it

means. But Wright does have some inkling of what Britons might regard as a bad person:

And what about me? What if Phaethusa was, I don't know, a murderess or an adulteress or an environmentalist or something? Someone who couldn't do math, or who liked Tony Blair?

The other thing that got to me was that Wright seems to have found his ideas about how women think by reading romance novels, in particular that type of novel in which the heroine is longing to be Dominated by a Strong Man. He does actually provide a rationale for why Amelia, despite her independent, tom-boy attitude, gets turned on by the thought of being tied up and brutalized, but I can't help but think that it was also a good excuse for writing a spanking scene. If that annoys you, just remember that it could be much worse. At least Wright is not one of those horror writers who is always producing scenes in which women get tortured and killed.

A small note to Tor's proofreaders too. The funny little island off the south coast of Australia is called Tasmania. Tazmania is something very different.

Gripes aside, however, *Orphans of Chaos* is a very imaginative, well-written book that kept me turning the pages at rapid pace. I'm certainly looking forward to finding out what happens next.

Orphans of Chaos – John C. Wright – Tor - hardcover

Visions of London

By Cheryl Morgan

London has been haunted in many different ways in fantasy fiction. Neil Gaiman, in *Neverwhere*, created a whole fantasy kingdom down in the Underground. China Miéville, on the other hand, has a London that is haunted by lurking threats and mysterious presences that can't quite be perceived or understood yet ooze with malignant menace. M. John Harrison's Viriconium (or Egnaro) is a dim reflection of London seen in a mirror of desire. It is no more attainable than fairy gold, and much less pretty. But these are all fantasy writers. Conrad Williams is more of a horror writer, and consequently the city he paints in *London Revenant* is haunted in a very different way.

Williams could, of course, have used ghosts. That's a traditional horror trope. But instead he opted for a rather different standard. His London is haunted by Bad People. In particular there is a serial killer known as "The Pusher" who gets his kicks by hanging round on Underground platforms and pushing people under trains. Because we have access to him through the novel, we know he likes torturing people too.

Of course there have to be good guys too. Williams has his own version of London Below, populated not by fantastical characters, but by lost souls who have dropped out of London life. The people whose faces you might see on "missing" posters. The Pusher is one of them, but he has chosen to take his revenge on those above ground rather than hide from them. This puts the rest of the community in danger. The hero of the book, Adam, thinks that he suffers from narcolepsy, but what actually happens when he blacks out is that he becomes Monck, one of the special

agents of the down below folk who is trusted to mingle with the world above, and who has been given the task of hunting down the renegade.

It is an interesting idea, but it didn't quite work for me because it was too close to the London I have lived in. Gaiman's London is mythological, Harrison's psychological, and Miéville's unimaginable in a Lovecraftian sort of way. Williams, on the other hand, talks about real people who have fled life above ground, and one of whom hates his past life sufficiently to become a killer. That close to reality, you have to provide reasons for what your characters do.

Certainly the London in which Adam lives is not a pleasant place. He and his friends have dead-end jobs, or no jobs at all. They spend their evenings getting out of their skulls on alcohol and drugs, and having casual sex with each other. Most of them appear seriously dysfunctional. And certainly the city can be a lonely place. As The Pusher explains to one of his victims,

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"We live so close to each other and we never talk. I bet you've got people living in this house, in the other flats, that you've never spoken to. There are people we stand next to every morning on a platform or in a queue. We've stood next to them for years. They aren't strangers but we never talk to them."

That's pretty normal for city living. It was the same in Melbourne, and it is the same in the San Francisco Bay Area. London is no different, but it does have an incipient air of violence that is missing from Melbourne, and that you only see in San Francisco and Oakland themselves, not the whole Bay Area. What's different? Adam almost gets it right here:

"In London, it's like putting on a belt and trying to kid yourself that it will go one notch tighter. You end up walking around feeling constricted all the time, unable to loosen yourself in public, always sucking in your gut and pretending to be impenetrable, unassailable."

Yet Williams never seems to quite get to the London I know. He gets sidetracked onto issues like the stresses of office life (as if the modern office worker somehow has a worse time of it than a coal miner, or a medieval serf), or he starts talking about the weight of history pressing in on people. It isn't dead people that are the problem in London, it is living ones.

