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Sprinting the Marathon

By Karen Traviss

So what's a nice respectable girl like me, a writer of serious intellectual SF, doing in a sleazy joint like media tie-ins?

That's one way of asking the question. The other way — and I get this from people who think they're flattering me — is: "Why are you writing this rubbish when you could be doing more Wess'har books?"

The word they use is almost always "rubbish," and when I challenge these folk — who really *do* think they're being nice to me — it always turns out they haven't even read my *Star Wars* novels. The other comment I get is that, because "rubbish" like tie-ins is clogging the shelves, "real" books don't get into bookstores. That's a belief that takes no account of the market realities of why the "real" books aren't on the shelves in the first place. But I digress.

I write media tie-ins for Lucasfilm as well as my own "original" fiction, and I realize that bewilders a few people. I always slap inverted commas on the word "original"; it's a meaningless term, partly because nobody can define originality, and partly because everything — absolutely everything — has been done before. A book's worth lies in its execution and the impact it has on the individual reader. So let's call it creator-copyright. That's the only hard line between the two.

On examination, my critically-acclaimed Wess'har series is as much set in a shared universe as any tie-in. It's a world of long-established tropes like everyone else's "serious" fiction: aliens, interstellar space flight, culture clashes, colonialism, armed conflict. Those are shared elements across SF. So why should similar shared elements in the form of continuity render a tie-in beneath contempt? You can, if you want to, take as fresh a look at that shared universe as you can your own. Lucasfilm let me question the heroic image of the Jedi and show them as a morally compromised elite who'd taken their eye off the spiritual ball. Some readers were unsettled by it. Most, though, leapt on it and said it was a question they always wanted to see asked.

From the writer's point of view, media tie-in fiction is harder and actually requires *more* original thought and creative effort than creator-copyright — provided you treat it and the readership with the respect both deserve.

The only people who believe it isn't harder and requires less creativity are those who haven't actually done it, or perhaps those who think they can coast on tie-ins and just phone it in. But readers can spot lack of effort a mile away in thick fog, believe me, and they'll never let the writer forget it.

The craft involved *is* more difficult. Having a foot in both camps, I can tell you that it's very easy to create your own characters and story arcs; the only holes you find yourself in are those of your own making, and if you need to kill off a major character or blow up the universe to fix them, you can do it.

In tie-ins, you don't always have that option. You often inherit characters (not always, because I have a complete *Star Wars* strand that's entirely made up of my own creations) and they have a life

of their own because of the surrounding continuity into which you're parachuted. You can't kill Luke Skywalker without George Lucas's consent, of course, or explore Yoda's origins: but that's a very small corner of a vast universe, and you can certainly push the limits in other areas.

Some characters have been portrayed a certain way for years: do you stick with that? No, you can look at them anew. You can ask why some of the Jedi are hypocrites. You can look at Boba Fett as a two-dimensional Mr. Cool with a jetpack, or dig deeper and see him as a very damaged man utterly alienated from normal society by a bizarre childhood and brutal teenage years. It depends how much effort you want to expend. And the more effort you expend, the more readers appreciate it.

At the nuts and bolts craft level, tie-ins are still not an easy ride. Basic techniques you fall back on in your creator-copyright world almost without thinking don't always work in the shared universe. There are no oranges in *Star Wars*, for example, so all the million-and-one little phrases that you've become used to in your own world — like orange-peel surfaces — are simply not in the tool box anymore. You're kicked outside of the comfort zone of your own unconscious writing and forced into the cold: the sense of writing by the seat of your pants can be overwhelming. The best I can liken it to is borrowing someone's Ferrari and not knowing if you're a good enough driver to take that hairpin bend. After finishing a tie-in novel, I sink gratefully into my seat and start work on one of my creator-copyright books for a rest.

Working with established continuity isn't always the uniquely limiting issue that some readers (and writers) seem to think it is, either. Continuity straightjackets you whether you create it yourself or George Lucas and your colleagues do it for you. My Wess'har series is now six books, so it's as hard for me to navigate through its continuity – and even remember detail - as it is for me to operate within the *Star Wars* landcape — except I don't have a content manager like the excellent Leland Chee at Lucasfilm to ask what canon says on a certain detail. That really would be handy, I can tell you.

The only practical difference with tie-in continuity is that it isn't solely in your hands. What makes it complex isn't the volume or the need for Lucasfilm approval: it's the state of constant and simultaneous flux. While I'm writing one tie-in novel or a short story, other authors and artists are adding their own components and twists to the shared universe. At any given moment, we have no idea if what we're creating will cut across anyone else, however closely we stick to outlines. It's common for writers to ask each other to accommodate changes to enable a certain storyline to take place, but it still needs constant vigilance because the devil really does dwell in those details. That takes craft. And, as sure as eggs are little oval cracky things, any slip in continuity will be seized and dissected by readers.

Another reason why I feel tie-ins require more technical writing skill to get them right is that the plot fixes and great ideas that hit you out of the blue have to be shared and approved. In your own universe, you can do as you please and probably not give it much thought, but changing an agreed outline in a tie-in impacts a lot of other people's work. You have to be hyper-aware of the building blocks of your story. You have to think things through much more thoroughly. Using the driving analogy again, it's the difference between driving on a deserted airfield and negotiating a six-lane motorway.

Does all that make tie-ins stilted and mechanistic? No. It just means that you have to apply conscious lateral thinking to what you do. And that's what makes me a better writer for having been through the School of Franchise Fiction: being forced out of my cozy corner of writer habits, I know that if I pull out into the wrong lane I might get hit by a truck if I'm not concentrating and checking my mirrors.

From the readers' viewpoint, another big difference might appear to be the time it takes to write a tie-in. But for me, there's no difference whatsoever. I put exactly the same thought and effort into any book or short fiction, and I happen to be a fast writer, so at the end of five or six weeks (I write full-time now) there'll be a novel of 150,000 words regardless whose copyright is on it. Inputs don't relate to outputs in fiction, and I like using my Wess'har series to prove to people that a six-week book is as good as a six-year book; it's all about your natural speed, and there's no right answer. The only constraint is that no publisher can wait six years for a tie-in. So media work favors the fast writer.

Now, here's the question that really ends up getting people choking on their latte: is tie-in work less demanding intellectually than copyright-creator stuff?

No.

I say again: no.

In fact, it opens doors to issues that you might not even touch in your own universe.

A publisher asks you to do tie-in work because they like the way you write in your own world. They want to capture that certain something and use it in tie-ins. My particular groove is military and political fiction and the politics of identity. (I have a reader at MIT to thank for that last label.) So I took that outlook across to *Star Wars* and I didn't have to "dumb down" one bit. In fact, I found myself forced to go further in terms of examining ethics than I ever had before.

It was cloning that did it. In my Wess'har universe, I make as much use of tropes as anyone. (Ironically, it's hailed as fresh and original.) But even I would never have used cloning in my series. Boring, boring, boring: everyone else had been there so many times that I thought there was nothing new to say about it.

I was wrong. There was plenty. Freed from the environment of hard SF - forced out of it screaming, to be frank — I found a *lot* more.

I was asked to write a novel to accompany a game, usually regarded as the ultimate act of prostitution by the literati, and my brief was simple: it had to be about a squad of cloned soldiers with one member stuck behind enemy lines at some point. That was the whole brief. The rest was up to me, and Lucasfilm gave me carte blanche to write what I liked. When I signed on the line, I knew nothing about *Star Wars* beyond seeing the films. I didn't even know if I liked *Star Wars* or not, but I knew that as a brand new author, I'd have my name in front of hundreds of thousands of readers in the same year my debut novel (*City of Pearl*) was published. That could only be good for me.

Outside the Lucas universe, I'd have done my hard SF thing and shown what a disaster cloning was — high failure rates, developmental difficulties and all the problems inherent in cloning and raising a human army. But I couldn't do that because the movies said that the cloned army worked just fine.

So I looked beyond that to what it meant to be a cloned soldier in the service of the Republic. The hermetic, brutal, loveless upbringing. Being disposable.

Being a slave. Being bred to die. And all that with the complicity of those ultimate good guys, the Jedi. Now, dear reader, look me in the eye and tell me that there wasn't an intellectually demanding and harrowing story to be examined there.

