# EMERALD CITY #125

Issue 125 January 2006

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

## In This Issue

# Politics in Fantasy

By Jeff VanderMeer

*Politics is as personal as religion. Current events should have an impact on writers and resonate in their fiction. Activism has a place in the writing of fantasy fiction. Characters, plots, story structures all benefit from a careful consideration of, and dialogue with, the political world.*

Two decades ago, I would have been horrified by statements like these — statements I now believe in deeply. In my teens and early twenties, I very much saw fiction as Art with a capital "A," and Art was above the fray of the every-day, and, therefore, politics. I didn't yet see that the Surrealists' statement of "convulsive beauty in the service of liberty" was a political call-to-arms.

At the same time, however, my *fiction* conflicted with my conscious thoughts about writing. On a subconscious level, on the level of inspiration, politics and the consequences of political decisions entered my fiction on a regular basis. I wrote about Latin American dictatorships and the legacy of the Conquistadors. I wrote about the erosion of personal liberties. I wrote about the impact of war on individuals and groups. I wrote about the effects of colonialism.

My short fiction was awash in politics and political positions. Sometimes it was so embedded that to cut it out of a story would have required killing the story. Sometimes it was superficial. Sometimes it was probably too didactic.

I think this last possibility — that the fiction could become too preachy — made me believe that writing as Art should somehow be separate from the current world, and therefore the messiness of politics. Fiction should come out of character and situation. Anything from the ordinary day-to-day should be included solely in the form of specific detail. The way light struck a window frame. The particular lilt to a woman's speech. The smell of coffee curling out from a sidewalk café.

I believe this position on fiction explains why many of my stories had a stylized quality. I almost thought of them as paintings: beautiful but static, emblematic and symbolic, solemn and visionary, the passion grounded in the so-called "universal," which had no place for the temporal.

Writing about my imaginary city of Ambergris changed all of that. As a place, it had to encompass nitty-gritty detail at street level. It forced me to think about politics on all sorts of levels. A city can't remain stylized and be real — that would be like denying oxygen to someone, or depicting everyone in mid-step, forever frozen. A city also can't be above politics because politics forms its beating heart — its institutions, its government, and the personal politics of its individual citizens, their personal interactions.

I remember that Brian Stableford once said of Angela Carter that her work had risked sliding into mere rote symbolism before its exploration of gender politics became wedded to a fantasy setting. That she risked not allowing enough air into her work for readers to breathe.

For me, the secondary world fantasy of Ambergris let more of the real, unstylized world into my writing — and that meant those echoes of the real world that concerned politics as well. I found myself thinking about how conflict arises on a micro and macro level. How do ruling elites come into being? How do they stay in power? What are the consequences of colonialism and pogrom on both the oppressor and the

oppressed? Who fills a power vacuum when it occurs, and why?

In Ambergris, merchant clans serve as stand-ins for the corporations of our world. A merchant elite more or less rules Ambergris, aided by a hodge podge of revered artists and other creative people. These are the people who lend legitimacy to or withhold it from the rulers.

Of course, there is also a strong vein of anarchy running through Ambergris, a sense that the city could descend into chaos at a moment's notice, even if the annual festival serves as a release of violence that helps stave off every-day anarchy.

Is this much different than the world I live in as an American? I don't think so. We have our own aggression-relief festivals in the form of sports events, for example. And, when an event like Hurricane Katrina occurs, or election irregularities, or, as happened in Florida recently, rival state agencies have an armed stand-off over the fate of a person in a vegetative state, we begin to realize that we are much closer to the edge than we would like to think, anesthetized as we are by our technophiliac gadgets and our selfish pursuit of creature comforts.

Not only are we closer to the total or partial breakdown of civilization than we think we are, we do not understand how close we exist to potential atrocity. In Ambergris, pogrom and counter-pogrom occur as the result of greed, ignorance, and fear. The gray caps, a native people driven underground by the founders of the city, exist in that dynamic shared by every group of oppressors and the oppressed. (The plot of such events varies in its details — whether in Rwanda or the Balkans, Cambodia or Germany — but the results are the same: a mass psychosis and individual indifference to suffering that leads to mass bloodshed.)

But "politics" in fiction is not just about using a backdrop of war or atrocity or city dynamics at the macro level to explore questions that affect us in a longer-term, broad way. It is also about understanding that *all* people are political in some way, even those who seem apathetic, because politics is about gender, society, and culture. Every aspect of our lives is in some way political. So if we don't, at some point during our writing, think about this consciously — if we simply trust our instincts as writers — we may unintentionally preserve cliché, stereotype, and prejudice.

Carol Bly, in her amazing writing book *The Passionate, Accurate Story*, makes a compelling case for the inclusion of the political — and thus real-world ethical, moral issues — in the creation of character. She gives the example of a character who happens to be an executive for a company that produces a harmful product or whose factories pollute the environment. The story's emphasis may have nothing to do with the character's job, but it is still incumbent on the writer to ask, *What is the character's relationship to his or her job? Does the character think about the ethics of supporting harm to others, even if indirectly? What are the character's politics, and how do they reflect or not reflect the character's actual actions? How does the character justify both personal and political decisions?*

Asking such questions is part of creating fully rounded characters. A character's politics — public and private — may be inconsistent or, again, irrelevant to the main story being told, but the writer still needs to think about such issues. The questions still need to be part of the conversation the writer has with him or herself about the character.

When writing about characters in Ambergris, I try to position them in relation to events such as the Silence (when 25,000 people disappeared from the city, possibly because of the gray caps), or a war between rival political groups the Reds and the Greens, or on how they feel about the merchant-ruler Hoegbotton & Sons. Not because all of these thoughts will make it onto the page as part of character, but because somehow even just considering them rounds out the character, influences other things about the character that do make it onto the page.

Just as every day we make potentially dozens of small decisions that reflect our thought or lack of thought about the world around us so too does a fictional character of any weight exist in a world of such daily decisions, such thoughts. Otherwise, the character becomes less than real. Even small decisions have consequences in the real world, because we live in a world where politics matter, where politics can get you killed or knighted, often for the same action in a different context.

As part of the whole of a character, these types of attributes, internalized, expressed at the most basic level can make the difference between good fiction and great fiction, but, also, perhaps as importantly, the difference between fiction that is relevant and fiction that is not.

But is it important for fiction to be "relevant"? Does it affect what we think of as "classic" fiction fifty years from now? Relevance may, in certain types of fiction, create a kind of "temporally regional" form of literature — fiction that contains outdated references to issues no longer of consequence in the future, consigning a novel or story to that gray, half-lit, half-dark world where fiction is primarily read for its historical importance.

However, there is at least one area of fiction in which the idea of relevance today leading to potential anachronism tomorrow doesn't have as much truth to it: that loose grouping of types of settings or a way of seeing the world often labeled "fantasy," and, in particular, secondary world fantasy.

Seen through the mirror of a fantasy setting that allows the real world to be reflected in it, a writer can perhaps more easily be relevant — in the short term — without running the risk of becoming dated in the long term.

In my new novel, *Shriek: An Afterword*, I wrote several war sequences during the most horrifying phases of the Iraq War and the conflict in Afghanistan. Are those scenes making a comment on U.S. involvement in the Middle East? No. Any aspects of those events become fictionalized and conflated with a number of other wars, until the specific detail I've gleaned from my nonfiction reading and television viewing is subsumed by the creative process into something that is both timely in one sense and timeless in another. Thus the current war becomes a catalyst for a relevant mood, for a *way in* to writing about a fictional war — an indirect influence.

A more pointed example might be a movement in *Shriek* called Nativism that reflects our country's head-in-the-sand attitude toward Iraq, while still being fantastical enough that it can be read any number of other ways as well. In a similar way, the stranglehold corporations have on the politics practiced in Washington, D.C., becomes, as previously mentioned, warring merchant clans' stranglehold on Ambergris. Even climate change is addressed in *Shriek*, in an off-kilter way. None of these elements of *Shriek* will be dated in fifty years, or one hundred years. All of them can be read on the

surface level or on a subtextual level in a way that has nothing to do with "current events" — even though any reader today would easily recognize those events embedded within the novel.

(Did I intend all of these points of common reference originally? No. I wrote most of *Shriek* or at least planned out most of it well before 9-11 and all that occurred thereafter. But an organic novel, a novel that is alive, has at least one inherent trait during the writing of it: it devours the world. It is wide enough, deep enough, and enough about the entirety of life that it envelopes the real world and distills it out the other side in fictionalized form.)

Incorporating such issues from a through-the-looking-glass angle also allows for the possibility of presenting a heated current political situation in a non-threatening context. This doesn't mean that the ideas aren't still threatening, but that the remove from reality allows for possible acceptance of those ideas by readers who originally did not share in that same system of beliefs. In other words, on some level, even if subconsciously, you may begin to change the world, one reader at a time. Even better, at least in *Shriek*, the politics of the setting do not overshadow the characters, but instead are expressed through the characters, and the emphasis in the novel is on other matters entirely. (The defeatist would say that, in fact, the opposite is true — for example, many right-wingers listen to, say, The Clash, and enjoy the music while ignoring the lyrics.)

However, no matter what I intend, the success of that intention depends on reader reaction and interpretation. Sometimes the reader has a responsibility — and in the case of the political, that responsibility includes not screaming "didactic!" any time a writer raises important issues in his or her work. Readers who care about writing need to recognize that sometimes the entertainment value of a piece must be weighed against the depth of what is being said, that sometimes a story may need a certain slow pace in a section, may need to build, and may even need to, yes, lecture, to achieve its full effect.

Now, after stating all of this, you may realize I haven't yet answered the question I posed before: Is it important for fantasy, or fiction generally, to be relevant in this way? The answer is a resounding *No, it isn't*. The instinctual idea I had as a teen and young adult about Art for Art's sake, the idea that character and situation are paramount, that some truths transcend politics — that's all valid.

But, for me, not because of 9-11 but because of everything since then — the hypocrisy, greed, and evil of government leaders, institutions, and private individuals — I cannot *not* react in a different way than before. These issues permeate our world, and if you do not internalize that, if it *doesn't* affect your writing, then it lies like an unhealing wound in your heart, and you go a little bit crazy.

If there's one thing I've learned in the post 9-11 world, it is that everything we do matters — *every little thing matters* — even if we sometimes feel like we're drowning, going down for the third time.

I'm not a political activist. I'm just a writer. But in doing what you love most — writing — and in observing the state of the world you love so much and have such curiosity about — with its insane assortment of sad, beautiful, ugly, evil, wonderful people — how can you not write these kinds of things into your fiction?

# That Was The Year That Was

By Emerald City Staff

## Introduction

By Cheryl Morgan

Normally at this time of year I write a review of the year style article. However, this year I have been honored to be asked to contribute to the *Locus* Year in Review article. Given the choice between writing something here and writing something that will be seen by five-to-ten times as many people, and sees me published alongside Gary Wolfe, I'm afraid I didn't spend much time making up my mind. So my review of the year will appear in the February *Locus*. I encourage you all to buy it. After all, if Charles gets enough subscribers he'll get bumped out of the semiprozine Hugo category and that will give other people a chance to win. In the meantime, I'll just list my favorite books of the year, and I'll rely on the rest of our reviewers to cover the year in more detail.

## Cheryl's Best of the Year Lists

By Cheryl Morgan

(In no particular order.)

***Science Fiction***

*Accelerando* – Charles Stross

*9Tail Fox* – Jon Courtenay Grimwood

*Living Next Door to the God of Love* – Justina Robson

*The World Before* – Karen Traviss

*Learning the World* – Ken MacLeod

*Olympos* – Dan Simmons

*Spin* – Robert Charles Wilson

*Lady of Mazes* – Karl Schroeder

*The Eternity Artifact* – L.E. Modesitt

*Venusia* – Mark von Schlegell

***Fantasy***

*Anansi Boys* – Neil Gaiman

*Limits of Enchantment* – Graham Joyce

*Vellum* – Hal Duncan

*Snake Agent* – Liz Williams

*A Feast for Crows* – George R.R. Martin

*Lord Byron's Novel* – John Crowley

*The Princess of Roumania* – Paul Park

*The Girl in the Glass* – Jeffrey Ford

*Spotted Lily* – Anna Tambour

*The Narrows* – Alexander C. Irvine

***Collections***

*20th Century Ghosts* – Joe Hill

*In the Palace of Repose* – Holly Phillips

*Looking for Jake* – China Miéville

*The Cuckoo's Boys* – Robert Reed

*Strange Itineraries* – Tim Powers

*I Live With You* – Carol Emshwiller

*Attack of the Jazz Giants* – Greg Frost

***Novellas***

*Yume No Hon : The Book of Dreams* – Catherynne M. Valente

*Cosmology of the Wider World* – Jeffrey Ford

*Burn* – James Patrick Kelly

*Fishin' with Grandma Matchie* – Steven Erikson

***Non-Fiction***

*Soundings* – Gary K. Wolfe

## Fantasy Fiction

By Juliet E. McKenna

There's always the same problem when I'm asked this kind of question. I'm one of those writers who cannot read fantasy for uncritical enjoyment while I'm actually working on a fantasy novel. So most of what I read is crime fiction and non-fiction related (sometimes very tangentially) to the book I'm currently writing. This is actually one reason that I took up reviewing; it's a way to make sure I still read fantasy and it allows me to do so with the analytical mindset that goes with writing. Unfortunately it tends to mean that the quick and easy response to 'what's the best fantasy you've read this year?' is 'go and check my reviews.' Beyond that, I read other fantasy I'm desperate to catch up with in the school holidays when having 10 and 12 year old sons round the house makes word-smithing nigh on impossible.