What disturbs me most about London is that there are too many rats in the cage — it isn't surprising that some of them turn to drugs, self-harm or violence. It is a natural animal reaction to that level of population pressure. It doesn't surprise me that people want to get away, but I'm not sure that many would want to do so by hiding in the Underground. And if they have a better society there, it is because it is small enough for them to know each other, to have a community, not just a vast mass of individuals.

Having said that, although I could not connect with what Williams was writing, I was very impressed with the way he did it. *London Revenant* is plastered with enthusiastic blurbs from the likes of Harrison, Roz Kaveney, Graham Joyce and Tim Lebbon. All of them recognize Williams' talent as a writer. I was sufficiently impressed by *London Revenant* to want to read more of his work. And those of you out there who have no connection with London, or perhaps are too close to it, will get more out of the book than I did.

London Revenant – Conrad Williams – Night Shade Books – hardcover

Back to the Dark Future

By Cheryl Morgan

There are probably a few people reading this issue who still remember the aborted Dark Future role-playing game. That was a very long time ago, and cyberpunk is hardly the hot potato now that it was back in the 1980s. But Black Library has chosen to revive the Dark Future setting for a series of novels. Some of these will be re-issues of books commissioned by David Pringle back in the days when he ran Games Workshop's publishing arm. Others will be brand new. I know Marc Gascoigne would prefer that I look at some of the newer books, and I will get round to them, but I can't resist starting with some Kim Newman.

There is an art to writing tie-in novels, and Newman, or rather his were-form, Jack Yeovil, seems to have it off pat. You can't make the writing too complex, and you have to fit in as best you can with the setting, but that doesn't mean that you can't have interesting, well-drawn characters. And while poking fun at the product you are working with will get you fired very quickly, poking fun at anything and everything else appears to be OK, at least as far as GW/BL is concerned.

The set-up for *Demon Download* goes something like this. First of all we have a group of Fundies, conveniently based on Salt Lake City but not the Mormons who moved out when environmental collapse made Utah uninhabitable a few years back. This particular bunch of Fundies are, of course, led by an evil sorcerer who has been around for centuries. (Not that the believers know this, they have Faith.) The Bad Guy has summoned a particularly nasty demon that he intends to insert into the data networks of the USA and thereby destroy the world, heh! heh! heh! Thankfully the Vatican is onto him, and they have sent a nun to investigate.

Well, not any old nun, you understand. Sister Chantal Juillerat is not only a top class systems security expect, she's also a highly trained assassin. And like all top class agents she has a neat car; a black Ferrari called Federico who has lots of big guns and a somewhat questionable taste in music, even for a car with a male personality module. You would have thought that by 2025 even AIs would have forgotten the Spice Girls.

Timeline is, of course, an issue with a book like this. The original book came out in 1993. The world has changed a little since then. Black Library and Newman have made an effort to update things, and as I have copies of both editions I have been able to check what has been done. Perhaps the most interesting change is that Prime Minister Archer has been transformed into Prime Minister Mandleson. A Tory PM is quite unthinkable these days.

But anyway, there's funny stuff. Most of the action is set in Arizona. The rule of law has pretty much broken down, and the roads are only kept clear thanks to the hard work of the re-formed US Cavalry. Instead of fighting Injuns, they now spend their time hunting down Mad Max style motorcycle gangs (sorry, "motorsickle" gangs) of various persuasions (including Fundies). Sadly a bunch of hard-working, dedicated troopers who trace their ancestry back to General Custer are not the right people to go demon hunting, even if they have replaced their horses with sophisticated modern ve-hickles.

Yes siree, the poor cavalry, for all that their uniforms might be blue, are symbolically wearing red shirts. This

means that Newman needs names for the brave soldiers who die in the line of duty. For example, Major McAuley and Captain Stableford. And, because the book was originally written back in 1993, someone who hadn't yet made it out of the ranks:

Trooper Charlie Stross, in the guardhouse for mouthing back to Sergeant Quincannon after a twenty-mile forced march through the desert in full pack and gear, was mysteriously gone from his cell leaving only a couple of severed fingers, some cabbalistic symbols traced in blood and a chunk of what had tentatively been identified as a pancreas.

So, there's a demon, there are lots of guns, and ve-hickles of various types. Lots of people die: troopers, gangsters, and various bystanders, none of whom is called Bubba though one of them probably should have been. All of which goes to show that it is a tough life in the 21st Century US Cavalry. Trooper Nathan Stack does get to hang out with a seriously cute nun who reminds him of watching Angelina Jolie movies when he was a kid. But he also has to put up with her big-mouthed foreign car.