Fuelled by class outrage and righteous loathing for those elitist, spoon-bending, lightsaber-wielding, funded-by-the-taxpayer Jedi bastards, I wrote from the gut in a world that was utterly new to me. My tie-ins are aimed at an adult audience, but they still have to be suitable for young adult readers, so I couldn't fall back on my usual soldierly dialogue of profanity. But I maintained a lot of solid science, and dealt with issues like rape, atrocities, shooting prisoners, and all the other ugly areas of war. Nothing was off limits. I ended up with a book (*Republic Commando: Hard Contact*) that, heresy of heresies was a source of more pride to me than *City of Pearl*, which was nominated for the top awards in respectable SF.

And that effort was rewarded. While I'm of the school of thought that says fiction is entertainment, and the journalist in me deplores sending polemic messages to readers, the issues in *Hard Contact* provoked fierce and complex moral debate on the fan forums about cloning, servitude, and the nature of orders and compliance in war. I can't write without posing questions for the reader; and *Star Wars* readers — be they 10 or drawing their pension — really latch on to them. Moral dilemma is central to the myth. It's one of the reasons they like *Star Wars*. They don't all want soothing predictability. They enjoy a good ethical wrangle, and some of it gets into areas that are frankly uncomfortable. The latest debate I had with a reader was about what makes a person human, and whether it's ever acceptable to talk of sub-humans. No cozy fantasy tropes there, I can tell you.

By the time I wrote the sequel that's just been published, *Republic Commando: Triple Zero*, I was deep into areas of the politics of terrorism and exploitation that were far more extreme, and so more demanding, than the rigorously real-world plot of my Wess'har series.

Readers who find me via *City of Pearl* and take the risk of catching tie-in cooties from touching a *Star Wars* novel say that the books feel just as intense and heavyweight to them. They get the same experiences that they do from the Wess'har series. I even use the same style: a minimalist, plain-English form of reportage, very tightly from the character's viewpoint — because that's what I use in my Wess'har books to make them accessible to as wide an audience as possible. I don't just want to sell truck-loads of books: I want readers to *understand them* and be stimulated by the ideas, and I particularly want the reader who might be daunted by "serious" fiction to feel comfortable with them.

It's all about the characters. About the *story*. I'm a storyteller, and I want to communicate. I don't believe in a static piece of art with a single interpretation that requires hard work to comprehend.

For me, the line between copyright-owned and tie-in is an artificial distinction. Adjusting to its framework and settling into each character's head is now the same process for me, whether they're of my own sole making or whether they're created by George Lucas and scores of other writers and artists. If anything, tie-ins deserve more effort: they're going to be scrutinized by hundreds of thousands of readers — tie-ins sell more copies than anything except the megastar big-hitters like Brown and Rowling — and you know what it'll do

to your reputation if you screw it up. A lot of my Wess'har readers came to me from *Star Wars*. If I'd treated their universe like a pin-money job that didn't matter, they'd never have trusted me again.

So apart from the fact that it can be a lot harder for the author, there's no fundamental difference between writing a tie-in for any franchise and a creator-copyright piece. It still has to stand the tests of good fiction, except that it's got to be done fast, it's got to be done right, and it's got to be done despite changes, deadline shifts, studio diktats, or — here's the real white-knuckle ride — trying to fit in with an ongoing TV series that's still being written, as many of my colleagues do. Those who've novelized movies tell me stories of not being allowed to take scripts away home, and having one chance to read them with a security guard standing over them: and a movie script makes a novel of about 20,000 words. Adding another 80,000 words without deviating from the film takes real talent. Tie-ins are not a job for the faint-hearted or the dilettante.

One of the questions I've been asked is how people treat me when they know I write tie-ins. Short answer: like a celebrity. Regular people think it's fantastic. The stigma implied in the question has been placed upon tie-in writers only by a very, very small group of snobs among authors and readers, who seem to see tie-ins as a threat to civilization — the kind who tell me to my face that tie-ins shouldn't be on the same con dealer's table as "real" SF (no, I didn't throw a punch...) or that they take me away from writing "proper" books.

Let's get one thing straight. If people don't care for *Star Trek*, *Buffy*, *Monk* or *CSI*, or any of the many franchises that spin off into written fiction — and they'll only know that for sure if they actually read them, of course — then they don't buy them again. That's their right. But launching attacks on tie-ins (and on the people who read them) tells me a lot more about the insecurities of the attackers than it does about the merit of tie-ins. Let me go on writing my tie-ins in peace, please, and I won't stop you reading what gives you most pleasure. I love writing *Star Wars* and I'm not ashamed to say that.

It's also sound business practice. It pays me good money to piggyback on the marketing of the most successful franchise in the world: and without the sudden visibility that *Hard Contact* gave me, I'm certain I wouldn't have the readership I now have for my Wess'har series. My *Star Wars* titles are best-sellers. That's a win-win in anyone's book. In cash terms, royalties are very small compared to creator-copyright, but the advance is bigger, so while the two balance out over the years, a front-loaded advance enables me to plan a few years ahead instead of sweating on sales to make up my income in royalties, which take literally years to reach my bank account and, of course, are never guaranteed. All my financial plans take place without any assumption of royalties. That way, the only surprises I get are pleasant ones.

Star Wars also entertains me and stretches me. I get to work with talented people from other fields, the composers, artists, designers, software creators that I'd never even meet in the course of my other books. I have the pleasure and commercial advantage of being a name to hundreds of thousands of readers, who know what they like and are smart enough to appreciate the genuinely challenging themes wrapped up in their favorite shared universe. And I have the privilege of the support of *Star Wars* fandom — the kindest, most generous, and friendliest people I've ever met.

That's a greater reward for me than you could possibly imagine.

I find tie-ins harder work than creator-copyright, yes. But in return, I get a lot more in payment than just money. For a storyteller — and that's what I am — there's no greater reward than a big, enthusiastic and vocal audience. This is showbiz, baby. It has to appeal to a wide range of readers, and that takes skill, not some imagined low-lying common denominator. It's a test of every craft skill.

As one of my tie-in colleagues, Max Collins, puts it: "We are not sprinters. We are not long distance runners. We sprint long distances."

And sprinting a marathon makes you pretty fit.

[I recently did an interview with Karen Traviss, talking mainly about the political background to her wess'har books. It is due to appear on Strange Horizons <www.strangehorizons.com> on Monday March 27th. - Cheryl]

Mining Fantasy

By Farah Mendlesohn

What to say? *Black Dust and Other Tales of Interrupted Childhood* is a beautiful book. Remove its dust jacket and the matte black of the boards binds the book in its own compressed carbon. The stories are by Graham Joyce, with an introduction by Mark Chadbourn, and contributions from Jeffrey Ford and Jeff VanderMeeer. It is a book produced to raise money for Nqabakazulu Secondary School near Durban in South Africa, and I hope it does.

But it is a slight book. The stories have been published elsewhere, "Black Dust" in 2001, "Tiger Moth" and "Under the Pylon" in 2003. "Tiger Moth" and "Pylon" are thin, rather predictable ghost stories. Their pleasure (and there is much pleasure) is in the execution, a point which both Ford and VanderMeer make. "Tiger Moth" is a tired tale of a man who suffers from the over-whelming and selfish control of his widowed mother. Seeing a ghost of his childhood is enough to persuade him to take an offered job in another city. The story works only as long as one is immersed in Joyce's writing. Move away from it and it collapses into a petty confection in which mother is blamed for boyish resentment and adulthood is manifested in (illusory) escape. If I were the student to whom Ford sent this story — to convince him to study music, instead of business — I would feel patronized and infuriated. This is not a story of duty chosen with eyes wide open; it is a story of dependency shifted from parent to friend to employer.

In "Under the Pylon" a boy disappears when he climbs a pylon and is never seen again. The story is surrounded by the characteristic boy-girl games that appear in a number of Joyce's works, a faded pornography of ennui. It ends again as so many of Joyce's *bildungsroman* end, with a sense always that the narrator is moving away from this world, has never perhaps truly regarded himself as of it.