So what can I say? Firstly, I've been reading a fair amount of what can be loosely described as vampire/monster chick-lit, which I enjoy because it's definitely not something I could ever attempt to write. At the risk of repeating what I've already said in reviews, I heartily recommend Tanya Huff and Kelley Armstrong's writing to anyone keen on this kind of thing.

In other reading, I finally took *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell* away on holiday last Easter and was hugely impressed by it. It's original, intelligent, beguiling and chilling by turns. If you haven't read it, do so. If you find yourself dealing with one of those people who insist that fantasy can't be 'real' literature, make them read it.

Thinking about originality, I can also recommend Jo Walton's *Tooth and Claw*. This fabulous tale deals with a family of dragons arguing about inheritance; specifically, who gets to eat the dead body of their deceased father and thus who gets to benefit from the magical properties of dragon flesh. If that sounds a bit gory, don't be put off. It isn't. It's a thoroughly satisfying, fast-paced tale of bravery, love, deceit and choices in the best heroic tradition, where the characters all happen to be dragons, and by that I don't mean they're just people with scales.

## Short Fiction

By Anne KG Murphy

I have listed a selection of my favorite short fiction from the past year. You might notice that my tastes are angled toward science fiction rather than fantasy, though as I look at the list I find both are represented, just not evenly.

**Novella**

"A Few Good Men" – Richard A. Lovett (Jan/Feb *Analog*)

"Inside Job" – Connie Willis (Jan *Asimov's*)

**Novelette**

"Mars Opposition" – David Brin (Jan/Feb *Analog*)

"The 120 Hours of Sodom" – Jim Grimsley (Feb *Asimov's*)

"The Edge of Nowhere" – James Patrick Kelly (June *Asimov's*)

"The Summer of the Seven" – Paul Melko (Aug *Asimov's*)

"Walpurgis Afternoon" – Delia Sherman (Dec *F&SF*)

**Short Story**

"Two Dreams on Trains" – Elizabeth Bear (Jan *Strange Horizons*)

"Helen Remembers the Stork Club" Esther M. Friesner (Oct/Nov *F&SF*)

"Last Breath" – Joe Hill (*Subterranean* #2)

"Intelligent Design" – Ellen Klages (Dec *Strange Horizons*)

"The God Engine" – Ted Kosmatka (Oct/Nov *Asimov's*)

"Bottom Feeding" – Tim Pratt (Aug *Asimov's)*

"The Ice Cream Man" – James Van Pelt (June *Asimov's*)

I would also mention that Elizabeth Bear's "Two Dreams on Trains" is included in a chapbook called *10-Dollar Saints* that Bear put together to raise money for victims of Katrina. You can write to her at elizabeth.q.bear@gmail.com for details. The chapbook features New Orleans-focused stories by many authors including Tim Pratt and Pat Cadigan. Suggested donation is $20.00, and *Strange Horizons* has agreed to handle the money processing, making donations tax-deductible.

## Horror Short Fiction

By Mario Guslandi

There are at least three short story collections in the field of dark fiction that really stand out in 2005.

Joe Hill's outstanding debut collection of modern ghost stories (*20th Century Ghosts*, PS Publishing, UK) has taken the world of small press by storm, marking the appearance of a new, original author who has instantly bewitched reviewers, critics and fellow writers with his fascinating tales.

Another outstanding collection is Reggie Oliver's *The complete symphonies of Adolf Hitler* (The Haunted River, UK) an excellent follow-up to the author's first volume of short stories (*The Dreams of Cardinal Vittorini*). Written in a very elegant prose, the stories are remarkable for their ability to convey new strength to the genre standard themes.

Finally mention must be made of Gary Braunbeck's superb second instalment in his Cedar Hill cycle (*The Graveyard People* Earthling Publications, USA), establishing once again this author as one of the major, current literary voices even beyond the limits of the horror genre.

By contrast, 2005 has not been a great year for original horror anthologies, even though there were several of them published, including by mass-market imprints. Two, however, deserve a specific mention: *Darkness Rising 2005* (Prime Books, USA), edited by the British duo LH Maynard & MPN Sims, and *Poe's Progeny* (Gray Friar Press, UK), edited by Gary Fry.

Both are hefty volumes featuring a large number of original stories. As with any anthology not everything is top-notch, but both books include a fair number of excellent tales.

And one last minute edition. The Cemetery Dance anthology *Taverns of the Dead*, edited by Kealan Patrick Burke, has been promised since 2003. It has finally been published and my copy has just arrived. I've read so far about 2/3 of the book and I feel it should definitely be included among the best 2005 horror anthologies.

## Dreams From the Sprockets Zone

By Peter Wong

Generally favoring films that aren't Hollywood products translates to having limited exposure to feature-length science fiction and fantasy films. On the other hand, the best non-Hollywood films that do use fantastic themes display originality not possible under the typical Hollywood studio thumb. A

case in point is Dave McKean and Neil Gaiman's *Mirrormask*. McKean was given the option of making the film on a big budget but with studio "input" or doing it on a far smaller budget and complete creative control. The resulting small-budget film put a fantastic spin on the prototypical coming of age story thanks to McKean's surreal art and creative use of CGI, the witty script, and some wonderful acting by Stephanie Leonidas and Gina McKee in the principal roles.

Jang Joon-hwan's wonderfully crazed *Save The Green Planet* finally broke out of the festival circuit to do very limited theatrical runs. This South Korean gem's "save Earth from destruction" plot sets the stage for a story which deliriously careens from punk rock to *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Frequent brutality aside, Jang's unique film is unlikely to be remade by Hollywood.

*Serenity*, on the other hand, is not a remake. *Firefly* creator Joss Whedon managed to make a film that thrilled dedicated fans without alienating viewers unfamiliar with his fictional universe. This science fiction adventure tale treasured individualism and realizing one's destiny, but was mindful of the human cost of honoring that ethos.

Also worthy of note on the feature-film front were the lovable *Wallace & Grommit: Curse Of The Were-Rabbit*, *Kung Fu Hustle* (very antic martial arts comedy featuring a landlady who runs at Road Runner speeds and killers whose music literally slices things in two), *Batman Begins* (very good comic-book adaptation with ADD-edited fight scenes), the weirdly jaw-dropping *Raiders of the Lost Ark – The Adaptation*, and *Pulse* (less a Japanese ghost story than an unsettling meditation on alienation in the Internet age). Lucile Hadzihalilovic's *Innocence* lacked overt fantasy elements, yet its isolated girl's school setting oozed weirdness.

Turning to short films, my favorite of 2005 was John Harden's multiple award-winning short *La Vie D'Un Chien*. This film used *La Jetee's* narrative approach to portray the problems resulting from a scientist's discovery of a formula that can temporarily turn people into dogs. Particularly hilarious are the film's ruminations on the social havoc resulting from use of the formula (e.g. what constitutes bestiality?). Interested readers can order copies of the film at http://www.johnfilms.com .

Sex and the fantastic were major elements of *The Big Empty*, from executive producers George Clooney and Steven Soderbergh. Selma Blair (*Hellboy*) plays a woman whose emotional repression is manifested by her vagina's ability to suck men into a limitless arctic wasteland inside her body. The hollowness of celebrity culture comes in for an especially sound drubbing. The film can be found in the first issue of the DVD magazine *Wholphin*, which is bound into issue #30 of *The Believer*. *Wholphin's* official web site can be found at http://www.wholphindvd.com .

Finally, there's Joel Trussell's Flash animation music video *War Photographer*. Trussell and an international team of animators successfully turned Jason Forrest's titular song into a magical battle of the bands between Viking and demon rockers. Toss in glaring anachronisms and two giant robots, and the result is wonderfully entertaining. The video can be found at http://www.cockrockdisco.com/JFDSwpweb.mov .

"Exterminate!" is not a short dramatic presentation, but is a definite guilty pleasure. It's the song of the Doctor Who nemeses, the Daleks, and it can be found at http://artistic-

insanity.net/song/daleksong.html.

## Convention Summer

By Kevin Standlee

Two important conventions usually associated with the USA were held elsewhere in 2005, and the "consolation prize" event was sufficiently low-key that it was almost overlooked, as the Westercon went to Calgary and the Worldcon to Glasgow, with Seattle holding the NASFiC.

Bridging the July 1-4 weekend (so it had Canada Day at the start and US Independence Day at the end), Westercon 58 ("Due North") rolled into Calgary, Alberta. 706 people attended, roughly twice the attendance of the area's local general-interest SF convention, Con-Version, which held a "virus-con" during Westercon in lieu of their annual convention. Calgary proved to be a nice place to hold Westercon, although the convention was somewhat of a cultural shock to many of the local fans, whose experience of conventions outside of Calgary or not of the "Creation-type road show" ilk appeared limited. Due North's four-plus day schedule (including a "sneak preview" on the evening before the official start of the convention) was crowded, as it also hosted the Canadian National Science Fiction Convention, including the Aurora Awards, and further hosted the *Locus* Awards. The favo(u)rable impression left by the event upon Editor Guest of Honor David Hartwell may have contributed to Calgary's being selected to host the 2009 World Fantasy Convention. Westercon was financially successful, and besides refunding the memberships of its staff, volunteers, and program participants, plans to issue grants to a variety of fannish organizations, mostly in Canada.

A month later (and a month earlier than its traditional dates), the World Science Fiction Convention came to Glasgow for the second time. Interaction was a general success, with approximately the same attendance as the previous Glasgow Worldcon in 1995. It had a much improved facility in the rebuilt and expanded Scottish Exhibition and Convention Centre. Attendees showed their appreciation of having actual function space instead of partitioned exhibit halls by crowding into a highly successful program. The management team recruited conrunners from around the world (literally: as Events division manager, when I organized a conference call on technical services, I had to take into account time zones from Sydney to Scotland). The Clyde Auditorium (known to all, including the convention centre staff, as the "Armadillo" for its spiky design) was the elegant setting for the Hugo Awards and Masquerade, which — contrary to most fans' expectations — started on time and ran as scheduled. The convention finished in the black and will be able to pass along a small amount to its successors, and everyone who worked on it can take pride in a job well done.

Finishing out the convention summer was CascadiaCon, the 2005 North American Science Fiction Convention held outside Seattle, Washington, across from Sea-Tac Airport. NASFiCs are a challenge under the best of circumstances. They take 90% of the effort of a Worldcon and even when well done get their organizers only about 10% of the egoboo as a well-done Worldcon. The Seattle committee worked hard to make their convention a success (as Fan Guest of Honor, I had nothing to complain about), but were hampered by a badly spread-out set of facilities. While NASFiC is supposed to be a North American convention for the benefit of fans who cannot afford the trip overseas,

CascadiaCon felt more like a large regional, perhaps a successful Westercon. And a reasonable success it was. There continues to be talk among the Seattle-area conrunners about bidding for another Westercon, or possibly a Worldcon. Seattle last hosted a Worldcon in 1961, using one of the hotels that was part of the NASFiC site. (That hotel will be torn down shortly, victim of an airport expansion project.) Whether they will successfully bid for another Worldcon in the near future remains to be seen.

So ended a busy convention summer season. As an interested participant at a high level as either an organizer or Guest of Honor at all three of these events, I have a somewhat skewed view of them from the average attendee, which makes an unbiased assessment difficult. However, all three of them were successful in their own ways. I do, however, think that we're seeing a decline in the number of people interested in what I call "general interest SF" as the number of what I think of as "specialist" events increases. Indeed, I found myself in Looking-Glass Land a few months after Westercon when a number of fans very seriously told me that events like Worldcon are the "specialist" events and it is the media-oriented shows that should be considered "general interest" because people are mainly interested in watching TV and movies — books are a minor interest of a small number of people. However, people have been predicting the Death of Fandom since before I was born, so I'm going to try and be an optimist and say that convention attendance continues to be steady, and that there continue to be new people coming into the community.

# Life in Ambergris

By Cheryl Morgan

Well boys and girls, I might not be able to see into your chimneys, but I know that you have been good this past year. After all, look what Santa has brought: a new Ambergris book!

Because it took Jeff VanderMeer a long time to establish his particular brand of squid-filled visions in the literary world, Ambergris seems to loom much larger than the actual quantity of material published. First we had short fiction, then there were the various incarnations of the collection: *City of Saints and Madmen*. Years later we finally have a novel, and it will come out from major publishers on both sides of the Atlantic. Thank goodness for that. But, I hear you ask, is *Shriek: An Afterword* worth the wait? Well, I guess it depends on what you were expecting, but I'd say a definite and enthusiastic "yes!"

Probably the most famous of VanderMeer's invented books, one that forms an entire section of *City of Saints and Madmen*, is *The Hogebotton Guide to the Early History of the City Ambergris* by Duncan Shriek. As it turns out, Shriek knew rather more about the city, and in particular about the mysterious gray caps or "mushroom dwellers" than he let on. Years after the book was published, Shriek's art critic sister, Janice (the woman who discovered Martin Lake) set out to write an afterword to Duncan's book. Before long her work turned into a full-scale biography of her brother and his strange fascination with the world beneath Ambergris, not to mention his relationship with fellow historian, Mary Sabon. Perhaps most importantly, however, Shriek's work sheds new light on the most famous period of Ambergrisian history: The Silence.