Three drones in formation hovered above the car, locking on. Lights flashed around their rims. Stack knew they were warming up for a particle beam thrust.

"Ciao, dumb boulders!" shouted the car as it exploded them one by one. "This is too easy. They're only using American technology."

Stack was irritated, but he couldn't bring himself to hope that the car would be shown up by good ole yankee knowhow.

And if you are really lucky, Trooper, you might get to meet a mysterious horsed stranger who makes a Winchester '73 out-perform any fancy, new-fangled weapon. I mean, what would a cowboy story be without him?

And for those of you who aren't familiar with the series, there are two more books to come. Book 3 has Elvis in it.

Demon Download – Jack Yeovil – Black Library – mass-market paperback

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Back to the Pulps

By Cheryl Morgan

When I interviewed Chris Roberson of Monkey Brain Books last year (*Emerald City* #112) one of the projects he was most enthusiastic about was *Adventure*, a series of anthologies which, so the blurb goes, is intended to represent, "The rebirth of the classic pulp magazine in book form." That, of course, is a little bit of a hostage to fortune, because now anyone reviewing the first book in the series is going to be as much interested in whether it meets the stated objective as in the quality of the stories. I'm going to try to steer a middle line.

Here first are a couple of stories I really liked, but which I thought were much more *Interzone* than *Astounding*. John Meaney's "Lost Time" is a bitter-sweet SF tale about a scientist stranded on an alien planet when her shuttle is wrecked. It is full of flashbacks to her past life, because she is expecting to die. Paul Di Filippo's "Eel Pie Stall" is a surreal story about another dying woman, except this one is in London and we get to follow her into the afterlife. These are both good stories, but not what I expected of *Adventure*.

"Four Hundred Slaves" by Michael Kurland is unexpected in a different way. It is a straight up Roman-period mystery story. It is nicely written,

though very predictable, but it has no action in it at all. "Ancephalous Dreams" by Neal Asher gets closer to the idea. It reminded me a lot of the little SF stories that Marvel used to publish in their *Tales of the Watcher* series. A convicted criminal is asked to participate in an experiment involving mysterious alien technology. He finds it an, er, life-changing experience. Great story, but again not much action.

Roberson himself, of course, knows just what he wants. His "Prowl Unceasing" is a tale of the young Abraham van Helsing fighting weretigers in Sarawak in the company of an Indian sea captain called Dakkar (yes, it is that Prince Dakkar). Kage Baker also comes close to the right thing with "The Unfortunate Gytt", which involves running around Victorian Scotland digging up treasure. However, there are two small problems with the story. Firstly it is a Company story that doesn't say it is a Company story. Rather like Iain Banks' *Inversions*, you may be totally confused if you can't work out what you are reading. Also the heroes leave for Edinburgh from Paddington station. Sloppy.

It takes the old hands to get the job done right, and my personal favorite in the book is "Richard Riddle, Boy Detective in 'The case of the French Spy'" by Kim Newman. As you might guess, this is more Enid Blyton than Edgar Rice Burroughs, but it is certainly an adventure. And Newman, as ever, is very funny. Our hero and his two pals spend their summer vacation in a Devonshire seaside town, solving mysteries. This description of their office introduces the characters quite well.

Dick had installed his equipment – a microscope, boxes and folders, reference books, his collection of clues and trophies. Violet had donated some small fossils and her hammers and trowels. Ernest wanted space on the wall for the head of their first murderer: he had an idea that when a murderer was hanged, the police gave the head as a souvenir to the detective who caught him.

Violet, by the way, is nicknamed 'Vile' by the boys. It helps them forget that she's really a girl and they should not be hanging out with her. She is, of course, way too clever for her own good, and prone to enthusiasms. It used to be folklore. Now it is dinosaurs. Which brings her into conflict with Daniel Sellwood, a dissenting preacher who has made it his business to destroy all of the "evidence" that Satan has planted for the false and blasphemous idea of evolution.

As it turns out, Sellwood comes from a whole family of people with enthusiasms. An ancestor of his, Jacob Orris, spent his time protecting the local area from Bonaparte.

Orris's patrol was like Sellwood's Church Militant – an excuse to shout at folk and break things. Orris started a campaign to get "French beans" renamed "Free-from-Tyranny beans", and had his men attack grocer's stalls when no one agreed with him.