The piece which most attracts Chadbourn, Ford and VanderMeer is the title story, "Black Dust" and rightly so. Andy waits to hear if his father will be rescued from the coal seam where he is trapped. Andy is stoic. His friend Bryn's attempts at comfort are shrugged off. There is reflection, and Andy remembers his Dad confronting Bryn's Dad over the matter of Bryn's bruises. He remembers also Bryn's father's delight in presenting the boys with guitars. And then it is Bryn's Dad who dies in the rescue

attempt, his ghost manifesting to Andy in a second cave, never found again. The story is told in quiet, controlled tones. Chadbourn, Ford and VanderMeer are all right about that. But this reader was baffled that they ascribed that to Joyce's skill. "Nine out of ten writers would have had fists flying or at least a heated yelling match…" (Ford, 27) The missing word is "American". What Joyce is describing is the characteristic British way of masculine confrontation. It may be fading now, but it permeated the world Joyce describes and is replicated in the writings of many British authors. What makes the story specifically Joyce's has more to do with the way the children are described. Only William Mayne matches that ability to write the mood of childhood into the physical movement of the child. The result is astonishingly intense: Joyce's children appear as compacted dark matter, small universes about to burst into the world.

Which brings me to the accompanying material. It adds little to the book: the three pieces are neither perceptive critiques nor informative reflections. The introduction is just a little too sanctimonious and mawkish: minors and miners are *not* the same, they do not exist in a world of similarity ("lives sealed away from us"), and the People's History Museum in Manchester has a huge archive of miners talking about their condition. They were the backbone of the British union movement and produced an astonishing amount of literature. The comparison is fatuous and put my back up instantly. Jeffrey Ford's essay is fascinating as long as it sticks to Joyce's text, but it is much too short; at around seven hundred words it reads as assertion where it could have been analysis. I have already said what I think about his attempt to peddle Joyce as chicken soup for the student soul. Jeff VanderMeer's even shorter essay (perhaps five hundred words) is essentially a set of blurbs telling us how to respond to the stories. It should have been printed on the back of the book.

I exited the book feeling that the reader *and Joyce* deserved more. I would have preferred just "Black Dust" and a series of short, genuinely critical essays. But it is a beautiful object and that one story justified my time.

[Note: All of the contributors to this book have given their work and time for free. Other notable contributors include Zoran Živković (back cover text), Michael Marshall Smith (design), Tony Baker (cover art), Bob Wardzinski (editor) and Roger Robinson (publication) — Cheryl.]

Black Dust and Other Tales of Interrupted Childhood – Graham Joyce - Westwood St. Thomas and Beccon Publications - chapbook

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Politics in Fantasy Redux: A (Partial) Critique of Jeff VanderMeer

By R. Scott Bakker

I should make clear from the outset that I've never read any of Jeff VanderMeer's fiction, something for which I've been upbraided more than a few times. Since the calluses have become rather thick, please feel free to berate me some more. I *need* to read VanderMeer's work, if only because it seems we might be up to the same literary mischief. All that concerns me here is his recent essay, "Politics in Fantasy." What concerns me in particular is the following passage:

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.

For me, this is where VanderMeer's horse takes a tumble — and in the final stretch no less. There I was in the stands cheering him on, then suddenly I'm staring at my ticket in disbelief. How, after spending the bulk of his article flogging the inevitability of politics in fantasy, could he suddenly pull up short and declare *otherwise*? And in a resounding fashion, no less!

First, we should probably make sure we're all on the same page. Far too much debate trades in misinterpretations, so it's always a good rule of thumb to make sure you're reading someone as charitably as possible. There's nothing quite so embarrassing as critiquing a *caricature* of someone's position, since in a sense, all you're doing is making fun of your own inability to read. So let me quote the passage that had me betting on VanderMeer's horse in the first place:

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.

It seems pretty clear that VanderMeer is indeed arguing the inevitability of politics, not just in fantasy, but in writing *period*. The choice is yours: either your writing is unconsciously political through and through, or your writing is consciously political as well. Pick your poison. But if *every* aspect of our lives is political in some way, and "truths" are one of those aspects, doesn't that mean, contrary to VanderMeer's resounding assertion, that *no truths* transcend politics? Isn't VanderMeer trying to eat his cake and have it too?

Sure he is. The important question to ask is *why*.

When you teach something like Popular Culture, as I did not so very long ago, the first thing you need to overcome is the common intuition that most commercial cultural products are examples of a magical thing called "Entertainment Pure and Simple" — what is essentially the mass market version of "Art for Art's Sake." For instance, how could Professional Wrestling or *Andromeda* or Hockey or *American Idol 5* possess a complicated political subtext? Surely these harmless pastimes are "simple," unblemished by the political mire we see on the nightly News.

Well, if you think *anything* is simple, you're the victim of an out and out illusion. If you disagree with me, a good way to test your intuition is to go to a local university and enroll in as many courses as you can. Or simply go the library, or do a web search. *Everything* is more complicated than it seems, trust me. The only thing that makes anything seem "simple" is the limitations of our particular perspective. We literally can't see what lies outside our point of view, and we all share the bad habit of assuming that what we can't see either doesn't exist or doesn't matter. That's why we once thought the Earth was the

motionless centre of the universe. That's why we need reminders like, "There's always more than what meets the eye." *Ignorance is invisible*: what we don't know simply doesn't exist for us. Only those things that fall within the narrow circle of our experience can matter, which is why the coolest toy, country, pet, god, and so on, usually happens to be the one we want or believe in or already own.

This is even more the case when the apparent simplicity at stake involves *meaning*. In my Popular Culture classes, I would always give the example of a man holding a gun in a convenience store. "So what is this guy?" I would ask. The resounding answer would be, "An armed robber!"

"But he's wearing a uniform," I would say.

"Oh, he's a cop!" my students would reply.

"But there's a Brinks truck parked out front."

"Then he's a security guard!"

"But there's a camera crew down aisle 3."

"Ooh, he's an *actor*!"

"But there's a Newschannel 5 van parked behind the Brink's truck."

"Then he *is* a security guard after all, being filmed for the news!"

"But there's a man in his underwear taped and gagged in the back of the Brink's truck."

At this point they would begin throwing up their hands. "Then he *is* an armed robber!"

"But there's–"

"Shut the hell up, Mr. Bakker, we get it!"

The point, of course, is that meaning is powerfully conditioned by *context*. Ask yourself, what will your so-called "obvious truths" mean to your descendants in 1,000 years? How about 10,000? Like it or not, everything we say or write is pitched against a potentially infinite horizon of contexts, the vast majority of which don't seem to exist. This is why the greatest geniuses of 10,000 years ago couldn't even imagine the bulk of what we now take for granted. And this is why questions are so much more powerful than answers, why they can muddy things that otherwise seem "pure and simple" in the span of a few short seconds. Questions force us to take a step sideways, to reconsider our perspective. Questions *make our ignorance visible*, which is to say, they reference contexts — perspectives — that didn't seem to exist simply because we couldn't see them.

(And this, by the way, is why so many traditional belief systems tend to discourage questioning: certainty tends to depend on ignorance).

Entertainment Pure and Simple is an illusion leveraged by ignorance of different perspectives. The tropes, attitudes, homilies, even the stylistic techniques that comprise the content of what you see, hear, and read only strike you as obvious and natural because you've been raised in their unquestioning bosom. There's always more than what meets the eye, and a good part of that "more" is political through and through. This is especially true of fiction. Narratives are about human interaction, about people trying to solve the riddles of desire and obligation and circumstance that bedevil us all — *just like politics*. The choices the protagonist makes are always political choices, insofar as they turn on the same network of assumptions that underwrite our daily lives. And insofar as pretty much everything you do in your daily life possesses social origins and social

consequences, nearly every choice you make is a political choice as well. We are, despite the assumptions of so very many, the most *interdependent* generation in the history of the human race. Think of the collective hands that made your shoes, your soup, your roof and your real-time strategy game. Think of the collective thoughts that speak with your voice. Our very existence depends upon a vast system of social relationships. We can scarcely make a move without making some ineluctable impact. And like every civilization that has come before us, we use songs and sports and stories — *entertainment* — to conserve that system's structure and function.