*More than two hundred years before, twenty-five thousand people had disappeared from the city, almost the entire population, while many thousands had been away, sailing down the River Moth to join in the annual hunt for fish and freshwater squid. The fishermen, including the city's ruler, had returned to find Ambergris deserted. To this day, no one knows what happened to those twenty-five thousand souls, but for any inhabitant of Ambergris, the rumor soon seeps through — in the mottling of fungi on a window, in the dripping of green water, in the little red flags they use as their calling cards — that the gray caps were responsible. Because, after all, we had slaughtered so many of them and driven the rest underground. Surely this was their revenge?*

---

From the point of view of the SF&F reader, that is exactly the sort of material that is expected. *City of Saints and Madmen* dangles many, many unresolved questions in front of the genre reader, and we are the sort of people who want to know what really happened. *Shriek* won't supply definitive answers, and it has to be admitted that the narration is highly unreliable. Neither of the major "authors" of the work is particularly sane, and one has spent an extended stay in the Voss Bender Memorial Mental Hospital. But a considerable amount of sickly green light is shed upon the doings of the gray caps nonetheless. They are down there, and they are up to things.

What is more, VanderMeer supplies us with some serious action. There is a war, and this being Ambergris it features terrifying gray cap fungal weaponry. If you are looking for SFnal material, here it is:

---

*I can remember watching from one end of a street as a fungal bomb blew up a few blocks away. It was one of those hideous creations that, dissolving into a fine purple mist, travels forward from the impetus of the blast and enters the lungs of everyone in its path, making them brittle statues that disintegrate at the slightest touch or breath of wind.*

---

All that, however, is only part of what you get with *Shriek: An Afterword*. Because in many ways the book is more like a mainstream novel than anything I have read in a long time.

What do I mean by that? Well, despite all of the fantastic material, at heart *Shriek* is about people. Specifically it is about three seriously dysfunctional people: Duncan, Janice and Mary. All three feature significantly in the story.

Janice, of course, is the author of (most of) the book. We know her as a successful gallery owner, art critic and society figure. In *Shriek* we find a very insecure woman, someone whose artistic ambitions far outweigh her talent and who makes it big largely by accident. The two constants in her life are her love for her eccentric younger brother, and her hatred for the woman she believes has destroyed his life, Mary Sabon.

We would know a lot less about both Janice and Duncan if VanderMeer had simply let Janice write her book without interference, but he has not. When she wrote her manuscript, Janice believed that Duncan was dead, or at least lost in the underworld, but his ability to navigate the world of the gray caps, not to mention his mastery of their sophisticated biotechnology, far exceeded her imaginings. When the manuscript was found and delivered to its eventual editor it was full of annotations in Duncan's handwriting, many of which flatly contradict what Janice has written.

That isn't surprising, because much of what Janice wrote is about Mary, the former student of Duncan's whose affair

with him cost Duncan his job and who later became one of his fiercest critics. Mary Sabon became a leading light of the Nativism movement, a political and philosophical view that essentially denies that the gray caps are in any way intelligent. More of this later, but first some comments on the structure of the book.

Normally when a writer produces a work written in two very different voices the publisher will opt to use some sort of typographical trick to help the reader follow who is speaking. Typically they will use a different font for each character. With *Shriek* VanderMeer and Tor have elected not to do this. Instead Duncan's annotations are simply shown in parentheses (thus). The rationale is apparently so as not to inadvertently place too much emphasis on one or the other narrative, especially Duncan's, which contains some pretty outlandish claims about the gray caps. Inexperienced readers may have difficulty working out who is speaking when, but most will not because VanderMeer's control over his characters' voices is superb. Most of the time you will have no trouble knowing who wrote what, and indeed you will delight in the by-play between brother and sister. Janice is given to excessive flights of colorful verbiage and strong emotion, while Duncan is much more detached and precise, but prone to make sarcastic comments on his sister's work.

---

*Ten years shall we fly across before we begin our slow, circling descent to the cause of Duncan's calamity. Those ten years brought five black books flapping their pages. Five reluctant tombstones. Five millstones around my brother's neck. Five brilliant bursts of quicksilver communication. Five leather-clad companions for Duncan that no one can ever take away. (Five progressively grandiose statements that stick in my craw.)*

---

For all the entertainment that the Family Shriek provides, however, it is Mary Sabon who is the key to this book. Duncan first meets her when she is a young history student and he a professor, and falls madly in love with her. Their affair is discovered and he is dismissed from his job. Later, and significantly during the war, they live together, but Mary is increasingly unable to cope with Duncan's obsession with the gray caps and his determination to explore the city's underworld. As the book progresses she falls deeper and deeper into denial, until at last denial of what Duncan has shown her becomes the entire core of her life. Here Duncan ruefully comments on her life after their separation.

---

*Worse, worse — I found she had taken up with another man, her own age, the son of her father's best friend, someone she had known for years. Someone comfortable. Someone safe. Someone with a "III" in his name.*

---

That should give you plenty of clues. Indeed, the comment about 'a "III" in his name' is probably superfluous. All you have to do is use the word "safe" and people know that you are talking about modern-day America. For all its bizarre and wonderful fantasy and magnificent characterization, *Shriek* is just as much a commentary on modern politics.

---

*The main appeal of Nativism to Ambergrisians was that it freed them from any responsibility to think about or do anything about the gray caps, while reassuring them that this was the most responsible thing they could do.*

---

That, of course, is the key to propaganda designed to promote an aggressive, militarist policy. Not only do you paint your enemies as less than animals, you convince your population that this is the right and moral thing to do.

There is much to enjoy in *Shriek: An Afterword*, in many different ways. Ambergris itself is as bizarre and wonderful as ever. I am also coming to the conclusion that the gray caps are the best-realized aliens since Gwyneth Jones's Aleutians. *Shriek* will be sold as fantasy, but in many ways it is a superb science fiction novel. Contrasted with that are the magnificent character studies. Some readers may get a little bored with Janice's self-pity or Duncan's sickly love-letters to Mary, but if you do find your attention wandering just skip through those pieces and you'll soon get to the war. Finally, *Shriek* is not just a great book; it is a great book with a very serious point to make. You can't ask for much more than that. Here's hoping we don't have to wait too long before the next VanderMeer novel.

*Shriek: An Afterword* – Jeff VanderMeer – Tor UK – 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 .

This issue we have five (yes, five!) copies of Jeff VanderMeer's new novel, *Shriek: An Afterword*, to give away to lucky subscribers. What is more, Jeff has offered to personalize each book, so if you do win I'll be asking what you want him to write when he signs it. If you are really lucky he might get Evil Monkey to sign it too. US readers should note that this is the UK edition we are talking about. You won't be able to get the Tor edition in shops until August. Enormous thanks to Jeff and Pan Macmillan for their generosity. The draw will take place on February 19th.

## One Hell of a Job

By Cheryl Morgan

Back in 2001 Liz Williams got a BSFA Award nomination for an *Interzone* story called "Adventures in the Ghost Trade". It featured a certain Inspector Chen, who specialized in supernatural crimes, and it was rather good. Little did I know at the time, but Williams had actually written an entire Inspector Chen novel (and I still don't know which came first). That novel is finally seeing print from Night Shade Books, and I am at a loss to know why it has taken so long.

Before we get into the story, however, let me direct your attention to the superb cover by Jon Foster. It you are reading this on the web site you should be able to see a thumbnail of it. This is the cover that had everyone at World Fantasy Con going, "ooh, ahh," and buying the book. It really is lovely.

Anyway, as I said, Inspector Chen specializes in supernatural crime. This, inevitably, means that he must have dealings with Hell. Indeed, the entire case around which this novel, *Snake Agent*, is built involves the kidnapping of the ghosts of innocent young girls bound for Heaven and putting them to work instead in Hell's brothels. Dealing with Hell is not easy. Chen is Chinese, and therefore used to impenetrable bureaucracies, but Hell can make even

the British National Health Service seem positively friendly. Fortunately Chen knows far more than most humans, let alone most police detectives, about Hell. He has a good informant.

---

*He turned and looked at his wife. In the dim light of the houseboat, her pupils had expanded until they lay like dark wells among the elegant planes of her face. Only a thin rim of crimson delineated each iris. In this light, Chen thought with a rush of affection, she might almost be human.*

---

Then there is his partner. For the purposes of this case Chen is required to work closely with Seneschal Zhu Irzh of Hell's Vice Squad. He's young, single, and a bit of a lad, but not so bad as demons go, as long as you don't insult him.

---

*"Are you accusing me of having* principles*?" The demon said, outraged. Chen did not see the demon move, but the unwavering tip of the katana was suddenly at Chen's throat. Zhu Irzh took a gliding step forward; Chen back away until he was up against the wall. He stared along the black blade, to meet the demon's golden eyes.*

---

Of course things are never quite that simple. The interests of Earth and Hell are not always closely aligned, even on joint investigations, especially considering that Zhu Irzh is secretly working for the First Lord of Banking, one of Hell's most powerful ministers. Then there are those busybody nuisances in Heaven who disdain to act directly in worldly affairs but who get seriously stroppy if their agents, of whom Inspector Chen happens to be one, fail to follow correct procedure. Not to mention the matter of the professional demon hunter that Beijing has sent to help with the case. You know the sort: never laughs, utterly dedicated to the cause, black leather trenchcoat, big sword and gun, only hobby would be watching Clint Eastwood movies, if he allowed himself hobbies, which as a devout Maoist he does not.

---

*"This is most unorthodox! To knowingly involve a hostile in the course of an investigation displays a degree of ideological unsoundness that I can only condemn."*

---

And if all that wasn't bad enough, the case turns out to involve Chen's in-laws who are simple vendors of gourmet blood and not well equipped to deal with Infernal politics. Thankfully Chen has a visa allowing him free passage into Hell where he and Zhu Irzh can set about bringing the bad guys from the Ministry of Diseases to justice (or at least what approximates for justice in Hell).

---

*"You have television here?" he whispered to Zhu Irzh. Somehow this was an aspect of Hell that had passed him by. The demon merely grinned.*

*"Who do you think invented it?"*

---

All of which adds up to a highly amusing and entertaining romp. It is the closest thing I've seen yet to a Kim Newman vampire novel. Williams takes the whole Chinese mythology angle absurdly seriously and combines it with some biting satire about the real world. If the likes of Michael Chabon and Chris Roberson want to revive the spirit of the pulps, they need Inspector Chen stories.

Given the fabulous cover and Night Shade's new found prominence in the US publishing industry I'm expecting this book to sell well. I hope so, because I

foresee several other Inspector Chen novels in the near future.

*Snake Agent* – Liz Williams – Night Shade Books - hardcover

## Aztec Invasion

By Cheryl Morgan

One of the reasons I like looking for books written by people from different cultural backgrounds is that they tend to produce interesting SF worlds. Tobias S. Buckell lives in Ohio, but he was brought up in the Caribbean, and that background shows in his first novel, *Crystal Rain*.

The world of Nanagada, or at least that little we see of it, is very much a Caribbean society. Its people are brown skinned, some of them practice Voudun, and many of them spend a lot of time in boats. Yet it is clear that only a few generations ago they spent time in ships of a very different sort. They still have airships, and there is talk of lost science that some in the community wish to recover and others want banned for fear of what it can do.

Naturally the people of Nanagada speak a language that is somewhat different fom American English, but it is not as dense as that of, say, Nalo Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber*. Here's an example:

*"What happen?" Then Keisha saw the kitchen table, the bloodied man, and gritted her teeth. "Where he come from?"*

*Jerome pushed into the kitchen from behind her and started at the man. "He fall from he airship all stuck up in we mango tree."*

I can't imagine many readers having difficulty following that, unless they don't want to do so.

But how come there is this injured man on the table? Do we have a plot here? We sure do, for south of the charmingly named Wicked High Mountains are the lands of the Azteca, a degenerate people who worship strange beings called Teotl. These self-styled gods demand regular blood sacrifices, and all-in-all the Azteca would prefer to sacrifice those dark-skinned northerners rather than their own people.

*The war gods proclaimed the Azteca to be the fiercest human warriors in all of time. The gods had chosen to bring the Azteca into this world to capture prisoners for sacrifice. Thus their crops remained fertile.*

As the book opens, the Azteca are in the process of launching a major invasion. Defense of Nanagada falls to a rather informal government in Capitol City, led by its young Prime Minister, Dihana, who has the job mainly because her father did, and a rag-tag volunteer army of bushmen and hunters led by General Haiden. It all seems pretty hopeless. Haiden, however, knows that more powerful weapons are available. There are machines from the time of the oldfathers. There are even people who are said to have machines in their blood, machines that have allowed them to live for hundreds of years, and which might give them superhuman strength and skill. Unfortunately most of these people are cowards who are more interested in longevity than fighting, and would rather trade their secrets to the Azteca than resist. Haiden and Dihana's only hope is John deBrun, a man who claims to have lost his memory, but who has not grown noticeably older in all the time they have known him.

Unfortunately deBrun's village was one of the first to be overrun by the Azteca.

Of course they have other problems too. The Azteca are not all of one mind. Those who wish to defy their Teotl overlords generally flee across the mountains and are granted asylum. They have their own quarter of Capitol City in which to live, and call them selves Tolteca. Some of them, however, are bound to be spies.

And then there is Oaxyctl (O-ash-k-tul, as he keeps having to explain), a man born under the unlucky sign of the Ocelotl, a man who has been a double agent for so long he can no longer remember which side he is supposed to be working for, except when a Teotl takes a personal interest in his work.