Now what, you might be asking, does all this have to do with French spies? Well, there's this secret smugglers' tunnel, and there's this legend about Orris having captured a French spy who was wearing some sort of special suit that enabled him to swim underwater. You know; flippers, gills, bug-eye goggles, that sort of thing. And you could tell he was French because the said funny things like… Well, that would be telling. Let's just say that at the end of it all a brutal murderer comes to a nasty end.

Michael Moorcock and Mike Resnick also contribute thoroughly pulpish

stories. "Dogfight Donovan's Day Off" is a thoroughly thrilling tale of brave fighter pilots in WWI. It has a zeppelin in it, and you can't have an anthology of adventure stories without at least one zeppelin. "The Island of Annoyed Souls" is a story about Lucifer Jones, which I suspect Resnick fans will immediately recognize as likely to be very silly. It provides a very different twist on the story of Dr. Moreau.

There are war stories and westerns too. Chris Nakashima-Brown's "Ghulistan Bust-out" tries to revise that old idea of making sword and sorcery characters look silly by adding guns, but all he manages to do is make his story look silly. Lou Anders contributes the first installment of what might turn out to be a very interesting post-apocalyptic western, "The Mad Lands", but it is a bit early to judge as yet.

The book contains six other stories, none of which grabbed me sufficiently to get me to comment on them (or in some cases finish them), but given my usual dislike of short fiction I think *Adventure* has done pretty well. I'd buy the book for the Kim Newman story alone. And I understand that Monkey Brain is to publish a Newman collection next year. I can't wait.

Adventure – Chris Roberson (ed.) – Monkey Brain Books – publisher's proof

Horrors of Science

By Cheryl Morgan

Michael Crichton has made a living out of writing books in which science is portrayed as something intrinsically horrible, but in his short fiction Robert Reed manages something much more worthwhile. A lot of Reed's short stories are quite disturbing, but they almost all have a strong science fiction setting.

I'm reading Reed because Golden Gryphon have produced a very nice collection of his short fiction called *The Cuckoo's Boys*. The opening story is a good example of what I mean. "On the Brink of That Bright New World" is told by a man who got away with murder because he committed his crime on a night when the whole world was busy watching TV coverage of the first discovery of alien life. It is followed by "The Children's Crusade", which is about a cult that encourages kids to volunteer for a mission into space, told from the point of view of a man whose daughter gets caught up in the cult. Then there is "She Sees My Monsters Now", in which a psychopath corrupts a naïve woman as part of an argument with his AI warden about the nature of mental illness.

The title story, "The Cuckoo's Boys", is also disturbing in its own way. It concerns an eccentric billionaire called Philip Stevens who sponsors the creation of a plague that makes thousands of women pregnant with clones of himself. The story focuses on three of the boys and their tutor as they go through high school. It does an excellent job of envisaging how bad life will be for these kids, both because of the paranoia that will have developed around their origins and the pressure they feel from being just one of many supposedly identical children.

Not all of the stories in the collection are horrific. Two are set in the world of Marrow, and have appropriately Marrow-ish themes. The first, "Night of Time", is about the origins of life in the universe, and features a new character who may get his own Marrow novel soon. The other, "River of the Queen", sees Quee Lee and Perri get involved with a species of aliens who have

brought their entire ecosystem on board the giant spaceship.

The oddest story in the collection is "Coelacanths", in which Reed tries to imagine what it would be like to live in a world in which we humans live alongside creatures to whom we are little more than dumb animals. It is an interesting idea, but I suspect that the complex structure will put most readers off.

"One Last Game" is a classic time travel story in which a group of adults challenge their kids to come back in time and visit them when they find themselves in that great science-fictional future we all dream of. Of course the kids do come back, with predictably upsetting results. The central character, a sulky 14-year-old boy, is very nicely drawn. Equally mal-adjusted is the hero of "Abducted Souls", a college boy who uses the fact that he was supposedly abducted by aliens as a child as a means of getting girlfriends. If you assume that he's making it all up for effect, it isn't an SF story at all.

Finally there are three stories with political themes. "Savior" is about how decisions made in the heat of battle can come back to haunt soldiers who were only trying to save the world as best they knew how. "Winemaster" is about how a terrified American government tries to wipe out those of its citizens who have chosen to upload their minds. And "First Tuesday" features a world in which the US president sends a virtual avatar to visit every household in the country once a month to get a sense of the mood of the people.