If this strikes you as outlandish or impossible, you're literally stuck in your perspective — you're just not asking the right questions. And if asking such questions seems to make an uncertain mess of things, it's because that's *how things are*, an uncertain mess, no matter how much our innate tendencies to over-commit and to over-simplify dupe us into thinking otherwise. Culture is *soupy*, and the delicious bits of fantasy floating around in it soak up the political broth just like everything else. It's when people think their views, their truths, magically rise above the soup — that things are racially, politically, economically, or theologically simple — that the problems typically begin.

So why did VanderMeer pull his horse up short so close to the finish line? Why does a part of him remain stuck in his teenage perspective believing that some truths do transcend politics, that something, anything, can be for its own sake?

He ran out of questions.

At least that's *one* way of looking at it.

Worlds Apart

By Cheryl Morgan

I have been saying for a very long time that it is a great shame that Sean Williams is not better known outside of Australia. Last year Pyr made me very happy by producing a US edition of the excellent *The Resurrected Man*. This year, however, they have topped that by issuing the first of Williams' latest fantasy series, the Books of the Cataclysm. In Australia in 2005 *The Crooked Letter* won both Best Fantasy Novel in the Aurealis Awards and Best Novel in the Ditmars, which is a very rare achievement. Readers outside Australia can now find out what all of the fuss is about.

I'll emphasize that year again. *The Crooked Letter* was published in 2004 and won awards in 2005. I say that because I'm pretty sure you will see some reviews that accuse the book of being a rip-off of Hal Duncan's *Vellum*, whereas in fact it was published first. Great minds do indeed think alike. Both *Vellum* and *The Crooked Letter* deal with a war in heaven and merrily mix up mythologies on the assumption that the religions mortals have created are merely vague graspings at the awful cosmological truth. From there, however, the two books diverge. Many people have accused *Vellum* of being lacking in direction and plot. *The Crooked Letter* lacks neither, but it doesn't have *Vellum's* literary pyrotechnics. Some will doubtless say that Williams has produced the sort of book that Duncan ought to have written. Others will say that *The Crooked Letter* proves why *Vellum* had to be written as it was. As usual, readers will pick the style of writing that suits them best.

Meanwhile, back with the war in heaven. Williams has thrown a veritable smorgasbord of mythology into his

novel, but the underlying theme is very simple and very Lovecraftian. Yes, there are gods, and no, they don't give a stuff about humans, except maybe as food.

"Understand, Hadrian, that I have no problem with predation per se. It always amazed me that so few religious philosophers ever wondered what the soul was for. I mean, if it exists, it has to fit in with everything else. A lion eats a deer, and a lion's blood is drunk by ticks. An ant milks the secretions of an aphid, and is in turn eaten by an anteater. Nothing escapes the food cycle, so why should the soul?"

The cosmological underpinning (Williams does have one, and manages to make it fairly understandable) is that universes can bifurcate and recombine. Our universe has split twice, each time causing a major catastrophe. Here in the West we know those events best as The Fall and The Flood. The resulting three universes are very different. The First Realm, ruled over rather sleepily by the god Baal, is dominated by physical laws. Human beings are very much at home there. The Second Realm is a realm of magic dominated by force of will rather than by physical laws. It is the home of demons, but is currently ruled by the alien interloper, Yod. The Third Realm is that of choice, and sounds a bit like a quantum soup, but we don't see much of it in *The Crooked Letter*.

What gives us a story is that connections can be made between the realms through the agency of mirror twins. They are like identical twins, except that everything is opposite between them, even down to one having his heart on the right side of his body. Seth and Hadrian Castillo are a pair of such twins. Seth, the elder, is brash and overconfident; Hadrian is wracked with self-doubt and self-pity. The boys, who are Australian, are touring Europe when they meet and both fall in love with Ellis Quick. Little do the squabbling brothers know, however, that their lives are being watched from another universe. Yod knows that if it can kill one of the twins it can create a link between the First and Second Realms that will cause them to begin to merge. Baal is old and feeble, and the First Realm is just chock full of delicious souls. Yod is like a kid given the keys to a candy store.

The book follows the fortunes of the boys: one still alive, one dead and in the Second Realm, as they try to work out why their world has suddenly gone crazy. There is rather a lot of the old ploy of characters telling our hero that they know a lot about him, but they can't tell him yet because the time is not right. That minor annoyance apart, however, there's a lot of fun to be had. I was particularly struck by the vivid imagery of Williams' worlds. I wanted to see the book done as a comic — preferably by someone who has already worked on books like *Hellblazer* — so I could see all of the weird demons Williams had created. It is also noticeable that Williams has spent a lot of time watching supernatural TV series, and the car ads that riff off them.

Hadrian and the others emerged from the tunnel into another subterranean car park. This one was seven floors deep and wide enough to hold hundreds of cars, its ceiling low and vaulted in heavy concrete like a tomb. The sedans and SUVs resembled gleaming sarcophagi placed neatly in rows, regularly polished by some macabre undertaker. They seemed to be resting, biding their time for the opportunity to swarm — driverless, empty windscreens as blank as a madman's stare — out of their parks and into the eerie streets.

Pleasingly *The Crooked Letter*, despite being only book one of a series, does come to a sensible conclusion. Somewhat more surprisingly the book also turns out to be a prequel to Williams' recent Books of the Change series in that it describes how the world of those books came into being. You do not, however, need to have read the Books of the Change to follow *The Crooked Letter*. Which is just as well because the former still haven't been published outside Australia. Hopefully *The Crooked Letter* will do well enough for Pyr that they can take on the other series as well.

The Crooked Letter – Sean Williams – Pyr – publishers 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.php.

This month I am pleased to report that the draw will include three copies of our featured book, *The Crooked Letter*, by Sean Williams. Many thanks to Pyr for making them available. In addition, to coincide with M. John Harrison being the headline Guest of Honour at the forthcoming Eastercon, Bantam have given us a copy each of the US editions of *Light* and *Viriconium*. So, plenty of chances to win this month, and some very fine books on offer. I'm determined to get good books into the hands of readers, even if I have to give them away.

The draw will take place on April 23rd. Rules for the draw are available on the *Emerald City* web site at: www.emcit.com/draw.php.

Anything But Mundane

By Cheryl Morgan

As some of you will know, Geoff Ryman is a supporter of Mundane SF, a literary movement that believes that speculative fiction should not stray too far from what we know. Perhaps more importantly, Mundane SF champions the cause of interesting characters and stories ahead of interesting technology. Some of Ryman's work has, of course, been highly speculative, but he doesn't write space opera, and his latest novel, *The King's Last Song*, qualifies as genre only in that it is in part a historical novel. Nevertheless, it is a very fine book, and a story that very much needed to be told.

Once upon a time, in a country far, far away, there lived a king. When he was young, the king was very popular as he succeeded in extricating his country from the rule of foreigners. But politics in his part of the world was not easy. Other great nations fought over the region, and the local countries were drawn into the wars. The people of the country, who were mainly simple farmers, became unhappy. Some foreigners whispered in their ears that having a king was out of fashion, and that if they overthrew him they would become wealthy. Then a local man set himself up as the leader of the people. Depose the king, throw out the foreigners, he said. We will make a country that is fair to all.

The king's name was Sihanouk, and the man who would depose him called himself Pol Pot. The story of his brief and terrible reign is so horrific that if an author made it up in a book everyone would say it was too awful to ever happen.

The Cambodians wanted the Vietnamese out of their country and China to stop feeding the Khmers Rouge arms. They wanted America to stop supporting China. They wanted the Soviet Union to solve its own problems. They wanted it to stop. They were exhausted.

Geoff Ryman's novel begins in 2004. The French, Americans and Russians are long gone from the region, bringing their wars to other parts of the globe. Cambodia is struggling to find its feet in the world. Men like Ly William, who are too young to remember the civil wars, are interested only in making their country rich, and the best way to do that is to welcome the Westerners back as tourists. The beautiful and ancient city of Angkor Wat is an ideal tourist destination. Luc Andrade and his UN team of archaeologists are busy helping research the history of the site and recover ancient treasures. William makes sure he gets close to the Westerners. He can learn from them, and they pay in dollars.