---

*Sometimes doubt surfaced in Oaxyctl's head. He saw the heathen Nanagadans and all their varying religions on this side of the mountains, and the crops grew without any blood sacrifices.*

*But the Nanagadans would fall soon. The Azteca could not be stopped. The gods would rule everything. So doubt didn't matter. It would be over soon and Oaxyctl could live in a city and put this behind him.* Far *behind him.*

---

All of this results in a fast-paced pulp-style adventure during which we will find out much more about the history of Nanagada, about the alien Teotl, and about the mythical worm's hole in the sky through which both sides in the ancient conflict are said to have come to the world. There is, of course, a fair amount of revelation left for subsequent volumes, but *Crystal Rain* is complete enough in itself to provide a very satisfying first novel with a different and refreshing setting. Top marks too to Tor for getting John deBrun's skin color right on the cover.

Setting aside, what I liked best about this book were the characters. DeBrun himself actually has a good reason for his amnesia, and it affects his development. Buckell has done a good job with deBrun's teenage son, Jerome, for whom the war and discovering his father is some sort of old time hero come as a terrible shock. Minister Dihana, trying to do a good job but terrified that the men around her will take any excuse to depose her, is another bright spot. And Oaxyctl is wonderful. I do hope we'll see him again soon.

*Crystal Rain* – Tobias S. Buckell – Tor – publisher's proof

---

# Being Human

By Cheryl Morgan

Most of you will know Keith Brooke as the editor of the very fine online SF magazine, *Infinity Plus* <http://www.infinityplus.co.uk/>. But Brooke also has a secret identity as writer of scary children's books, Nick Gifford. Now he has decided to scare adults as well. His first SF novel, *Genetopia*, is due out from Pyr in February, and a very fine book it is too.

The basic premise is a modern twist on an old SF favorite, the post-apocalypse novel. So yes, mankind is reduced to tribalism and primitive technology, except that the disaster that destroyed civilization was not nuclear war, it was nanotechnology, and it might just have been partly deliberate.

Suppose you can use nanotechnology for genetic engineering. You can sculpt any sort of animal or plant to your purposes. What would you do? Well, making the

likes of dogs and monkeys a little more intelligent so that they can do useful work would be a good start. We've used animals as servants for millennia. Now we can make them better servants. Of course the most important feature we would want to build into that system would be one that induces a dog-like devotion to its human masters into the animal slaves. If we are going to create smarter animals we want to make sure that the humans are safe, right?

But suppose that technology gets lose. Suppose that outside carefully cultivated zones even the plants are deadly. Suppose that the nanotech gets into the air and that human children risk being born hideously deformed. What if it became hard to tell who was truly human and who wasn't? What if the punishment for certain crimes was a good dunking in the changing vats followed by expulsion from the community, or being sold as a slave?

Welcome to the world of *Genetopia*, a world in which absolute power has corrupted mankind absolutely. There are slaves to do all manner of work, but the remnants of humankind live in fear behind the palisade walls of their settlements, and everyone lives in fear of being denounced as impure by their enemies. Our hero, Flint, is young and as yet mostly uncorrupted, but as we shall discover he is already party to a dreadful crime. When his younger sister vanishes — he believes sold into slavery by his violent and abusive father — Flint sets out to rescue her. Along the way he, and we readers, discover far more about his world than we might want to know.

*Genetopia* is not a comfortable read. It is full of vicious and unpleasant people who have become that way because they have found that it works. The power that they have over their non-human "mutt" slaves has taught them to treat everyone with contempt. Brooke cleverly uses imagery from the real world's slave trade, from the persecution of Jews, from misogyny and so on to reveal the true message of the book.

---

*"To be human is to be fluid, unfixed. Open to change. Humanity is uncertain. Humanity today is not what it was yesterday, and it is only the start of what it will become tomorrow."*

---

The trouble is, given where biotechnology has got to today, that's a statement about our world, not a statement of science fiction.

I suspect that *Genetopia* is rather too disturbing to garner any major awards, but I warmly recommend it to next year's Tiptree Committee. It is, after all, a plea in favor of diversity.

*Genetopia* – Keith Brooke – Pyr – publisher's proof

---

## An Old-Fashioned Tale

By Juliet E. McKenna

They don't often write them like this anymore. Maybe they should.

*Daughter of Exile*, by Isabel Glass, is the story of Angarred Hashan, only daughter of Lord Challo. Lord Challo is an exile from the intrigues of the royal court, living in a decaying mansion. When he dies, Angarred finds herself impoverished and travels to the capital looking for answers to the puzzles of her father's life and death. She soon becomes enmeshed in those aforementioned intrigues, enlisting the help of a handsome wizard burdened by a secret sorrow. Together they encounter heroes and villains engaged in treachery, diplomacy, and using various magics for

selfless good and self-serving ill. Together with Gedren, honest serving woman, and Jerret, a truly noble noble, they foil a vile conspiracy. Success for some is won at the price of grief for others, lightened here and there with unexpected joy.

From the first few pages, this struck me as an irresistibly old-fashioned book. The writing style is predominately narrative rather than driven by dialogue, in the sense that we are being told a story rather than being present to witness it for ourselves. In fact this book would lend itself to being read aloud, something that's rarer than you might think these days. This shows just how well Glass uses narrative and summary. All too often writers attempting this style simple trundle along, telling us this happened and then that happened, and then he said this, and she said that. It's the literary equivalent to driving along at a steady 30 mph, no swerves or bumps in the road, unremarkable scenery flowing past the windows. By contrast, this tale speeds along from the outset, with endless twists and nicely original turns to compensate for the occasional predictable step or too-convenient coincidence. Here narrative summary means we're told what we need to know in short, pithy scenes vivid with vibrant description and intelligent use of telling detail. No time is wasted on irrelevance as the story moves swiftly along.

Many of the plot elements and settings are straight out of the traditional-fantasy handbook. We have backwoods nobles, a quasi-medieval capital city with a vast palace riddled with secret passages and a feudal court of treacherous lords and vapid ladies. There's a faintly oriental enemy, a mysterious college of mages hidden in a magical forest and even giants lurking. There's a stolen artifact that offers answers, power and ultimately a resolution. There are no intricate explanations as to how all this came to be or how everything relates to each other. That's not what this book is about. What matters is painting a satisfactory backdrop for the story. Each snippet of information we get about people and places and plans answers our questions as well as raising new ones, not sufficiently to distract but skillfully intriguing and prompting that all-important turn of the page.

As those pages turn, we see events unfold from new points of view as successive characters are introduced with deceptively well-crafted logic. Each one keeps the story moving and prompts ever-renewed curiosity. There's no danger of the narrative thread unraveling though, as Angarred's tale remains central. Like all of the characters, she's portrayed with essential simplicity. Bright, though naïve, she's courageous and determined in the best tradition of redheaded heroines. The wizard Mathewar cherishes a bereavement like so many solitary heroes while Gedren is a resolutely solid peasant, her son Labren a true-hearted foot-soldier. As with the scene setting, the characterization may be simple but it is certainly sufficient and the villains have believable, straightforward motives for their villainy. Crucially, while Glass has taken much from traditional fantasy, she's deftly thought her way around more dated aspects like the unthinking misogyny that can make such books unpalatable these days. There are other more 'modern' touches; Mathewar dulls the pain of his loss with an addictive drug and the various implications of that are shrewdly handled. Above all, there's an emotional truth to all these characters and their interactions.

I found this book a satisfying read for a cold and rainy January Sunday afternoon. It doesn't rewrite the rules of

the genre or offer an overwhelming immersive experience but there's no suggestion it claims to. It reminded me of all the simple virtues of traditional heroic tales that drew me to fantasy in the first place. Writing that kind of book these days, accentuating the positive and skirting the negatives, without falling into all the pitfalls of pastiche or predictability is harder than you might think. There's verve and charm and astuteness in the writing that leaves me interested to see what Isabel Glass will do next as she thinks her way around the central themes of fantasy fiction.

[Note: "Isabel Glass" is a pen name of Lisa Goldstein – Cheryl]

*Daughter of Exile* – Isabel Glass – Tor – mass-market paperback

## Saluting the Masters

By Mario Guslandi

Contemporary dark fiction owes a lot to literary icons of the past such as Edgar Allan Poe and other classical masters. The idea behind Gary Fry's latest anthology, *Poe's Progeny*, is to ask a bunch of today's genre writers to contribute a story paying tribute either to one of the old masters or to a standard subject such as the vampire, the werewolf, the haunted house etc. As a matter of fact in most of the tales included in this hefty volume the link between the current piece of fiction and the original model is very thin and the reference to the archetype must be intended in a very loose way. But what really matters is the quality of the stories and editor Gary Fry has managed to select, out of more than 400 submissions, a fair amount of good reading for the genre aficionados.

Obviously, to comment upon thirty stories by thirty different writers is an impossible task for the poor reviewer so, after mentioning that the book features the likes of Ramsey Campbell, Simon Clark, Mark Morris, Rhys Hughes, Gary McMahon, Allen Ashley, Steve Savile, I'll skip the ordinary and stick to the stories that I've found more accomplished and praiseworthy.

Mike O'Driscoll's "The Hurting House" is a cryptic but effective tale about two friends in love with the same woman and their deep suffering after her mysterious disappearance, while Mel Cartagena's "Bottom Feeders" is a nice modern retelling of the theme of psychic vampirism.

Joel Lane provides an excellent, cruel tale of violence and madness ("A Night On Fire"), and Conrad Williams contributes a dreamy piece of fiction revolving around a crime scene photographer and his difficult relationship with reality ("Once Seen").

The time-honoured subject of the haunted house is revisited quite efficaciously in Nicholas Royle's compelling "Sitting Tenant", while Richard Gavin's intriguing and atmospheric "The Pale Lover" pays tribute to Maupassant's disquieting journeys into the depths of evil.

Kate Sedia triggers cold shivers with the horrific report of the physical transformations carried out by a peculiar doctor ("Making Ivy"). Stephen Volk's "A God Unknown" is a delightfully ambiguous tale of life and death on a movie set, while John L. Probert's entertaining "The Volkendorf Exhibition" is a bizarre tale with a nasty ending in the tradition of the comte cruel and Andrew Hook's "The Pregnant Sky" an inspired Kafkaesque piece of fiction.

Editor Gary Fry's own "The Strange Case of Jack Myride and Company"

provides a fresh look at the concept of multiplicity and displays Fry's excellent talent as a writer.

Finally in "Papa Loaty", an American Gothic novella set in New Mexico, Donald R. Burleson skilfully recreates ancient horrors by means of great characterization and gripping storytelling.

All in all Fry's ambitious literary project must be considered fulfilled and successful, even though, admittedly, some of the distinguished contributors did not seem at their best.

The present anthology also represents the very promising debut of the new small imprint Gray Friar Press, which has already announced a number of extremely attractive new titles. If you're a horror fan, this is definitely an imprint to watch closely.

*Poe's Progeny* – Gary Fry (ed.) – Gray Friar Press - harcover

---

# A Prime Cut of Reel SF

By Stuart Carter

It's something of a truism in the genre that SF really doesn't translate terribly well to the big screen — and if you can still hear me over the gnashing of teeth and beating of breast from the, ahem, "Wookie camp" then let me just expound upon that statement.

Science fiction — proper, grown-up, following-the-rules science fiction — is a genre that presents unique problems in translation into a more visual medium. For example, we have enough trouble with unrestrained "infodumping" intruding upon the action in SF novels, let alone in SF films, which — rather peculiarly, if you think about it — are generally constrained by a sheen of "vérité" far more than any more conventionally located film, perhaps because the "reality" of the SF film is already a fragile enough construct, and to place any further strain on that construct, e.g. by stepping outside an already fictionalized narrative to explain a point that any inhabitants of the narrative should, almost by definition, already know, would be a step too far down the road of pure fantasy.

So the SF film is the victim of an often-crippling tension between the need to *appear* plausible, to *look* real, and the need to *explain* itself to us, so that we can *understand* where we are and how we got there. One might almost say that there is a tension inherent in the title of the genre between the need of *science* to explain itself, to make us understand, and the *fiction* to simply tell a story. In any kind of SFnal storytelling the explanation and the appearance are frequently at odds, but this is most apparent in cinematic SF. How to get across that the strange silver shower cap on our heroine's head is a mind-reading device with terrible side-effects? It isn't obvious to us in the way that, say, a large, hollow, noisy, metal box sitting on four pieces of rubber is a transportation device called a "car"; we require some background on the purposes (and possibly the development) of strange silver shower caps with terrible side-effects.

SF films often don't have the time to do this, however, because most sane audiences don't have the interest or necessary attention span to sit through, say, the professor's spiel about how he came up with the idea of mind reading through the use of strange silver shower caps with terrible side-effects. So it strikes me that genuinely SFnal films, those sailing most perilously close to the platonic ideal of SF, are going to be very allusive in their workings using, as they do, things that do not exist, and

employing them in a realist setting. Genuinely SFnal films, for example, like Darren Aronofsky's *Pi* — an SF film *par excellence* in my book — must explain themselves as they go along, building a rickety bridge of cause and effect to explain new things that the logic of the film's reality *requires* we understand. Aronofsky already has enough on his plate trying to explain this strange world of advanced mathematics we find ourselves in, so he must use a privileged first-person narrator whose personal notes we are privy to throughout. Without this technical backup his narrator is merely a delusional madman. So this SFnal cinema of ideas has its real, if ill-defined limits, levels of evidence and difference beyond which it cannot go without sacrificing understanding. Some kind of explanation, in some form, is absolutely necessary in this class of film.