That's it. Twelve stories, all of them worth reading, though "Coelacanths" was hard going. All of which goes to confirm that Robert Reed is a fine writer whose work I shall continue to seek out in future.

The Cuckoo's Boys – Robert Reed – Golden Gryphon - hardcover

Found in Translation

By Cheryl Morgan

I have Sean Wallace to blame for this. There was I, quietly perusing the books on the Prime table at World Fantasy Con, when Sean drags me across to Larry Smith's stall. "You have to get this," he said. The "this" in question was a large yellow book with a cartoon picture on the front. There's a large blue bear and some small pirates in a rowboat. I looked inside.

The Minipirates were the masters of the Zamonian Sea. Nobody knew this, however, because they were too small to be noticed.

I bought the book.

As a result I learned rather more about Minipirates than might be safe for my sanity. I also learned about many other inhabitants of the now lost continent of Zamonia. I learned, for example, about the villainous Troglotroll, the fearsome Spiderwitch, the monstrous Bolloggs, and the unbearably cute Wolperting Whelps. I also learned more about Minipirates.

The Minipirates had little iron hooks instead of hands and wooden stumps instead of proper legs, not did I ever see one without an eyepatch. At first I thought they'd been wounded during their reckless attempts to board a prize, but I later leaned that they were born that way, complete with hats and moustaches.

The book is called *The 13½ Lives of Captain Bluebear*, and is by a German writer called Walter Moers. The book says nothing about Mr. Moers' sanity, but it does say that he drew all of the helpful cartoons and maps that illustrate the book. Some of them are very silly indeed.

Captain Bluebear himself is not silly. He is merely occasionally unfortunate, perhaps overcurious, and in earlier times of his life possessed of a certain amount of youthful impetuosity that gets him into more trouble than he would perhaps like. For example, hitching a lift on The Eternal Tornado was perhaps not the best decision he ever made. But then again, he did have problems with his education.

Early on, Bluebear was taken in as a pupil by the famous Professor Abdullah Nightingale, who is more intelligent than anyone else in Zamonia by virtue of having seven brains. The professor is an expert in Darknessology, indeed he was the first person to successfully extract Dark Matter from the universe. Unfortunately his experiments left behind a number of Black Holes that have puzzled astronomers ever since, but that's their problem, not his. The professor also dabbled in many other areas of science, including inventing a volcanic suit that allowed him to explore the insides of volcanoes.

During one of his dives in Krakatoa's still active crater Nightingale discovered the lava-breathing fire-fish, a species he not only caught and tamed but contrived to use as the basis of a new invention, the fire-fish-powered cave-heating system. If fire-fish were deprived of lava and placed in ordinary drinking water, they automatically changed their cellular structure and transformed themselves into a kind of living lava. The aquatic creatures breathed water like normal fish and thus made it boil. Fire-fish could also be used for brewing coffee, although they left a slightly fishy aftertaste. They were really only suitable, in the gastronomic domain, for making bouillabaisse.

When Bluebear finished his studies, Nightingale implanted within his brain a copy of his most famous work, the *Encyclopedia of Marvels, Life Forms and Other Phenomena of Zamonia and its Environs*. The encyclopedia had the miraculous talent of automatically informing Bluebear about the nature of any marvel, life form or phenomenon he encountered, almost immediately after he had encountered it and had made some rash or foolish decision based upon his then lack of knowledge.

Fortunately the Captain was a very resourceful bluebear, otherwise he would not have lived through more than thirteen lives by the time he came to set down his memoirs. Had he not been so, he would not have escaped the Spiderwitch. Nor would he have survived falling into a Dimensional Hiatus and visiting the 2364th Dimension, home of his school friend, the Gelatine Prince, Qwerty Uiop. And of course he would not have made his way safely to the greatest city in Zamonia, Atlantis itself.

By employing a series of diplomatic stratagems, the Norselanders had taken over the reins of government while the kings confined themselves to ceremonial duties. The latter did little more than attend the opening of new supermarkets, run marathons for charity, deliver graveside addresses at the funerals of prominent citizens, or turn up on major sporting occasions. (One exception was King Snalitat XXIII of Tatilans, who had lost his reason at some stage during the Zamonian war of succession and ran naked through the streets making unintelligible government

announcements. His last edict was that all Norselanders over the age of thirteen be painted yellow and lined up in a row to have their feet tickled.) The people of Atlantis really governed themselves, a system that worked well at times, less well at others, and sometimes not at all.