The one thing that Luc doesn't need, however, is a major find. An ancient book, apparently written by one of Cambodia's most famous kings, and inscribed on gold leaf, is just the sort of thing to bring all of the old corruption and rivalries to the fore. The government, the army, the police, the Thai art dealers: all of them want a piece of the action. And the Khmers Rouges have not been destroyed, they are just waiting in the fields and the jungle for a chance to strike.

Half of the book tells how Luc is kidnapped by revolutionaries and how William and the policemen, Tan Map, try to rescue him. The other half is the book: the King's last song, apparently written by Jayavarman VII, the famous Buddhist King who united the country in the twelfth century and brought a period of prosperity, religious devotion and peace. William and Map hope that this book can inspire the Cambodian people to greatness once more.

Ryman, however, has no stars in his eyes. He knows that kings, especially mediaeval kings, do not come to power easily. Pol Pot did not invent the idea of civil war, and for all his piety Jayavarman still had plenty of blood on his hands.

Our swords rose and fell like the rain. We waded through a swamp of blood, sinking in ooze, having to be mindful that the fallen men would still strike. They clawed and bit and kicked and would not be still so we cut them to pieces. […] Yama the devouring sun was full upon us.

Central to this story of national redemption is Tan Map. A senior member of the Khmers Rouges, Map later defected and enlisted in the government army. By that time, like many Cambodians, he was sick of fighting and only wanted to find out if any of his family had survived the slaughter. But, of course, some of Map's family have been killed because of who he was and what he did. Others do not have the strength to live through the aftermath of Pol Pot's rule. Map has his own need for redemption, and appears not entirely sane.

Trouble is my girlfriend; I love Trouble; she comes up to me all slinky and says, you want to have a party? I don't even need a dollar to pay her, Trouble loves me so much.

Well, that's one way of dissuading all the people who would love to kill you.

I suspect that many genre readers will have little interest in *The King's Last*

Song, even though Ryman is currently flavor of the month in the SF industry. It is about as far away from a heroic fantasy as you can get. But Ryman isn't interested in the fantasy, he's interested in the reality that lies behind the myths, and how that reality gets spun. Jayavarman VII was no saint, although the Buddhists might portray him as one. Tan Map is not a hero. But Cambodia is a country desperately in need of myths. Geoof Ryman and Tan Map have set out to write one.

The King's Last Song - Geoff Ryman – HarperCollins – trade paperback

Men Are Trouble

By Cheryl Morgan

Liz Williams' first novel, *The Ghost Sister*, was very much a Sheri Tepper-style book with lots of interesting material about gender. Since then Williams has been bravely using different settings for her novels rather than mining the same world book after book. However, a good setting is a good setting, so it was perhaps inevitable that Williams would return to Monde D'Isle. Pleasingly she doesn't do so that obviously, and she's going back because she has something new to say.

The story of *Darkland* begins on two very different planets. One, Muspell, looks like it will be the setting for a series of books. It is a diaspora world settled mainly by people of Celtic and Nordic descent. The northern hemisphere is controlled by women, primarily through an organization called the Skald. But elsewhere on the same planet is Darkland, a forbidding continent controlled by a group of white male supremacists known as the vitki. The heroine of the story, Vali Hallsdottir, is an assassin who works for the Skald.

More of all this later, but the book actually opens on a third world, Nhem, which is a classic Sheri Tepper patriarchy. It is ruled by stupid, venal old men with big beards; the sort of people who cry out about how they are defiling themselves at the same time as they vent their lusts. The women are obliged to cover up completely, may not speak, and are bred for stupidity and docility. We don't get to see much of Nhem. Vali drops in, pays a visit to the Hierolath, does something rather more nasty to him than what he does to her, and is away again. Thus are the Tepper bad guys brushed aside. Williams has a rather more unpleasant enemy for Vali to worry about.

It is, of course, impossible for Vali to get into Nhem without a male escort. This isn't a problem. The Skald is happy to employ men where they might be useful. But the Skald agent sent to provide cover for Vali turns out to not only be a traitor, but to be a disguised vitki. And not just any vitki either; he is Frey Gundersson, a man with whom Vali has a considerably amount of history. That history happens to include the terrible claw marks that disfigure Vali's face.

The point here is that, unlike your traditional Tepper male, the vitki are smart. They recognize that women have uses other than breeding, and indeed use women agents at times. They are also very interested in techniques of mental control. They have developed methods for dominating animals, and are looking to extend that to control of humans. Which is perhaps why they are so interested in a world they know as Mondhile, a place where the local inhabitants are rumored to have a very close relationship to the natural world and something of an, er, deep affinity with animals.

At this point those of you who have already read *The Ghost Sister* will be nodding sagely and anticipating parts of the plot. However, it is probably better if the reader, like Vali, knows very little about Mondhile and its people. If you don't know what the locals mean by Bloodmind then you can share Vali's ignorance. If you do know you'll be beating your head in despair at her inability to ask the obvious questions. But I think this is much better than producing a book in which knowledge of the previous volume is a requirement to understanding the new one.

I found *Darkland* to be a more obviously feminist book than anything else Williams has done of late. It doesn't have the sort of innovative treatment of gender issues that is liable to get it on the Tiptree short list, but in terms of pointing out that men are rather smarter and more dangerous that Tepper tended to make out it is certainly a worthwhile book. It addition, it also happens to be a fine science fiction adventure. And it is already set up for a sequel. You can't ask for much more than that.

Darkland - Liz Williams – Tor (UK) – trade paperback

Stealing the Holy War

By Cheryl Morgan

The classic structure of a fantasy trilogy is that the characters spend volume one finding out what is going on and getting together; they spend volume two getting from here to there; and volume three is the climactic finale. *The Lord of the Rings* illustrates this well. But volume two is a hard thing to get right. All too often it becomes just a travelogue with no real development of the characters or the plot. At worst it becomes an exercise in plot token collection or an excuse to have the characters visit every location on The Map. If you want to know how to do volume two well I recommend that you read *The Warrior Prophet*, part two of the Prince of Nothing series, by R. Scott Bakker.

When I read volume one, *The Darkness That Comes Before*, I found it a little hard to follow. Most fantasy writers create very simplistic worlds that are very easy to get to know. Bakker's world is richly detailed with a mixture of different cultures and a wealth of political intrigue. It was hard work following multiple plotlines and getting to know everything that was going on in the book. With volume two, however, all of the introduction has been done and all of the major characters are in place. The Holy War is about to set out across the desert towards Shimeh, and Bakker can concentrate solely on his characters and his plot.

Having said that, the world of the book is very cleverly designed to be just familiar enough for a well-educated reader to know what is going on, but just different enough for no one to make the mistake that Bakker is talking directly about the Crusades rather than using that setting to talk more generally about political and philosophical issues. It would be wrong to see the book as a story about Christians and Muslims, and indeed you'd have to stretch things a lot to interpret it that way. As a book about the stupidities into which Faith can draw people, however, it is excellent.

As readers of the first volume will remember, the central character (the Prince of Nothing himself) is Anasûrimbor Kellhus, a clever young man who has been trained from birth in disciplines of science and psychology unknown to most of the rest of the characters in the book. Dropping Kellhus into the middle of the Holy War is rather

like taking a rather more sane version of Gregori Rasputin, educating him in martial arts and science, and dropping him into the Crusaders with orders to subvert the whole enterprise to his own ends. The arrogant and egotistical war leaders are no match for him, and the frightened and superstitious soldiers are putty in his hands. Kellhus is, in fact, a master of spin who uses his manipulative talents to encourage people blinded by Faith to engage in reckless warfare that mainly benefits him and leaves most of them dead. Any connections between this and real world events that you may draw are entirely your own.

Telling that story, of course, takes time, and a lot of detailed characterization. But tell it he must because Bakker needs to get his main characters to the point where they can play a significant part in the grand finale. In particular he needs the involvement of the Mandate Schoolman, Drusas Achamain. Aside from us all-knowing readers, Achamain is the only character who fully understands that there is a deeper game being played, that the whole enterprise of the Holy War might actually be a charade, a distraction engineered by the mysterious Consult, the agents of the No-God who are plotting the resurrection of their dread master. It is also obvious to us readers that Kellhus will have a major role to play in that conflict, though quite what role is entirely another matter.