Then there are genuinely SFnal films like Shane Carruth's *Primer*. *Primer* is a dense geometric block of a film, unforgiving to even the least casual viewer. It follows two young American scientist-technicians, Abe and Aaron, as they discover a working form of time-travel. We then see how they develop it, how they decide to use it and how ultimately it drives them apart. Like *Pi* and also like another worthwhile piece of cinematic SF, *Cube*, *Primer* is a low-budget film (although a *much* lower budget than the other two films, at a bare $7,000), and all three are intelligent pieces of cinema, veering towards arthouse, in that they're not big-screen blockbusters — *Cube*, the nearest of the three to a mainstream work, is also, notably, the least intellectually challenging of the three. *Primer* is the most challenging, even without the math of *Pi*, primarily because it makes no concessions to its audience. There is no cozy voiceover explaining events, no advisory subtitles, and no character says, "Tell me, professor …" It *looks* and *sounds* very real — the time travel and everything connected to it is stunningly dull and unglamorous — but there's no backup evidence onscreen, other than that which you see occurring, and once the idea of the time travel device is established then everything else is simply a logical extension of this single, simple idea. It's the classic old SF idea of taking one tiny part of the world, changing it and seeing what happens.

We begin with four guys chatting about technical stuff in a garage where they run a small electrical parts business. The conversation is not very interesting and the sound pickup throughout isn't particularly great either. Through a series of flash-forwards and tense but impenetrable experiments involving Weebles, disassembled microwaves and catalytic converters, *something* is discovered. Flash further forwards and the *something* is clarified. A bit.

Eventually, after much more cramped technical conversation, the *something* is discovered to work as a form of time travel. And now is when you, the viewer, should sit up and start to pay some real attention — but, of course, this is *time travel* we're talking about, and so you really needed to have been paying attention *before*. But it's too late now, and you'll watch the rest of the movie and blink helplessly as it snowballs in complexity to a car-crash ending.

And then you'll watch it again to try and figure out what the hell just happened.

*Then* you'll probably watch it *again* to try and find out what happened just before the bit you were concentrating on before. And even though there's a privileged narrator doing voiceover, his cryptic pronouncements don't initially shed very much light on events. But this is what I love about *Primer*: It's a smart person's film, you have to be awake and

alert and *thinking* to enjoy — let alone understand — what's going on, and in that sense I think it's a very, very pure strain of hard science fiction movie — "SF" rather than the conventional "Sci-Fi" of the movies. So, given what I've already said about SF and arthouse, could it be that hard SF movies, as a genre, are perennially suited only to the arthouse, away from the big-budget glare of mainstream success? Discuss.

*Primer*, as I've already noted, is shot on a microscopic budget, which surprisingly seldom shows, and as a negative feature only in that some of the dialogue is almost impossible to hear, let alone understand (and this is after a great deal of it was redubbed, according to director Shane Carruth!). But it's worth noting that this only helps to add realism to *Primer* – everything is not perfect; on the contrary, we have to strain to hear dialogue, and what we can hear doesn't make much sense because of one of three things: either it's familiar banter between friends, engineering technobabble or, more importantly, we're missing the deeper structural context behind it.

On the surface not a very great deal happens in *Primer*'s 77 minutes, but further viewings reveal a looping, recursive structure that may, or may not, coalesce into a final causative system. I've yet to entirely figure out this fascinating and remarkable film, but I do know that I'm prepared to invest repeated viewings in order to do so. There's a logical and discernible structure in there somewhere, and given time I'm certain a diagram can be drawn of it such that I can trace all the time-loops and various doubles of Abe and Aaron that scurry through this true geek masterpiece — I just haven't managed it yet!

*Primer* – Shane Carruth - New Line Home Video – DVD

# A Smax Upside

By Peter Wong

Alan Moore and Zander Cannon's mini-series *Smax* (originally titled *Smax the Barbarian*) has finally been collected in book form. For readers sighing at encountering the umpteenth iteration of a fantasy cliché in their reading, this tale provides the perfect revenge.

*Smax* is a spin-off of the Alan Moore-penned comic book series *Top 10*. Jeff Smax and Robyn Slinger (a.k.a. Toybox) are super-powered police officers in the city of Neopolis. At the end of the previous issue, Smax had asked his partner to accompany him to his home dimension to attend his beloved Uncle Mack's funeral. Toybox accepted, despite Smax's vague warning of complications.

Up to this point in the series, the blue-skinned misanthropic giant never talked much about himself or his past. Readers knew Smax kept someone or something in his closet that talked to him in gothic script, but not much else about him.

*Smax* fills in the titular hero's background. Jeff Smax hails from parallel Earth-137, one where magic readily exists and technology is roughly stuck at the medieval level. The voice in Smax's closet comes from an artifact of this Earth, a literally singing sword. Compared to the more scientifically advanced and lower-numbered parallel Earths, Smax's home Earth is the equivalent of the sticks. Hostility and perpetual surliness are Smax's means of covering his embarrassment at hailing from a backworld.

Despite some similarities to her home Earth, Toybox is entranced by much of what she encounters in Earth-137. She's

also flattered that her partner trusts her enough to talk about his past. Smax's goodwill account quickly gets emptied after Toybox meets Smax's twin sister Rexa. The policewoman had thought of her partner as a "big, irritating dog that I didn't really want." Supposedly, the feeling was mutual. Yet now, Smax passes his partner off to Rexa as his wife. Toybox is openly furious at being tricked and used, especially after her partner refuses to offer any explanation.

It takes Toybox's threat to go home alone before Smax confesses the embarrassing truth. His lie about his marital status would allow him to evade marrying Rexa. Even though Smax has deeply loved Rexa since childhood, marrying his sister would confirm the stereotypes about his backworld roots.

But a far bigger source of shame prompted Smax's departure from Earth-137. Smax used to be a famous dragonslayer named Jaafs Macksun. His last job was to rescue Princess Naruli from the clutches of the dragon Morningbright by slaying the creature. But Smax underestimated the wiliness of his opponent, and the job ended in a disastrous fashion. Guilt-ridden and deeply ashamed, Smax gave up the dragonslaying businesses and moved to Neopolis.

It soon becomes clear that Smax was fated to return to his home dimension to remedy this bit of unfinished business. Accompanied by Toybox, Rexa, and the inevitable dwarves and elf, the former dragonslayer unwillingly embarks on a quest to slay Morningbright. But the dragon is not a creature that can be defeated through strength or force of arms, which is all Smax can offer. Despite her unfamiliarity with Earth-137, Toybox is determined to find a way to help her hard-headed partner.

Dwarf: "Uh…but, with respect, Miss, Morningbright's a **dragon**."

Toybox: "Yeah. And a **murderer**, and a **child abductor**, and an industrial strength **polluter**…and I'm a **police**."

Alan Moore has previously used *Top 10* to quietly ridicule pop culture. One of the series' more memorable images was that of a drunken Godzilla with a pronounced beer belly.

*Smax* allows Moore an opportunity to mock the mindless escapism underlying the typical fantasy quest series. Such series may ostensibly deal with the primal conflict between good and evil. Yet the worlds and characters engaged in that conflict appear to him as simplistic facades that remain emotionally unattached to our world. So Moore decided to bring the real world to the lands of fantasy. Earth-137 is a fantastic land where a Health Department regulates the price of rooms in a cursed tavern, gold eggs must fight off currency devaluation from magic beans, and land speculation makes finding affordable housing difficult.

Smax: "See, what it is, all the wizards and heroes buy second **homes**, places like here in the Dell. Property prices **rocket**. Castles, even a decent **cave**, down payment's gonna be one, two gold eggs. **Minimum**."

Moore also strips away romanticism and even the cookie cutter nature of many heroic fantasy quests. Smax prefers to leave Earth-137 and let Morningbright rampage freely. Only when enough omens arrive to choke half a dozen horses does he feel impelled to change his mind. The assemblage of the heroic band is treated like applying for a driver's license. Smax must stand in long lines for hours. He must also satisfy a bureaucrat that his party has the requisite number of dwarves and

wizards before he can be issued a questing license.

The quest journey is rendered as a realistic task and not an imaginary vacation. It's a miserable process not far removed from marching to war, and Moore and Cannon make sure the reader realizes it. There's the sight of forests reduced to burning twigs and refugees literally fleeing with just the clothes on their back. The most disconcerting moment, though, is one that Toybox likens to encountering the massacre sites in Bosnia and Cambodia.

In Moore's eyes, sentimentality has undercut the potency of fantasy. He shows his disdain for such fantastic sentimental clichés as a unicorn, a mermaid, and a pair of cherubs. Those creatures appear only as courses on a dinner meal. Even the music of ABBA becomes little more than a soundtrack to Smax's confrontation with possible death.

Finally, despite his being the titular hero of the story, Smax's machismo receives justifiable criticism. He doesn't understand why his lie about being married to Toybox came across like a betrayal of her trust. Nor does he admit that Morningbright's defeat requires more than punching the dragon until he stops moving. In the end, it is Toybox's ingenuity that solves both of Smax's problems.

In the end, Moore's criticisms of standard heroic fantasy stand revealed as an act of literary refurbishing. Fantasy and myth are fictional ways to illustrate the lighter and darker aspects of human behavior. Smax's account of his childhood would fit into this tradition, as it's filled with rape, incest, and a nasty fratricide. Subscribing to romanticism and sentimentality means subscribing to self-denial of the existence of the weaknesses of human behavior. Morningbright saw the emotional weakness that Smax carried since childhood, and exploited it. It was only after Smax acted despite that weakness that he became a true hero.

Zander Cannon's lighter artwork may disconcert *Top 10* fans who adored Gene Ha's gritty artwork on that series. Yet given that Earth 137 is beautiful and simple compared to the urban freneticism of Neopolis, Cannon's artwork is entirely apropos. This is not to say that Cannon's art fails during the grimmer parts of *Smax*. The death of one of Morningbright's victims and the aftermath is told in an effective series of silent panels.

Fans of *Top 10's* throwaway references to other fantasy works will be pleased by the visual jokes offered in *Smax*. The book offers everything from a brief reference to the old animated series *Wacky Races* to Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* and its parody *The Dove*.

For those who wanted more skewering of fantasy clichés after finishing Diane Wynne Jones' wonderful tome *The Tough Guide To Fantasyland*, Alan Moore and Zander Cannon's *Smax* will be guaranteed to provide a new round of giggles and tears.

*Smax* - Alan Moore and Zander Cannon - Wildstorm – graphic novel

---

# Lost Prince Turns Messiah

By Cheryl Morgan

No, this is not *Dune* we are talking about here. Or *Star Wars* for that matter. If you are a good enough writer you can wring new life out of the hoariest of old clichés. And Richard Paul Russo is a good writer; so don't give up on *The Rosetta Codex* because of a few unoriginal ideas.

The book begins with a ship carrying 5-year-old Cale Alexandros and his wealthy, powerful father being shot out of the sky above Conrad's World. Cale and his bodyguard, Sidonie, eject in a small flyer, but they crash in the wilds. Sidonie is raped and murdered, and the boy taken as a slave.

It turns out that Conrad's World is very much a frontier planet. It is full of villains and ruffians of all sorts. Even when Conrad has escaped from slavery — thanks in part to a Mysterious Stranger called Blackburn — he finds the capital city, Morningstar, almost as dangerous. The one bright spot in the local culture is a group known as the Resurrectionists. Naturally they catch Cale's interest.

Here Russo switches to another cliché, that of the lost civilization. We are talking about the aliens known as the Jaaprana. I say "known as" because although they have left extensive ruins and much written work on many worlds, the language of the aliens has as yet defied translation. Treasure hunters talk of the mysterious Rosetta Codex, a book written in both the Jaaprana language and several known languages. If it can be found, the secrets of Jaaprana technology can be unlocked. But legend also has it that the Codex speaks of a chosen one, a Messiah who will find the Codex and use it to restore the entire Jaaprana race to life. Guess who?

Of course not everyone thinks that resurrecting the Jaaprana would be a good idea. Some are understandably terrified of the technologically superior aliens. Others just can't see why mankind would want to risk letting a potential competitor into their universe. Cale's most energetic opponents are a group of elective cyborgs called the Sarakheen, who seem to think they are the future of the human race.

I did say at the beginning of this review that it takes a good writer to take clichés like this and make something of them. And Russo is a good writer. Throughout much of the book he demonstrates that. His world is interesting, his characters have some depth to them, and for the most part Cale's motivations are clear and believable. I enjoyed the book, and it kept me well entertained on a long flight to Boston. But having got to the end I was somewhat disappointed to discover that none of the complex endings I had been speculating about eventuated. *The Rosetta Codex* is altogether too straightforward and simple. Even the obvious and predictable twists don't happen. The only real surprise was that there were no surprises. Which is a big shame, given how brutally the book started. Can we have a Director's Cut, please? One that hasn't been castrated by focus groups?

*The Rosetta Codex* – Richard Paul Russo – Ace – trade paperback

---

# The War Effort

By Cheryl Morgan

One of the interesting things about this time of year is that everyone is putting out their "best of" lists for the previous year, so you get to find out which books other people thought were really good but you haven't read. This is especially so if you happen to be a contributor to the *Locus* Year in Review process. And one of the books that got mentioned a lot by the *Locus* staff was *The Narrows* by Alexander C. Irvine. Given that I really liked *A Scattering of Jades* there was no choice really; I had to get it.

Of course the cause of my wallet was not helped by the fact that on picking up the book in Borders I noticed that the front

cover blurb was by Jeffrey Ford. And that was quite appropriate, because if you want a "more like this" recommendation then Ford's work is a close match for *The Narrows*. Irvine's book is more upfront about its fantasy than *The Girl in the Glass*, but it's easy to talk about the book without mentioning fantasy at all.