The book says nothing about the effect on Herr Moers of translating Captain Bluebear's memoirs, or indeed of the effect on John Brownjohn of transcribing them into English. However, it is noticeable that the good Captain's lives appear to get longer, more adventurous and somewhat less believable with time, suggesting the onset of an insidious form of mania that affects writers from time to time. It is possible that all of this is the fault of Bluebear. He was, after all, employed as a dream composer inside a Bollogg's brain, and became the champion congladiator of all Atlantis (the peculiarly Atlantean sport of congladiatorial combat involves two persons telling tall tales in competition with each other). His reports of life in Zamonia are therefore somewhat suspect, especially as that fabulous continent has now sunk forever beneath the waves. Whatever the truth of the matter, I would recommend that readers approach this volume only a few pages at a time. Extended reading might result not only in the developed of certain manic tendencies, but also in severe damage to the muscles of the face, respiratory system and stomach. You have been warned.

The 13½ Lives of Captain Bluebear – Walter Moers (tr. John Brownjohn) – Overlook – hardcover

Stocking Fillers

By Cheryl Morgan

It is probably a little late for me to be making recommendations as to what you might buy fantasy-loving children for presents this holiday season, but if any of the little darlings to happen to have been sent book tokens by cautious or unimaginative relatives, and are therefore forced to spend the money on paper rather than anything digital, here are a couple of suggestions that thudded through my mailbox recently. Both are coffee table book-sized, and both are lavishly illustrated with pictures of strange and fabulous beings.

The first is *Arthur Spiderwick's Field Guide to the Fantastical World Around You*, which appears to be the latest volume in the successful Spiderwick Chronicles series. Tony DiTerlizzi's art is reminiscent of that of Brian Froud, and indeed the great man himself contributes an enthusiastic back cover blurb. DiTerlizzi is at his best painting goblins and trolls of various sorts, all of which have an earthy aspect to them, though I did very much like his lobster-tailed Caribbean Mermaid. He's less good on fabulous beasts such as unicorns and dragons.

The book contains numerous large, foldout illustrations. In her *Locus* review Karen Haber warns that the picture of the Olde World Wyrm, which folds out vertically, is in great danger of tearing. Too late! Mine tore the first time I tried to open it. Thankfully that is the only picture so configured.

Holly Black's text is authoritatively learned in style, and is full of useful facts by which various types of fantastical creature, or at least its presence, might be recognized.

Unusual organization of items is also common in houses with brownies. A brownie may alphabetize books by the middle initial of the authors' names or file records by the titles of their favorite songs.

This is a very beautiful book, and liable to be a particular hit with kids who are already fans of Holly Black's novels.

The other book I received is *Fantasy Encyclopedia*, by Judy Allen. This is not to be confused with *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, by John Clute and Peter Nicholls. Indeed it is almost a polar opposite of that book, for where Clute and Nicholls strive to be authoritative, Allen is skimpy and vague in exactly the right way that will have nerdy kids yelling "that's wrong! that's wrong!" with monotonous regularity. Which is not to say that Ms. Allen is actually wrong, but rather that she has ranged so widely and said so little that apparent errors are inevitable, and when you claim to have written an encyclopedia people expect you to get things right.

Unlike the Spiderwick book, Allen does not have a resident artist. Various illustrators have been used, including John Howe, and it looks as if the pictures have been sourced from existing material rather than drawn specifically for the book. Consequently it has less stylistic coherence.

There are, however, two excellent aspects to the book. Firstly, as I said, it ranges far and wide. There are creatures listed from the mythologies of the Inuit and the Maori, from Mexico and Korea, from Ancient Egypt and Classical Greece. It will, I hope, encourage kids to explore different cultures and their legends.

In addition each entry comes with a short list of recommended books and movies featuring the creature or artifact under discussion. Thus the entry on mirrors recommends that kids read *Alice Through the Looking Glass* and watch Disney's *Snow White*. The entry on harpies and gorgons recommends reading *The Odyssey* and watching *Clash of the Titans*. Recommendations for material on dwarves includes not only *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, but also *Time Bandits*. Those for ghosts include entries for Dickens, Shakespeare and Oscar Wilde, along with the *Ghostbusters* movie. For some reason I can't explain, Alex Irvine's *A Scattering of Jades* is listed under mummies. It does have a Mayan mummy in the story, and it is a very fine book, but don't let your kids read it if you want them to sleep through the night. Fob them off with *Scooby Doo on Zombie Island* instead. If your kids ask for only a fraction of the wonderful books and films that Ms. Allen recommends, this book will have been well worth the purchase price.