Interestingly Bakker drops a number of hints along the way that his world is not all that it seems. In particular there are characters known as "skin spies" who can take the form of other humans. They remind me a lot of the face dancers who worked for the Bene Tleilaxu in *Dune*, but there are hints that their powers are technological in nature rather than magical. If you are going to produce a three-volume series, the last thing you want to do is give away all of your secrets in volume one. Bakker seems to have a big surprise planned for the final volume, and as it has been released in the US I'm itching to get my hands on it.

The Warrior Prophet - R. Scott Bakker – Orbit – mass-market paperback

Arabian Terrorists

By Cheryl Morgan

The new series from Chaz Brenchley has been a little time in coming, but the first volume is due out from Ace in early May and it looks like the series is going to be well worth the wait.

It being an Ace publication, there's a good chance that I'll have something to say about the cover. In this particular case people looking at *Bridge of Dreams* in a shop will jump to the conclusion that it is a harem novel and therefore probably intended for romance readers. This would be a mistake. Not a total mistake, because half the book does actually take place in harems. But the book certainly isn't a romance novel, and the other half of the story is very different indeed.

For decades, maybe even centuries, the cities of Maras and Sund have glowered at each other across a broad river. Sund is a peaceful place inhabited largely by merchants and craftsmen. Maras, on the other hand, is the center of a vast military empire. Various Sultans of Maras have long coveted Sund, but the breadth of the river and the cadre of water mages protecting the city have always been able to keep the Marasi armies at a distance. Then one morning the Sundain awoke to find a vast magical bridge spanning the river, and Marasi soldiers already thronging their streets.

It looked like a bridge in the mist, in the soft monochrome shadows of first dawn, when there would be light but no sun yet. It steamed, or smoked perhaps, lending an acrid tang to the air. It seemed to be no work of man, no honest build. It lacked a proper parapet; it had no piers, no trusses to support it. It might have been poured of molten stone, if stone could melt like glass and be cooled like glass and look so insubstantial. It defeated the mind and the imagination; it defeated the eye altogether, rising through its own fog to overleap where walls had stood, rising higher and stretching further, overleaping all the width of the river beyond, the great unbridgeable river of the world.

Creating the bridge was not easy. All magic has a price, and in this case the price was children. As the title of the novel explains, the bridge is maintained by dreams, and only young children are suitable dreamers. The Sultan takes hostages from noble families. They are well cared for, and are always returned to their loved ones when they grow too old to dream the bridge, but their minds are always damaged. Jendre, the eldest daughter of one of the Sultan's most favored generals, had always expected to be taken as a dreamer. As the book opens she is shocked to find that her younger sister, Sidië, is taken instead. Whether this is a mercy or not is another matter, for her father has entirely different plans in mind for her: marriage.

Meanwhile, on the banks of the river in Sund, people are finding out that magic is dangerous stuff. The bridge glows at night, and the homeless people who live by it develop deformities. Some turn into hideous creatures with dog-like faces. Slowly but surely, the magic of the bridge is polluting Sund. Issel, a young beggar, is desperate to find some means of making enough money to escape the riverbank before he too succumbs to the degenerative effects. The one advantage he has is a talent for water magic – a rare thing now as the Marasi have executed all of Sund's known sorcerers.

The Shine was like its own dawn rising, like an oil-slick dawn with all the colors of disturbance washing at pale stars like surf on shingle, the suck of river water on the strand. Except that it was there all night, unshifting; all its movement was internal, smoke in a bowl, swirling and sliding and going nowhere.

This being a fantasy novel, Issel turns out to be a very powerful mage indeed. This means that he comes to the attention of various people. Some are trying to preserve the ancient knowledge of the city; others are actively trying to kick the Marasi out. They would doubtless call themselves freedom fighters. To the Marasi soldiers on peacekeeping duty they are, of course, terrorists.

Brenchley is well aware of how all this works. Issel is immensely valuable to the rebels. He knows that if he lends his powers to their cause then the reprisals from the occupying army will be terrible. The rebels know this too. Indeed, like revolutionary groups everywhere they are counting on it. Here the rebel leader, Lind, explains to Issel how the execution of some rebel sympathizers is a good thing.

"And their wives, their mothers, sisters, yes. Issel, I have their names, every one of them. They have all been counted, and none will be forgotten. But the city needs these cruelties or it will forget, it will learn to live with occupation. Today wins more to our cause than we have lost on the scaffold there; the Marasi act against themselves."

Issel's half of the book is extremely strong, with a lot of powerful things to say about the relationship between conquerors, the conquered, and those who would fight for freedom. Brenchley has no rose-tinted spectacles here. He knows just how inevitably brutal the whole process is, and he doesn't let sentiment get in the way of telling it like it is. You can expect leading characters to die.

The other half of the book, while equally well written, is somewhat less intense. Jendre goes through the usual process of having to learn to play harem politics in order to survive. She and the Sultan have a story, and Brenchley tells it well. In the back of Jendre's mind, however, is always the desire to rescue Sidië from her dreams before her mind is ruined.

What Jendre doesn't have is any connection to Issel and the Sundain. Shut up in the harem, she knows next to nothing about what goes on in the outside world. When you get to the end of the book and there is still no connection you realize that Brenchley is playing a long game here. There is much about his world that you don't know. There are plot mysteries left unresolved. The whole story is building slowly and inexorably, and so far you've only sampled one small limb. You will see that there must be more books and you will want them now, or preferably yesterday. Let's hope the wait for the next volume isn't too long.

Bridge of Dreams - Chaz Brenchley – Ace – publisher's proof

Fighting Faith

By Juliet E. McKenna

Can you ever really fight belief?

The Burning Land, by Victoria Strauss, was quite the most interesting fantasy novel I read in 2004. The sequel, *The Awakened City*, is now available and is the subject of this review. I'm always fascinated when other writers tackle something I steer well clear of and make a resounding success of it. In this instance that something is religion. Too often fantasy authors simply use gods either as heroes writ large or as convenient routes out of plot tangles. Few ever examine the complex implications of belief and religion influencing daily life. But if fantasy is to be a magic mirror, showing us new insights into topical issues, surely in this day and age religion must be addressed?

In *The Burning Land*, the ancient Aratist faith came under threat. This doctrine had been long guarded by the Brethren, those identified in each generation as the reincarnated souls of the sons and daughters of the First Messenger. As long as the god Arata slept, they would be reborn to preserve his message. But when an expedition was sent into the scorching desert to find a long-lost enclave of co-religionists the humble devotee Gyalo brought back proof that Arata had already risen. The Brethren ordered that such heresy be brutally suppressed, along with all evidence of the enclave, a place called Refuge. Not only did the people of Refuge have dangerous views about Arata, they also didn't subscribe to the doctrine that demands the hobbling of Shapers, those who can wield awesome power over the natural world. As a sworn Aratist Shaper, Gyalo's own magic had long been ritually dulled with the drug Manita. Even when he knew his full strength, he submitted once more to the doctrine. That didn't save him from those determined to kill him.

As *The Awakened City* opens, we find Gyalo has managed to survive. Now he

lives a quiet life as a scribe with Axane, a healer woman who gains magical insights through her dreams. Together they have found a measure of happiness, as long as no one knows who they are. Gyalo would be condemned as an apostate since he will no longer tolerate any limiting of his magic now. Axane still fears the only other survivor from the destruction of Refuge, Ravar. He is an unfettered Shaper and as such, incredibly dangerous. He's also the father of her child.

Ravar, of course, has set his sights on revenge, and against more than just Axane or Gyalo. Twisted with guilt and hatred, he is using his formidable powers to convince a growing number of once-faithful Aratists that he is the Next Messenger. There is a hunger in this world for religious consolation, after eighty years of suppression by the Caryaxists. Ravar doesn't know about any of this, nor does he care. He is setting out to bring down the Brethren. He is determined to destroy all Aratists by corrupting them with blasphemy to blacken their souls. What he seeks above all else is revenge upon his god.