The story is set in Detroit during WWII. The hero, Jared Cleaves, injured his right hand as a child and cannot hold a rifle, so the draft board has refused his pleas to let him join the troops. Instead he is helping the war effort by working in one of Henry Ford's many factories. It is a difficult time for a young, married couple. Jared's wife ("a proper Rosie the Riveter," as her mother says) has a better job than he does. They work different shifts and so hardly see each other. Other people are always running Jared down because he's not out with the troops. And of course there are loads of pretty young women around who have recently lost their husbands. It is really only 2-year-old Emily who is keeping the family together. Irvine writes about the kid with the wry passion of someone who has young children himself. Clearly he loves kids, but also knows how they can drive you to distraction.

All of which would not be so bad if Jared was happy at work. But he is working on a secret project that he can't talk about. He's actually doing far more for the war effort than anyone realizes. And consequently he has attracted the attention of German spies. They have a man in his project, but they can't get close to another new secret job that has started up in the factory where Jared's wife, Colleen, works. The Germans think they can pressure Jared into getting Colleen to spy for them. US military intelligence wants Jared to go along with them to try to net the whole German spy ring. It is all very messy.

About the only respite Jared has is watching sports. Of course all of the Tigers' best players have been drafted, but there is baseball of a sort. The Red Wings are better. As Jared's father points out, hockey is a game for drunken French-Canadian bruisers, and it's easy to avoid getting drafted if you are an alcoholic and have lost all your teeth.

Did I say this is a fantasy book?

Oh yes, Jared is working on a top-secret military project. The Ford production lines are hard at work pumping out anything that will help with the war effort. Jared works on what he and his colleagues call The Frankenline. Jared Cleaves' job is making golems.

As for the other secret project, you really don't want to know.

Even on the fantasy side, however, Irvine is never far from history. In particular he has picked up on the legend of the Nain Rouge. That's Red Dwarf in French. The Dwarf is an ugly little fellow with a devilish grin who appears just before some awful disaster is about to hit the city of Detroit. Irvine adds that the Dwarf has a habit of waving his genitals at people he appears to. (Is anyone thinking, "So that's where they got the idea for Lister from?") Naturally Jared gets involved with the Dwarf. And that gets his spymasters in the Office of Esoteric Investigations very excited. Not to mention the Germans.

Along the way we also get flashbacks to Jared's father's life as a traveling car salesman and whiskey runner during Prohibition. We get a glimpse of the racial tensions and management-union struggles of wartime Detroit. The Narrows is a good fantasy book. But it is also an excellent historical novel with some great characters. No wonder the *Locus* folks were enthusing about it.

*The Narrows* – Alexander C. Irvine – Del Rey – trade paperback

# Us and Them

By Cheryl Morgan

I don't often review YA books in *Emerald City*. I'm overwhelmed with review requests as it is, and YA is a useful line that can be drawn. But every so often I make an exception, and I'm making one here for *Magic or Madness* by Justine Larbalestier. There are several reasons for this. To start with Justine is a "mate" (technical Aussie term meaning "good friend") and a fellow cricket fanatic. Also lots of people in the industry have been very complimentary about the book. And perhaps most importantly it is a book that examines cultural differences between Australians and Americans. Like me, Larbalestier spends half of her life in North America and half of it elsewhere, so I was interested to see her take on the cultural issues.

There is, however, another rule about YA books I am breaking here. Normally when I review a YA book it is because it is something like Philip Pullman, which might be sold a YA but is really an adult book in disguise. Pullman's book might have teenage characters, but they are the sort of teenagers that a rather bookish adult like Pullman might imagine. They are not the sort of people you find slouching around at the shopping mall of a weekend. Larbalestier's book, on the other hand, is a book about teenagers for teenagers. The only content for adults is in the jokes. This is not really my sort of thing, because I have trouble identifying with the characters. If I were to be unfortunate enough to contract Alzheimer's, the first part of my life I'd want to forget is being a teenager. With that caveat in mind, here's a review.

As you have probably guessed, *Magic or Madness* is a fantasy novel. Which makes it rather odd that the lead character is called Reason and is a math genius. But then Ree's mother didn't hold much with magic, and wanted to bring her daughter up as far away from it as possible. You see Grandma Esmerelda is a witch, and not a very nice one either. So Ree's mum (technical Aussie term meaning "mom") took some fairly extreme steps to keep her little girl safe. This involved fleeing from one Outback settlement to another, one step ahead of the authorities. Because, of course, Ree's mother is quite mad. Eventually the police and social services catch up with them, the mother is put in an asylum for safekeeping, and Ree is given over to her Grandma's custody.

Naturally the first thing that Ree does is plan her escape. Esmerelda has an exceptionally nice house in Sydney, and has pots of money to shower on her runaway granddaughter. There's also the matter of Tom, the cute boy who lives next door, to consider. But Ree wants out of there, which is how come she opens the back door and steps out, expecting the sunny yard she can see from her bedroom window. And finds herself in New York in the middle of "winter" (technical Aussie term for a time when the sun isn't quite so hot and people play footie instead of cricket — many Australians have never seen snow except on TV and in the movies; a New York winter is a serous shock to the Aussie system).

The rest of the book is given over to finding out more about Ree's history, about how magic works in Larbalestier's universe, and exactly who are the bad guys. Ree gets shown round Manhattan by her new best mate, Jay-Tee, a streetwise runaway who is clearly not as trustworthy as she pretends. Much cross-cultural confusion results.

My favorite bits of the book are when Tom finally makes it to New York and

has to manage American restaurants by himself. The poor boy can't cope with the fact that when you order something you are immediately faced with a barrage of questions about how you want it prepared, and what you want with it. When Tom has finally got the waitress to leave him alone, the shifty looking woman dressed all in black at the next table starts on at him about how asking all these questions is an evil government conspiracy. Yep, that's America all over.

So, *Magic or Madness* is indeed a fun book. While there's not a lot of deep philosophy in it, it does have complexity of plot and an interesting background. Magic in Larbalestier's world is most definitely not an escapist panacea.

There will, of course, be sequels. We have to find out which boy Ree is finally going to end up with. Will it be the sensitive Tom, or Jay-Tee's handsome and athletic brother? I know who I'd go for. Any boy who can make me dresses that look as if they were Vivienne Westwood or Thierry Mugler originals and isn't gay is pretty hot property, but you never know with Australians and their obsession with sport.

The bits I am really looking forward to, however, are those where Ree gets to introduce Jay-Tee to Sydney and the Outback. Next volume please, somebody. And a packet of Tim Tams.

*Magic or Madness* – Justine Larbalestier – Razorbill – hardcover

# Fighting Evil

By Cheryl Morgan

One of the annoyances of not being able to go to Interaction was that I didn't get to meet Glenda Larke. Meeting Australian authors is hard enough, but meeting Australians who live in Malaysia something of a challenge. Fortunately I still get to read Larke's books, which appear to be getting better with time.

As I mentioned in my review of *The Aware*, Larke has made a conscious effort to not write a formula fantasy, despite the fact that her books are about a sword-wielding heroine and her sorceress pal who go around fighting evil. Here are some observations on the second book in the series, *Gilfeather*.

There is quite a bit of observation about religion in the books. Gilfeather starts out with an unpleasant encounter with the Fellih worshippers, who are one of those classic old-men-with-beards patriarchies that you find in Sheri Tepper novels. An utterly odious bunch they are too. They are Larke's fundamentalist fanatics. But the official church, the Menod, are not too wonderful either, as exemplified by heroine Blaze's on-off relationship with the patriarch, Tor Ryder. Despite being a sword-wielding adventurer at heart, Ryder keeps insisting that he loves God far more than he can possibly love any woman, which of course messes things up for everyone.

Interestingly the new book isn't mainly narrated by Blaze, it is told primarily from the viewpoint of Kelwyn Gilfeather, a physician from a remote part of the Isles of Glory where the people claim to be not religious at all. What is more they are all pacifists and vegetarians. You might expect Larke to present them as being much better people than the religious types, but in fact most of them prove just as sanctimonious and intolerant in their own way. There's a point being made here and I like it.

Gilfeather doesn't only not believe in God, he doesn't believe in magic either. This is somewhat inconvenient when he gets mixed up in the affairs of Blaze, Flame and Tor. Although an Aware himself, and therefore immune to Blaze's illusions, he has difficulty explaining how other people appear to be taken in by them. Not to mention the fact that he doesn't quite understand why anyone would rush around the world getting into all sorts of dangers just to hunt down evil magicians. Of course he gets a rude awakening, but along the way he comes up with the theory that belief in magic is some sort of disease, and this is likely to have relevance in volume 3.

You see the books are still punctuated by reports from the foppish anthropologist, Shor Iso Fabold, who claims to have transcribed Blaze and Gilfeather's stories as part of a survey of the barbarous peoples of the Isles of Glory. Fabold is adamant that at the time he met these two old storytellers there were no magicians at all in the islands. I suspect that the third volume is going to tell us why that is the case.

As I noted in reviewing *The Aware*, Larke does not shirk from nastiness in her books. While her Evil Overlord does have some motivation for what he does, the "disease" of dunmagic does seem to cause practitioners to become particularly psychopathic in a manner that you normally only find in horror stories. I also noted that Larke's writing didn't quite have the maturity to convey the level of nastiness that her plots described. That remained true throughout most of Gilfeather, up until the last couple of chapters when our heroes finally manage to defeat the Evil Overlord and have to face the consequences of their actions. At this point Larke does something that Stephen Donaldson would have been proud of. When it comes to emotional torture of one's heroes, Larke is getting very good. I'm starting to like this series a lot.

I should warn you that the covers don't really convey the content very well. The Aware had the "my little sea-pony" cover. The cover of Gilfeather, for some odd reason, shows the delicate sorceress Flame wielding Blaze's big two-handed sword, and presumably in one hand as well because, as even the cover artist knew, Flame's left arm is an illusion — the real arm was amputated in *The Aware*. Also the cover shows a Viking longship while the book talks about ketches and brigantines. But I'm sure the PR people at Ace know what sells a book so we mustn't complain. The point is that the covers make Larke's books seem like comfort reading, and thankfully they most certainly are not.

*Gilfeather* – Glenda Larke – Ace – mass-market paperback

---

## Fallen Elves

By Cheryl Morgan

Regular readers will know that Storm Constantine novels generally receive a favorable reception here. Constantine's own publishing house, Immanion Press, covers a wide range of styles (I have a Tom Arden novel lined up for future review), but the pitch for Fiona McGavin's *A Dark God Laughing* was that it is in a similar style to Constantine's own work. Having read a sample chapter I was intrigued, and I'm pleased to say that the book is just as interesting.

So what has this got to do with elves? Clearly there won't be anything sweet and flowery. But, centuries ago, perhaps they were. Once the world of McGavin's novel was covered with trees and two races of people. The pretty Alari and the immortal enteri lived side-by-side in

peace. Then came the Westermen: tall, blonde and militaristic. They chopped down the forests. They built cities. They built factories that pumped out noxious smoke. The Alari became subjugated. The enteri got drunk and tried to pretend it wasn't happening.

Which is how come we have a book that asks what a bunch of immortal elves will be like a millennium after being kicked out of their forests by uppity humans and forced to live in the slums of cities. McGavin makes the assumption that if you are immortal you live for today, not for tomorrow, because tomorrow is endless and will always come at some point if you wait long enough. So the enteri try to adapt, or lose themselves in parties. They become different.

---

*By the edge of the lake, a castle built almost entirely of black metal teetered and twisted precariously, as if it had no foundations and might collapse at any moment. The huge plates of metal that formed the walls were creased like sheets of paper that had been rolled into balls and then straightened out again. There was a single tower that reached into the sky and swayed precariously in the wind. Gargoyles leered down at us as we stood looking up at the castle, and candles flickered within the narrow arched windows. Livid green waterweed drifted lethargically in the moat that surrounded it, and a bridge of coloured glass arched gracefully over the moat to the entrance.*

---

Yes, this is a book in which people have long hair, wear a lot of black and purple, and spend a fortune on kohl and nail varnish.

But it is more than that. To start with I haven't yet mentioned the hero. Alix is not enteri. He's an Alari half-breed, crossed with the Drael, another human race, and mortal enemies of the Westermen. And he's a sorcerer of sorts, though he knows little about his powers or how to use them. Hunted out of his own lands, he's hiding out in the grim city of Zoelon, a place full of religious fanatics whose favorite idea of a good festival is to build some big pyres and burn a bunch of witches. Alix isn't very safe in Zoelon.

Religion is the other main theme of the book. As you can probably guess, there are indeed gods. At least one of them is rather nasty, and one of the more interesting characters is Traize, the Drael high priest (or Voice of the Triple God, as he is known), who found out the day he got the job just how badly the Draels were being suckered.

The most interesting religious material, however, comes from ordinary people in Zoelon. Alix works in a factory and shares a room with several Westermen co-workers. There's Eric, who is a bully and uses religion as an excuse to victimize Alix. And simple-minded Smeek, irresistibly drawn to dark ideas. Coll, the most responsible of the group, tries to keep the peace but is torn between his essential good nature and his superstitious fear of anything different. Only Coll's girlfriend, Greta, is softhearted enough to have sympathy with anyone, no matter how strange, but that leaves her at risk from real evil. As for Alix, while he desperately wants to believe that he isn't the sort of monster the priests would make him out to be if they found him, the persecution and poverty he suffers makes it hard for him not to lash out.