Arthur Spiderwick's Field Guide to the Fantastical World Around You – Tony DiTerlizzi & Holly Black – Simon & Schuster – hardcover

Fantasy Encyclopedia – Judy Allen – Kingfisher - hardcover

Guld of the Guard

By Cheryl Morgan

One of my biggest regrets about *Emerald City* is how few American readers are able to purchase the fine books by PS Publishing that I review. Good quality specialist SF bookstores will, of course, get them for you, and online stores such as The Aust Gate will ship them from the UK, but what we really need is either a distribution deal or for someone in the US to publish them. Congratulations, therefore, to Night Shade Books for making available the first in Steven

Erikson's Bauchelain and Korbal Broach novellas, *Blood Follows*.

US readers should by now be familiar with Erikson's Malazan Empire books. Also some of you may remember my review of the other novella in the series, *The Healthy Dead*. *Blood Follows* is, as far as I can make out, the first book in which the nefarious pair of sorcerers appear. Certainly it is the book in which they first hire the unfortunate Emancipor Reese. The story goes something like this.

The city of Lamentable Moll is gripped by fear. Each night some new and more dastardly murder is committed. The murderer is never seen, but his victim, brutally dismembered, is always left somewhere public. Naturally the King has asked for Guld of the Guard, the city's best detective, to be assigned to the case. But Sergeant Guld soon learns that there is sorcery at work. Foul necromancy, to be precise.

Meanwhile, Emancipor Reese is out of work again. His most recent employer, the merchant Baltro, has become the latest victim of the serial killer who is stalking the city. Not wishing to suffer more than a day's scolding from his wife, Subly, for his laziness in failing to find a new source of income, Reese is happy to jump at the first opportunity that comes his way, even if the gentlemen who are looking for a manservant do seem decidedly strange.

Guld, of course, will track down his quarry eventually. He is too smart not to spot the clues eventually. Though apprehending the villain might prove more difficult, especially when everyone from a mysterious barbarian swordsman, the Moral Sword of one of the city's temples, a princess with eccentric tastes and even the city's rat catchers seem to want to do his job for him. Emancipor Reese, on the other hand, is not stupid and has far more access to the clues, and it doesn't bear thinking about what Subly will say if he loses this fantastically lucrative job so quickly.

I didn't find *Blood Follows* anywhere near as funny as *The Healthy Dead*, though perhaps that is because I live in a part of the world so like the unfortunate city of Quaint. But it is certainly good fun, and it is probably better if you read the two books in order. I'm sure that Night Shade will be publishing *The Healthy Dead* soon.

Blood Follows – Steven Erikson – Night Shade Books - hardcover

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Cold War in Heaven

By Cheryl Morgan

Many writers, perhaps most notably Ted Chiang, though I rather like Lyda Morehouse's version, have wondered what life on Earth might be like if angels actually put in an appearance here. Just how powerful would they be, and what effect would they have on human politics? Lavie Tidhar is the latest person to tackle the question, and he does so through the medium of the spy thriller.

His novella, *An Occupation of Angels*, published as a chapbook by UK small press Pendragon, has the Cold War escalated by the presence of angels on either side. Behemoth lurks inside St. Paul's, Metatron has occupied Notre Dame. Azrael, as might be expected, prefers the atmosphere of the Lubyanka. They add an extra dimension to the balance of power. The trouble is that someone has started to assassinate them. Each side blames the other. The threat of nuclear war looms. The chaps in MI6 seem to think this has something to do

with the disappearance of a lowly but rather smart cryptographer.

I don't read a lot of spy fiction, but Tidhar seems to have all the right elements. His heroine, Killarney, gets shuttled around the capitals of Europe, has informants shot dead in front of her just as they are about to spill the beans, and has a fight to the death with nameless Aryan thugs on a speeding train. It is all entertaining stuff, and suggests that God and Satan might really want to be more careful before tangling with those devious humans.