The Brothers and Sisters have their own troubles even before Ravar appears on the horizon. Their power has been restored at the cost of compromise with the very secular king, Santaxma. Those involved in the destruction of Refuge are troubled by it while others of their number continue to connive in factional infighting. There's also the unanswered puzzle of Gyalo. Was he, as some believe, truly the Next Messenger?

The book is as full of questions for the reader as the world is for those who live in it. In the beginning we wonder if the god Arata truly exists. If Shapers are able to create water or gold out of nothing in this world, surely it makes sense to believe in the god who created the whole world in the first place? Soon we have more urgent concerns. As Axane and her child are stolen away by Ravar's minions, will Gyalo ever be able to find her? Will the Brethren be able to work together to defeat Ravar or will they be brought low by their own divisions? When the Sister Sundit is sent to open negotiations with Ravar, she is faced with appalling betrayal and dreadful choices. What consequences will flow from Santaxma's inability to fully comprehend what he's facing? Will the king's lack of faith prove to be a fatal weakness or a strength? What will happen if Ravar ever succumbs to doubt in his own abilities? What will his followers do then? Will Gyalo's humility, his lack of arrogant certainty, ultimately prove a key to salvation?

As every character struggles with uncertainty, and the reader works through the intricacies of their actions and reactions, it's apparent that the author knows exactly what she is doing and where she is going. This hot, dusty, alien world is vividly realized, a far cry from the misty vagueness of fake medievalism. The characters are wholly believable, be they sympathetic or repellent. To show us all sides to this story, Strauss moves from viewpoint to viewpoint with smooth assurance. The pace is sufficiently fast and fluid enough to keep those pages turning. Successive revelations simultaneously solve puzzles while posing new ones. Crucially, there's a tangible sense of real peril threatening all those involved, even ultimately the all-powerful Ravar. With nearly half the book left to go, there's a shock that jolted me into staring at the page, wondering just what Victoria Strauss was going to do next.

And masterly as the writing is, what impresses me most is how the author weaves the intangible nature of belief inextricably into this tale. The extent to which every character does or does not

believe in Arata is central to this story. Their faith or lack of it governs all their choices, for good and ill. The sheer impossibility of fighting belief is crucial to the final outcome. Men can be killed. It is far, far harder to kill ideas.

This is a thrilling story that works supremely well as fiction while prompting thoughtful reflection on the fundamentalism and secularism complicating our world today. That's an achievement in any work of literature, never mind the fantasy genre. To my mind, this book shows just what the best of SF&F can do, when so-called literary fiction so often ducks such difficult issues.

The Awakened City - Victoria Strauss - Eos - hardcover

Ghosts Living, Dead, and In Between

By Anne KG Murphy

Last month a shelf of books in Borders suggested to me *The Best American Short Stories 2005*, edited by Michael Chabon. I picked it up, curious to see if I would recognize any authors, and was pleasantly surprised to see the list included SF's own Tim Pratt, Cory Doctorow, and Kelly Link. I think Chabon should get kudos for going out of his way to include genre pieces in his reading set, as is made clear not only by their inclusion, but also by comments in the introductions by him and series editor Katrina Kenison. I bought the book and, I will admit, first read the pieces by Pratt and Doctorow, but then I started back at the beginning, curious about what other stories might be in a collection such as this.

I do not often read mainstream fiction, and I swiftly remembered why. The first few stories seemed dreary, peopled by characters with no particular direction to their lives, and I was put to mind of why I let my subscription to *The New Yorker* run out. As I continued to read, I was impressed by how many of the stories felt like ghost stories. They were peopled with characters who had become ghosts of their former selves, or were haunted by ghosts from the past. And I'm not talking figuratively (for the most part). I'm talking dead people.

In "Until Gwen" for instance, Dennis Lehane tells a gritty short tale of a man fresh out of prison for stealing a diamond that his father is still convinced he has hidden somewhere. As his father forces him to look for it, they exhume the body of his girlfriend (and their father-son conflict is resolved violently, with a shovel), and the protagonist is face to face with all the possibilities he failed to preserve.

You look at the blackened, shriveled thing lying below your father, and you see her face with the wind coming through the car and her hair in her teeth and her eyes seeing you and taking you into her like food, like blood, like what she needed to breath, and you say "I wish..." and sit there for a long time with the sun beginning to warm the ground and warm your back and the breeze returning to make those tarps flutter again, desperate and soft.

"I wish I'd taken your picture," you say finally. "Just once."

Out of the 20 stories in the collection, there were just two that I'd read before, both from *Harpers* magazine; both emotionally complex stories of immigration; of survival, of connection, and of loss. The first, "Natasha", by David Bezmozgis, tells the story of a

suburban teenage boy whose father sends away for a Russian wife. She comes with a daughter, Natasha, who becomes his responsibility and then his intimate companion in a drug and sex-filled subterranean summer, though she is still largely a mystery to him. When things finally fall apart between his uncle and Natasha's mom, Natasha runs away to his dealer and our 16-year-old protagonist finally gets some perspective on his life and his stoner friends. He performs "a form of civilized murder" and considers them dead to him, and moves on.

The other *Harpers* story, "The Cousins", by Joyce Carol Oats, is in the format of a series of letters, some unanswered, between a holocaust survivor who has published her "unflinching" autobiography and a reader who thinks they might be cousins. The author, Freyda, slowly unbends to consider the possibility of a real relationship to her "lost" cousin Rebecca, only to be reminded once again that circumstances can prevent people from uniting. A sad but very interesting portrayal of emotional transition and personal expression.

Another transitional story that is both lovely and sad is "The Scheme of Things" by Charles D'Ambrosio. Here is an honest ghost story. Kirsten and Lance are traveling across the country posing as fundraisers for a program that helps the babies of drug addicts. Kirsten is Sensitive and Lance counts on what she sees to guide them. What she sees when they come into small town Iowa on Halloween is the ghost of a little girl who was killed in a field by a combine. It's hard to describe the sensitivity with which D'Ambrosio depicts Kirsten's growing understanding of the situation, and her relationship with the child's mother, who she comes to realize is the woman who, with her husband, has taken them in and fixed their car so that they can keep going. There are things that they take from these people, and things that they give them, and all is not quite what you would expect. Probably my favorite story in the book.

In one of the most serious stories in an already heavy collection, Tom Bissell applies some of his own journalistic experience to write "Death Defier" about a couple of journalists and a hired helper trying to make their way to safety in Afghanistan, struggling with repeated disasters, including having their hired vehicle break down, running out of medicine and water to tend to the Malaria one of them suffers from, and being taken in by a friendly but unhelpful warlord and his men. It is and interesting, frustrating, and at times almost poetic story. And there's a donkey. (No, the donkey doesn't make it, I'm afraid. This is hazardous territory even for the relatively inoffensive folks who are just trying to do their jobs. Even donkeys.)

And speaking of war, the one hard SF story in this collection is "Anda's Game" by Cory Doctorow (originally carried on *Salon.com* http://archive.salon.com/tech/feature/2004/11/15/andas_game/index_np.html). When Anda is twelve, she meets Liza the Organiza of the elite cross-game group Clan Fahrenheit, who explains to the girls at Ada Lovelace Comprehensive how many girls take male avatars in online games and she's going around the world encouraging girls to reclaim the space as one where they can walk (and make mayhem) freely without having to switch genders to do so.

She stomped her boots, one-two, thump-thump, like thunder on the stage. "Who's in, chickens? Who wants to be a girl out-game and in?"

This story has by far the biggest death-toll of the book, though those deaths are all in virtual environments. The main thrust of the story, though, is that even activities in the virtual world have impacts on the real one, and not always ones we expect. If you're going to kick ass, kick the right ass, chickens. And speaking of ass, well, make sure *yours* doesn't spread too much while spending too many hours online. A fun romp with a couple of simple morals.