As I hope you can see, there's a lot to this book. It isn't just people posing in black. Nor, somewhat to my surprise, is there a lot of sex. The enteri are androgynous, but this seems to be more for effect that any serious exploration of gender. I think the book needed a little more work. In particular some of McGavin's dialog sounded more like

people making speeches than natural conversation. But it is a very promising book and I'm keen to see where McGavin goes with the series.

*A Dark God Laughing* – Fiona McGavin – Immanion Press – trade paperback

## Breaking the Wall

By Cheryl Morgan

Here we are, back with Black Library's Dark Future series. These books are actually published under the Black Flame imprint because they are not quite based on Games Workshop properties. Workshop did once produce a Dark Future car combat game, which didn't have much to do with what some of us understood by the Dark Future concept. However, the books still class as tie-in novels. The original novels, edited by David Pringle, did sort of exist in parallel with the car game, but now the world has changed. Then we had Kim Newman, now we have Dave Stone. I know what you are thinking. Then we had a famous and popular writer. Now we have some hack for hire that no one has heard of. Right?

*Nobody has the nuts for inference in fiction, these days. There's quite enough of that in real life. The need things all spelled out for them when they read books.*

Yep, that's tie-in novels all over, isn't it, boys and girls? We know what they are like: linear plots, short sentences, no words of more than three syllables, no adverbs, and absolutely nothing subtle.

Somebody should have told Dave Stone that, because as you may have guessed, the quote above came from his Dark Future novel, *Golgotha Run*. If they had told him, he might not have used the word "gelid" twice, and he might not have written this:

*"… I like a somnambulating prolapse of coruscating bog-postmodernist elliptical prose as well as the next guy, but this is just completely disappearing up its own ass. We now have a grand total of* three *oblique but utterly ambiguous explanations as to what's going on – alien intervention, interdimensional incursion, and now even* time-*fracture references for fuck's sake – all to explain the big news that some guy meets this girl and they end up screwing. I really do have no idea why I read this crap."*

That was supposedly Masterton, the Gentech suit, commenting on a book he's been reading. But it is actually Stone commenting on what he has just written. Those three ideas have just been offered as possible explanations as to what is going on in *Golgotha Run*. I laughed myself silly when I saw what Stone had just done.

Of course it is also worth noting that if you are writing a tie-in novel you don't normally open it with a prologue that is based on a poem by Baudelaire. Nor do you follow that up with a quote from the French Dadaist writer, Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes. Really, Stone should know better. Anyone would think he was writing a proper book.

Now for the benefit of those of you who are beginning to worry about this book, I should point out that there is indeed plenty of violence in it, and a little sex as well. Much of it takes place on the road in America. Lots of gang cultists on motorsickles get wasted very messily and leave red-brown stains on the California blacktop. There's kind of gory stuff as well.

*Concrete stanchions reinforced the rock walls in the manner of the support superstructure of a cathedral dome. Their undressed surfaces seemed to have been colonised by some strange fungoid organism: fleshy webs of tendrils from which cilia rippled like the soft spines of a sea urchin; clusters of globular fruiting members that by some inner process appeared to give off their own light. Clusters of jewels sprouting in flesh.*

That was Stone channeling Duncan Shriek.

There is a plot of sorts. There's this guy, Eddie, and he's a bit of a drifter. But one day he comes across the wreckage of a corporate convoy and he rescues this preternaturally pneumatic babe, Trix, who isn't remotely what she seems. Then he gets taken in and Modified by the suits at Gentech and sent out on another convoy and lots of people die very messily and there are Things. They might be aliens and they might be demons and they might be creatures from beyond time, but they are probably something else entirely. You, dear reader, do not want to think about such matters, for you are merely human and your feeble mind cannot encompass the mysteries of the universe.

Goodness only knows what reading *Golgotha Run* will do to the minds of impressionable teenage boys — the traditional Games Workshop market is boys between the ages of 12 and 14 — but if it gets just one of them asking who the heck Baudelaire is then Dave Stone deserves a medal.

As for the rest of us, by the end of the novel Stone has us wondering what is really going on, and wanting to read the next book to find out.

*Golgotha Run* – Dave Stone – Black Flame – mass-market paperback

# Romancing the Aesir

By Cheryl Morgan

Kim Wilkins is an Australian author who I have been hearing good things about, but most of whose output to date has been horror. When Gollancz sent me a book of hers involving Norse gods I decided to give it a try. Then I almost thought I had been suckered. Amazon UK lists *Giants of the Frost* as Book 2 of the Europa Cycle. There's nothing on the book itself to indicate that it is the second part of a trilogy, though it is clear from the text that there's a lot of backstory to the characters' lives. Eventually I worked it out. The Europa Cycle is not a trilogy, but a lose collection of novels based on various European mythologies. The previous volume, *The Autumn Castle*, is set in Germany, and doesn't appear to have any immediate connection to *Giants of the Frost*. But maybe it does. The important point is that you don't need to read the one book to enjoy the other.

So far so good, but this little bit of confusion turned out to be indicative of a more general problem in that *Giants of the Frost* isn't really sure what sort of book it is. Despite being packaged as a fantasy it is, as with so much fantasy these days, actually a romance novel. The heroine, Victoria Scott, has just broken off an engagement to some guy who was obviously a complete rat, and has sworn off love forever (hah!). A meteorologist by trade, she takes a job on a remote weather station on the Norwegian island of Othinsey, thereby stranding herself far from civilization in the company of a bunch of hunky Nordic males. Naturally romantic complications ensure. She has trouble with her lecherous boss, Magnus, and is courted by the sweet but geeky Gunnar

(who is into Viking re-enactment and computer role-playing games).

Enter one tall, handsome stranger. But Vidar is no ordinary romantic hero. He's a SNAG, which in this case stands for Sensitive New Age God. It turns out that Othinsey (tr. Odin's Island) is the Midgard end of Bifrost, and the Norse gods still notice what happens there. Vidar, one of Odin's sons, is fated to kill Fenrir the wolf at Ragnarok, but these days he has turned his back on the drunken pillaging, looting and raping still beloved of Thor and his boorish pals, and has instead taken up the interesting hobby of falling in love with unexceptional and slightly neurotic mortal women simply because they happen to be the heroines of romance novels.

Of course there has to be a little bit more to it than that. While Victoria might imagine herself to be a thoroughly modern woman scientist who doesn't believe in gods or magic, Vidar is convinced that she is the reincarnation of his lost love, Halla, a woman who was savagely murdered by Odin a thousand years ago. He's pleased to have her back. His father is unlikely to see things the same way.

This is where things get confused, because it isn't just Victoria who doesn't believe in magic. The author doesn't appear to either. Vidar puts it like this:

---

*My father, Odin, believes himself a god. My brothers, uncles, sisters and aunts believe it too. I once believed it of myself, for we age slowly and only die if careless, but I no longer believe we are gods. I know now that we are just a race of people; petty, brutal, stupid people.*

---

And so the books goes. It is unfair to criticize a writer for not being Rob Holdstock, because his feeling for myth is exceptional, but it would have been nice to have some air of mystery in the book. Instead, for the most part, Wilkins writes the story as if it were a science fiction story. Everything is thoroughly matter-of-fact. The Aesir are simply long-lived aliens from another dimension. Except they aren't. If the Aesir are not gods, how come the Norns have the power of life and death over mortals with their spinning? How come Odin can control the weather? How come Vidar visited Hel in Nifelheim to bargain for Halla's life? How come everyone worries about Ragnarok?

There are parts of the book that Wilkins does really well. She's done a nice job of taking a minor character from Norse myth and making him central to her storyline, just as a good fantasy writer should. She has also managed one of the best characterizations of Loki I have ever seen. Aside from the end of the book (which is dreadfully disappointing) he's a perfect picture of sly cunning. He has more brains than the rest of the Aesir put together, and he's utterly cynical. But no one has any respect for him, so he is reduced to playing tricks on people and making them hate him even more.

If only there were a little magic in this book, it could have been so much better. But maybe if you are writing romance novels disguised as fantasy you can't ask too much of your readers.

*Giants of the Frost* – Kim Wilkins – Gollancz – mass-market paperback

---

# Verne the Unknown

By Cheryl Morgan

There are times when I think that Jules Verne is one of the least understood science fiction writers. To start with most

people outside France are more familiar with Verne's work through Hollywood, cartoon and comic adaptations of his work than through the books themselves. While I read a lot of Verne books when I was a kid, I now know that the translations I read were often, shall we say, inventive. With the release of *The Begum's Millions* by Wesleyan University Press I now discover that even the popular view of Verne's attitude to science is suspect.

Not long ago we discovered that Robert Heinlein, far from turning into a bit of a crank late in his life, had some very strange views on politics right from the start. You could see the roots of *Stranger in a Strange Land* and its successors very clearly in *For Us the Living*. It took Heinlein a long period of writing what his editors wanted before he could produce the sort of books he preferred. The same could be said of Verne's "lost" first novel, *Paris in the Twentieth Century*. That book was rejected for publication, not because of unconventional politics, but because it was too depressing. Verne wasn't at all convinced that technological development was a good thing, and his grim vision of a future Paris was deemed too downbeat to sell. One of the reasons that Wesleyan is interested in *The Begum's Millions* is that it is the book in which Verne was finally allowed by his editor to portray science in a potentially negative light. His work was never wholly upbeat again.

The other reason that *The Begum's Millions* is interesting is that it isn't actually Verne's book at all. It was written by a Corsican revolutionary called Paschal Grousset. Having fought alongside the Paris Commune, Grousset had been living in exile in the USA and London. His book was bought, probably illegally, by Verne's editor, Pierre-Jules Hetzel, but the manuscript needed polishing. As the book contained elements of SF, Verne was brought in to spruce it up. The arrangement worked, and Grousset ghost-wrote two other novels for Verne before he was pardoned and allowed home to write under his own name again.

But why, you are asking yourself, would a respectable and successful Paris editor like M. Hetzel risk his career buying a novel by a political exile? The answer to that is in the nature of the narrative, and the fact that France had just suffered the extreme embarrassment of the Franco-Prussian War.

Before we get to the plot, however, what is a Begum anyway? Verne (or possibly Grosset) tells us that it is the title given to the wife of a Raja. But Raja is a Sanskrit word and Begum is Urdu. My dictionary says that Begum is a title given to a Muslim woman of high social status. Maybe someone from that part of the world can give us a definitive answer on this.

So, there was this Begum, and she was very rich. When she died without obvious heirs, a firm of London solicitors was engaged to find someone to whom the money could be given. Eventually two men were found. One was Dr. Sarrasin, a French physician and scientist. Being a gentleman of good breeding and great intelligence, he vowed he would use the money to create a scientific utopia. The other beneficiary was one Dr. Schultze, a German chemist. He was unimpressed with Sarrasin's ideas.

---

*This enterprise seemed absurd to him and, to his way of thinking, was destined to fail since it stood in opposition to the law of progress which decreed the collapse of the Latin race, its subservience to the Saxon race, and, as a consequence, its total disappearance from the face of the globe.*

---

In order to prove his point Schultze resolves to build his own utopian society, run with perfect German efficiency. Not only will his community prove fitter than Sarrasin's, but it will also destroy it utterly. For Schultze, the purpose of science is to allow Germans to build better weapons, and thereby enforce their superiority over all other races.

Both men buy tracts of land in the wilds of Oregon territory where the US government, somewhat implausibly, allows them to build self-governing cities. Ville-France, Sarrasin's creation, is devoted to peace and prosperity through the application of science, in particular medicine. Sarrasin is determined that his citizens will be the healthiest in the world (even if he has to force them to be). In some ways Ville-France is scarily reminiscent of the city of Quaint from Steven Erikson's hilarious *The Healthy Dead*. But living in Ville-France is infinitely preferable to living in Schultze's Stahlstadt ("Steel City").

---

*In this remote corner of North America, surrounded by wilderness, isolated from the world by a rampart of mountains, five hundred miles from the nearest neighboring town, one could search in vain for the smallest vestige of that liberty which formed the strength of the republic the United States.*

---

It would be easy to dismiss Verne and Grousset's portrait of Herr Scultze as sour grapes on the part of a recently defeated, not to say humiliated, people. Except that their vision of a militaristic state dedicated to weapons production and led by an ambitious, racist madman proved scarily reminiscent of something altogether more real. Indeed, in his introduction Peter Schulman makes reference to a book from 1933 by Gaston Leroux that attempts to warn France about Hitler. When one character expresses concern about German ambitions another replies with the French equivalent of, "Oh, that's just science fiction, I read it in Verne."

Not that Verne and Grousset are entirely free of opinions that are a product of their time. One of the reasons that Verne's work tends to get heavily edited in translation these days is that the originals are shot through with racist and sexist commentary that a modern audience would find uncomfortable. The belief that each country's people had national characteristics that made them more or less fit for evolutionary competition with their fellow members of the human race was common throughout the West in Verne's day. It is also quite bizarre to hear one of the few female characters complain that it was terrible being a woman because there was nothing she could do to help defend Ville-France from Schultze. Tell that to Rosie the Riveter, love.

My overall impression was that *The Begum's Millions* is not a very good book. Certainly Verne has written much better, and he himself thought that Grousset's scientific ideas were implausible (but was persuaded not to change them by Hetzel). The only element of the book that seems genuinely Vernian is the telephone conference call system by which the council of Ville-France holds their meetings. But the quality of the book as a piece of science fiction is not the reason why it is being re-issued. *The Begum's Millions* is an important book, not only in shedding light on the history of Jules Verne, but also in the picture it gives us of Western Europe at the end of the Nineteenth Century.