The only complaint I have is that the story has a tendency to switch timelines without the customary blank line to indicate that the scene has changed. I thought perhaps this was just an artifact of the proof copy I was working from, but editor Chris Teague tells me that Tidhar asked for the formatting I saw. I'm all in favor of complex structures for stories, but I think it is possible for the author to ask the reader to work a little too hard.

An Occupation of Angels – Lavie Tidhar – Pendragon Press – publisher's proof

Out of Synch

By Cheryl Morgan

January is a pretty quiet month for publishing, though a few major releases are planned. There's only one book coming out that has been previously reviewed in these pages. It is, however, a very wonderful book. Bantam Spectra are producing a US edition of Justina Robson's latest novel, *Living Next Door to the God of Love*. If you like deep, complex novels, this is the book for you.

Living Next Door to the God of Love – Justina Robson – Bantam Spectra – trade paperback

Miscellany

By Cheryl Morgan

Ottakar's Update

Just in case anyone hasn't heard, the good news is that the Office of Fair Trading has referred the proposed takeover of Ottakar's by Waterstone's to the Competition Commission. The bad news is that they didn't pay much attention to the complaints of authors and publishers — their primary concern was consumer issues. However, this does mean that nothing will happen for about 6 months while the Competition Commission makes its enquiry. If you have a local Ottakar's you should go and support it between now and then.

SMOFcon Report

Kevin headed off to SMOFcon earlier this month and came back with some news on the current Worldcon bids. It would seem that the Columbus bid for 2008 is not going well. They were not at Interaction, and they have not turned up at SMOFcon either. Joni Dashoff (of Philadelphia) did her best to represent them, but the signs are not good. Shame.

The Chicago and Denver bids for 2008, and the Kansas City and Montreal bids for 2009, all seem to be moving along nicely. Who was it said that No Zone would inevitably result in all bids being uncontested?

Editorial Matters

By Cheryl Morgan

We have two new ventures starting up this month. Firstly I would like to welcome a new partner bookstore. Paul Wrigley and Debbie Cross have been regular features at conventions on the west coast of America for many years now. Recently they have had to close their physical store in Portland, and have set up online instead. As you probably know by now, I think specialist SF&F bookstores are going to have to do this more and more in order to survive. If you want such stores to continue to exist you need to support them. So, US-readers, if you see a book reviewed here that you would like to buy, instead of going to your local chain bookstore, why not order it from Wrigley-Cross instead? Especially as they stock lots of those small press books I keep going on about and which you may not be able to get in chain stores.

In addition we have the first in what I hope will be a continuing series of feature articles by big name writers in the SF&F field. Our opening article is by Matthew Cheney whose blog, *The Mumpsimus* (http://mumpsimus.blogspot.com/), earned him a World Fantasy Award nomination this year. Although Matt writes a lot about genre issues, he also teaches English and is well known amongst the mainstream lit-blogging community. He's far better placed than I am to suggest interesting mainstream writers that genre readers might enjoy, which is what I have asked him to do for this issue.

Next issue I am expecting an article from no less than Jeff Vandermeer, which should be a treat for everyone.

There's a change on the web site too. As I mentioned last month, I have gone over to a system of one page per article, because that helps up the "page views" statistics and helps attract advertisers. For now I have also left the whole issue on a page version accessible for those who prefer it, but I would like some feedback as keeping both versions is a pain and I'll drop the whole issue version if no one wants it.

Talking of the web site, with November now being over, I can happily report that for the first month ever *Emerald City* has averaged over 2000 unique visitors per day.

Now of course there are few things more fraudulent than web site statistics, and in the case of unique visits a major problem is knowing how many of them are real people and how many are software bots of various sorts. Also this level of readership is pitiful compared to better-known SF sites such as *Locus Online*. While the readership does appear to be continually growing, it is still well short of the level needed to attract regular advertising from major publishers. Which means that for now we are still reliant on your generosity. If people don't continue to subscribe, I won't be able to afford to get a regular flow of articles by big name writers.

One good thing I have to report is that publishers are very happy to give away books for the subscriber draw. The way things are going right now, subscribers have a very good chance of winning something over the next few months.

Meanwhile, back with January, as well as Jeff Vandermeer's article we will have my review of his new novel, *Shriek*. Also in the line-up for January are Liz Williams, Tobias S. Buckell, Justine Larbalestier, Glenda Larke and a chap called Jules Verne.

See you in 2006

Happy holidays,

Cheryl

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