*The Begum's Millions* – Jules Verne (tr. Stanford L. Luce) – Wesleyan University Press - hardcover

# Thoughtful Fantasy

By Cheryl Morgan

Last issue saw me enthusing about Margo Lanagan's *Black Juice*, but Lanagan is by no means the only Australian woman who is writing interesting fantasy short fiction. Lucy Sussex has been doing it for years — from way before Australian writers became fashionable. MirrorDanse, an Australian small press, has just issued a new collection of Sussex's stories, and it is well worth a look.

While the stories in *Black Juice* tend to strike straight at the heart, those in *A Tour Guide in Utopia* are much more likely to aim for the brain. Sussex mentions in her afterword that during the period from which the stories are taken she discovered a taste for "literary research". This can be seen very clearly in many of the tales.

My favorite story from the book, "La Sentinelle", is something that I think Jeffrey Ford might easily have written. The heroine is an ambitious young art curator sent by her boss to try to obtain items from the house of a recently dead collector for an exhibition. Annis soon discovers that the old man had some very strange tastes in antique dolls. Meanwhile, back in the 1930s, we readers are hearing some of the background story as a Freudian psychiatrist treats the original owner of the doll. It is an excellent tale, shot through with enough detail about antique dolls and 1930s France to sound thoroughly real. I found myself checking names on the Internet, just in case parts of it were.

Rather more real is "Kay and Phil". This is a tale about a Californian writer who is working on a book about a world in which the Axis powers won WWII. He is visited by an apparition who turns out to be a British writer called Katharine Burdekin. She also wrote a "Nazis win" novel, except she did it in 1937. Phil, of course, thinks he's taken too many drugs, but that doesn't stop him having an interesting conversation. Kay and Phil are both very real people, and now I want to find a copy of Burdekin's *Swastika Night*.

Many of Sussex's stories have feminist themes, and a good number of her characters are lesbians and even separatists. When Phil admits to having trouble with women and having been married three times, Kay retorts:

*"You amaze me. After I left my husband I made sure that I never again lived with a person of the opposite sex. It's too hard, Phil, being with someone who is human, like you, but oh, so different!"*

"The Queen of Erehwon" is a typical Sussex story in this mould. In some future Australia an anthropologist comes to study a country population that practices polygamy: one woman and many husbands. Naturally it turns out that the men still dominate the relationship, and the only way women can be truly free is to live without men.

Back with the literary research, "Merlusine" takes its academic heroine from a Cajun song and some scientific speculation about genetic diseases to a journey across the Southern USA and an explanation for an ancient medieval legend. The story is mainly a tale of unfolding research, but you can't help liking a heroine who sings "Marching Through Georgia" when driving through the South because all she can find on the radio is bad country music.

Only one of the stories, "The Lottery", is out and out science fiction. "Absolute Uncertainty" is about science — more specifically about Werner Heisenberg — but is more history than SF. Almost all of them, however, have what you might call a scientific, or at least rationalist, sensibility to them, despite the fantasy themes. Two of them I've seen before. "A Tour Guide in Utopia" appeared in a very fine anthology called *She's Fantastical* that came out in Australia while I was living there. "Matilda Told Such Dreadful Lies" appears in Jack Dann and Janeen Webb's *Dreaming Down Under*, published around the same time as the last Melbourne Worldcon. "The Queen of Erehwon" and "Absolute Uncertainty" appeared in *F&SF*, but many of the stories were only published in Australian magazines and won't have been seen by many people in North America or Europe. This is a shame, because Sussex is good. If you like your short fiction with a lot of thought and a strong dose of feminism this book is worth seeking out.

There is ordering information on the publisher's web site: http://www.tabula-rasa.info/MirrorDanse/.

*A Tour Guide in Utopia* – Lucy Sussex – MirrorDanse – trade paperback

# Out of Synch

By Cheryl Morgan

Top of the list this month has to be the fact that UK readers finally get a chance to buy Margo Lanagan's *Black Juice* from bookstores. It features a new story not included in the US edition. Thank you, Gollancz!

Still with Australians, Orbit have published Scott Westerfeld's *Risen Empire* as a single volume, which means that UK readers do not get to the end of Part I and find it ends with a major battle about to start and months to wait before the next book is out.

Gollancz are cashing in the success of Dan Simmons latest work by reissuing his previous work with covers that make them look like part of the *Ilium/Olympos* series. UK readers who haven't read the *Hyperion* and *Endymion* books should snap them up, especially *Hyperion* itself.

The only US novel making it into this column this month is Steph Swainston's *No Present Like Time*. The sequel to *The Year of Our War* will soon be available from Eos.

But, dear readers, don't forget novellas. Night Shade's edition of Steven Erikson's hilarious *The Healthy Dead* is now in the shops. Don't miss it, especially if you live in California. Remember, exercise can be bad for you.

*Black Juice* – Margo Langan – Gollancz – hardcover

*Risen Empire* – Scott Westerfeld – Orbit – trade paperback

*Hyperion Omnibus* – Dan Simmons – Gollancz – trade paperback

*Endymion Omnibus* – Dan Simmons – Gollancz – trade paperback

*No Present Like Time* – Steph Swainston – Eos – trade paperback

# Miscellany

By Cheryl Morgan

### Philip K. Dick Award Nominees

It has been another excellent year for the Philip K. Dick Award, the award for paperback novels published in the US in the past year. This year's nominees are:

*Cowl* by Neal Asher (Tor Books); *War Surf* by M. M. Buckner (Ace Books); *Cagebird* by Karin Lowachee (Warner Aspect); *Natural History* by Justina Robson (Bantam Spectra); *Silver Screen* by Justina Robson (Pyr Books); *To Crush The Moon* by Wil McCarthy (Bantam Spectra).

I'm particularly pleased for Justina who has been ignored by the US market for far too long. I'm also pleased for Peter Lavery at Pan Macmillan who is not only Justina's editor, but also Neal Asher's editor as well. (He also has this chap called Miéville on his books.)

As you probably know, Justina is a Guest of Honour at this year's Eastercon, Concussion, which takes place at Easter. The PKD winner is announced at Norwescon, which also takes place at Easter. This caused a small amount of running around. As far as I know, the plan is that Justina will still attend Concussion in Glasgow, but we will try to get some sort of hook-up to the Norwescon folks in Seattle. This may not be live, because the award ceremony is likely to take place at 5:00am Glasgow time (at which point the bar will just about be running out of Real Ale). We shall see. The Concussion web site <http://www.eastercon2006.org/> will have updates as and when I get them to post.

## Indian SF

Dr. Srinarahari has sent me a report of the annual meeting of the Indian Association for Science Fiction Studies, which took place in Mysore in December. The conference sounds to have gone well, with 200 people attending. The papers presented included subjects such as J.G. Ballard, Terry Pratchett, *The Matrix* and *The Life of Pi*, along which what look like a number of hard science presentations. Perhaps of most interest is the fact that they ran a 1-hour video conference with a group in Mumbai. Maybe next year they could do a link-up with someone outside India.

Or maybe I can work out some means of getting to Maharashthra in November. It is all a question of having the right frequent flier points, right?

## Hugo Nominating Time

As those of you who are part of the process should know by now (because you will have received your ballots), nominations are now open for this year's Hugo Awards. Those of you who have not need to buy your L.A.Con IV memberships by the end of January. And all that means it is time for you to get your ideas in to the *Emerald City* Hugo Recommendation List. <http://www.emcit.com/hugo_section.php?rec.htm> The more of you who express an opinion, the more of an effect you will have on those people who actually have a vote. Just because someone else has already suggested something doesn't mean that you don't need to. The more people who put their names to a recommendation the better that work should do.

A few technical points to bear in mind.

The Best Professional Editor split has not yet been approved by a second Business meeting, so Best Professional Editor will remain a single category this year.

*Emerald City* is no longer eligible for Best Fanzine because we've started paying some of our contributors (and because I say so). Instead we are in the Best *Locus* category (also known as Best Semiprozine). In theory any nominations for *Emerald City* in the fanzine category will be moved to Semiprozine if, and only if, there is space on the ballot. (If all five Semiprozine nomination slots have been used a new one can't be added.) If

the L.A. Con IV Hugo Administrator has a fit of nitpickiness (unlikely — John Lorenz has run the Hugos before and did a great job) or if you have five nominees already in Semiprozine, nominations for *Emerald City* in Best Fanzine **will probably be ignored**. You have been warned.

Not that I expect to win. It is the Best *Locus* category, after all. *Locus* is a much more impressive magazine than *Emerald City*, and it has Gary Wolfe. But it would be an honor to be nominated. Just like polling high in the *Locus* Poll, it would encourage people in the industry to treat *Emerald City* seriously – something we need much more now we are a professional concern.

Of course I am also eligible for the Best Dave Langford category, but I stand no more chance of winning that than *Emerald City* does of winning Semiprozine, so I'm not worrying about it.

Finally you may have noticed that L.A. Con IV has used its Special Hugo powers to create a one-off category for Best Interactive Video Game. There has been some discussion of this online, most notably Greg Costikyan complaining about there not being a category for boardgames or RPGs. I think it is an interesting experiment, but I wonder how many people will nominate anything, and whether the games they nominate will be SF. I haven't played a video game in about 20 years. Kevin plays *Locomotion* regularly, but it is hardly SF and only vaguely fantasy. Mark Kelly dug out some *Locus* Survey results that showed only 26% of *Locus* readers play video games, compared to 31% who read fanzines, 43% who read comics, and 71% who watch movies. This doesn't bode well. But Special Hugos are experiments, and thus are generally worth doing once.

Incidentally, if you think that the new category is a bad idea, the correct thing to do is to not nominate anything, and if the category does get onto the final ballot (which it may not if insufficient people nominate) to vote for No Award.

## BSFA Awards Short Lists

The short lists for this year's British Science Fiction Association Awards have been announced by Award Administrator, Claire Brialey. The lucky works are:

**Best Novel:** *9Tail Fox* - Jon Courtenay Grimwood (Gollancz); *Accelerando* - Charles Stross (Orbit); *Air* - Geoff Ryman (Gollancz); *Learning the World* - Ken MacLeod (Orbit); *Living Next Door to the God of Love* - Justina Robson (Macmillan).

**Best Short Fiction:** "Bears Discover Smut" - Michael Bishop (*Sci Fiction*, 26 October); "Bird Songs at Eventide" - Nina Allan (*Interzone* #199); "Guadalupe and Hieronymus Bosch" - Rudy Rucker (*Interzone* #200); "I, Robot" - Cory Doctorow (*Infinite Matrix*, 15 February); "Imagine" - Edward Morries (*Interzone* #200); "Magic for Beginners" - Kelly Link (*F&SF*, September - also collected in *Magic for Beginners*, Small Beer Press); "Soft Apocalypse" - Will McIntosh (*Interzone* #200); "Two Dreams on Trains" - Elizabeth Bear (*Strange Horizons*, 3 January).

**Best Artwork:** Cover of *Brass Man* - Steve Rawlings (novel by Neal Asher, published by Tor UK); Cover of *Elantris* - Stephan Martinière (novel by Brandon Sanderson, published by Tor); Cover of *F&SF*, January 2005 - Max Bertolini; Cover of *Interzone* #198 - Kenn Brown; Cover of *Interzone* #200 - Pawel Lewandowski; *We3*: chapter 2, pp2-3: "Run!" - Frank Quitely (with Grant Morrison and Jamie Grant, published by Titan Books).

Categories with more than 5 entries had ties in the nominating process.

The final ballot and award presentations will take place at Concussion (http://www.eastercon2006.org/), the 2006 Eastercon, with the award ceremony on Saturday April 15th.

### Solaris Launches

Following on from the *Golgotha Run* review, I'm pleased to hear that Black Library is launching a new imprint, Solaris, that will focus on original SF&F. Although most of their current output is work-for-hire style tie-in novels, Solaris will be a traditional publisher with normal contracts. I've known Marc Gascoigne for longer than almost anyone else in the business, and I have great confidence in his taste in fiction. This could be good.

It is worth noting, all of you writers out there, that Black Library has operations in both the US and UK, and generally publishes books simultaneously on both sides of the pond.

## Editorial Matters

By Cheryl Morgan

First up, huge thanks to Jeff VanderMeer for the feature article. Here's hoping you found it interesting.

Only one person commented on the web site change from an "all one page" format to "one article per page", and he was undecided. So unless several people yell at me over the next week or two I shall drop the "all one page" version entirely.

Not that it had quite the desired effect. Please excuse a small excursion into web site neepery. As you will recall, one of the objectives was to up the number of "page views" that *Emerald City* gets. And indeed with one page per article readers of the web site do look at a lot more pages. But, because the site content is generated dynamically rather than each page being a separate file, the web site stats still treat each issue as a single page. Which I guess shows just how stupid the whole "page views" idea is.

Not a lot is happening to me personally in February, but I'm pleased to note that I have got enough paying work in to allow me to go to ICFA in March. 2006 is starting to look up, finance wise.

As usual I have a huge number of books lined up for me to read. Those at the top of the pile include novels by Daniel Abraham, Tim Pratt, David Marusek, Trudi Canavan, Neal Asher and Tom Arden. There's a Lou Anders anthology, and a collection by Theodora Goss. I also have a book of essays by Samuel Delany. Better get reading, hadn't I?

Of, and we'll have a feature article by Gary K. Wolfe. Am I happy or what?

Best wishes,

Cheryl



For information about writing for, advertising with, or otherwise working with *Emerald City*, please contact Cheryl Morgan:

Email: cheryl@emcit.com
Skype: cherylmorgan