So, I've covered some of the living ghosts, and some of the dead ones. What about the "in between"? Well, Tim Pratt never really defines the status of one of the namesake characters in "Hart and Boot". John Boot climbs out of the ground one day in front of Pearl Hart, who has come to the Wild West to make her mark and her fortune as an outlaw and been so far disappointed with the results. Once she finishes swearing at him, Pearl takes up with Boot, and his ability to fade to insubstantiality and pass through walls comes in handy later in breaking them out of jail, just as his physical strength was handy in committing the crimes that landed them in there. When they finally land in a prison that Boot can't break Pearl out of, she and he both wind up wondering why he's there and what she really needs and wants from him. Love those fantasy westerns, especially when written as well as all this.

The other character of uncertain status is the title character of "The Secret Goldfish", by David Means, who is twice over presumed dead in the bottom of a very murky fish tank, the result of neglect that reflects the ups and downs of a family experiencing disruption and change. Means may be trying to create an allegory about how tough it is to truly destroy the soul of a family, or how easily and shallowly it can be revived, I'm not sure. In my experience, goldfish just really aren't that tough. Oh, and nobody carries a full fish tank of any size from one room to another either. I think maybe I'm missing the big picture because, as a fish owner, I'm getting lost in the details.

Death is not the only recurring theme in the book. There were also two stories about boys learning to play the piano, though of course they were really stories about change and about growing and about uncertainty and trust. Those themes are also touched on in Kelly Link's "Stone Animals", a story about a family who moves to a new house only to find it haunted by rabbits, a haunting that seems to be catching and to eventually involve many things, including the bathroom soap, his office, the cat, and even their little boy. It seems to be a story about the difference between passing through, and living *in*, the landscape of your life. About *seeing* what's around you, and taking possession of your role in things.

Best American Short Stories is a series designed to encourage both the reading and the writing of short stories by Americans and for American publications, and so it lists the editorial offices of publications that are surveyed every year for the collection. It is a diverse and encouraging list of publications, and as Chabon demonstrated, does not encompass all that the country offers. I'm glad I read the book, and I would recommend it to others who are interested in contemplating human existence at a bit of a slower, more difficult pace than our genre usually offers. For all that many of the stories feel dreary, many have a kind of optimism in them. As Joy Williams put it in "The Girls",

he had put the old dead behind him and was moving on to the requirements of the quickening new.

Something we all have to do from time to time.

The Best American Short Stories 2005 - Michael Chabon - Houghton Mifflin – trade paperback

Quiet Horror Stories

By Mario Guslandi

Opening the debut book by an unknown writer is like unsealing a letter from a faraway lover: one is torn between anticipation and dread, hoping for the best, but afraid of the worst. As for the credits on the back cover, they are often deceiving… So, what can be said about Sherry Decker and her first short story collection, *Hook House and Other Horrors*? Is she a good writer? Yes, she certainly is. What kind of fiction does she write? Dark, but gentle, what we used to call "quiet horror" — I don't know if the term is still fashionable — a genre mastered in the past by writers such as Charles L. Grant.

If you are looking for gore, violence and splatter, you'd better search elsewhere. If you like getting subtly unsettled, if you enjoy being kindly disquieted, this is the book for you.

In the title story, "Hook House" you'll read about a haunted house, inhabited by family ghosts, each one with his terrible secrets. "Hicklebickle Rock" is an effective, pitiless portrait of the American countryside, the petty mysteries of a small town, a killer above suspicion and a rock that's not simply a rock…

In the entertaining "The Clan" a feud between a witch and her vampire neighbour is described in a semi-humorous way, while in the compelling "Heatwaves" a little girl able to hear people's thoughts learns the facts of life during a hot summer afternoon. Another good story is "Gifts From The North Wind", the cryptic, disturbing depiction of a girl with unusual powers and the difficulty of living twice.

Obviously not every story hits the mark. "Chazzabryom", is a bizarre hybrid between "The Silence Of The Lambs" and a vampire tale and never really takes off, while "Shivering We Dance", a gallant attempt to create a horror story from an impalpable plot, fails to attain any suspension of disbelief.

On the other hand, "Twisted Wishes" is a beautiful, nasty tale revolving around the peculiar relationship between a girl and her mother. "A City in Italy" is a nice study of a split personality where a none too original subject is masterfully handled by the writer. In the brilliant "Jessica Fishbone" an old lady discovers unpleasant events in her family's history and in "Terissa" we are presented with a vivid story of witchcraft and damnation.

The themes, the atmospheres and the narrative style are clearly feminine and downright American, both features adding further charm to the writer's narrative style. In short, to repeat the customary phrase that Decker is "a writer to watch" would be unfair. She's simply a writer "to read".

Hook House and Other Horrors - Sherry Decker - Silver Lake Publishing - Trade Paperback

Yokai And Thongchai And Pod, Oh My!

By Peter Wong

Advocates for expanding the boundaries of fantastic film would benefit from checking out a good film festival to find effective examples. Such showcases for cinematic art may not provide either a smorgasbord of fantasy films or Sci-Fi Channel-style "blow up the BEM" fare. But the better fantastic films that do get programmed marry the excitement of the fantastic with stylistic story telling. *The Blair Witch Project*, *28 Days Later*, and *Mirrormask*, for example, played the Sundance Film Festival before getting theatrical release.

The Rotterdam International Film Festival is an excellent source of such material. This year's 35th Festival screened "Homecoming" from *Masters Of Horror* (Emerald City #126). Other offerings included a children's film that balanced classic themes with irreverence, and an *Amelie*-style musical fantasy that also decried global warming.

The Great Yokai War is the children's film firmly rooted in Japanese mythology. Director Takashi Miike tells the story of Tadashi, a city kid who hates his forced re-location to the sticks. His schoolmates routinely bully him. His semi-senile grandfather constantly mistakes him for a dead son. His tendency to get easily spooked also embarrasses him.

When Tadashi gets selected as the village's ceremonial Kirin Rider, the boy fears his life has hit bottom. The Kirin Rider bravely champions truth and justice, something Tadashi feels incapable of doing even on a pretend basis. But the boy must soon mature into a real warrior. The evil Lord Kato is capturing and killing yokai (Japanese spirits) to create an army of half-yokai, half-mechanical creatures. These creatures are soldiers in his plot to wipe humanity off the face of the earth. Only Tadashi, aided by a handful of yokai who have escaped capture, stands between Kato and the destruction of humanity.

The film's plot does indeed resemble that of dozens of urban heroic fantasy anime features. It's not an accident, for the film is a loose remake of a 1960's feature. On a visual level, though, the film's special effects wonderfully outstrip the 1960's original. The yokai-machine hybrids look like a combination of skinless Terminators and mythological demons. More impressive is a crowd scene where every inch of the screen is filled with yokai. Though computer animation made this scene possible, seeing a literal cast of thousands fill a live-action screen still leaves adults in unashamed child-like awe.

Miike does treat his source material with irreverence. Tadashi's grandfather barfs into the sacred Kirin Rider outfit. But Miike's irreverence never descends to outright mockery of the genre's tropes. The toppling of a temple may be greeted with a character's blasé "Don't worry about it. It's only Gamera." Yet that moment of comic relief doesn't make Tadashi's struggle ridiculous.

For the titular yokai war is the medium for following the very human story of Tadashi's maturing process. Though the boy suffers setbacks, his eventual growing into the hero's role symbolizes his first steps towards adulthood. Humans' ability to see yokai turns out to be a metaphor for Tadashi's journey. But the film's logical culmination of this point may annoy adult fans of fantasy.

For a fantasy that doesn't treat adults as children, one needs a story featuring a smoking, drinking and cursing teddy bear. Thongchai is just one of the

wonderfully oddball characters populating the Bangkok of Wisit Satantienang's musical romance, *Citizen Dog*. The title derives from the fate "afflicting" people who find a job in the Thai city. Country bumpkin Pod moves to Bangkok in search of work. But his fear of growing a tail soon pales when compared to the sheer weirdness of Bangkok life. The crowds around Pod burst into the same song. Accidentally severed fingers get re-attached with ease, despite being stored in sardine cans for several days. Besides Thongchai, other strange characters inhabiting Bangkok include Kong, a motorcycle taxi driver killed by a rain of motorcycle helmets, and Jin, a neatness-obsessed maid who occasionally carries on conversations with characters in a magazine romance serial.

Needless to say, Pod develops a crush on Jin. The film soon charts the convoluted course of Pod and Jin's relationship.

Citizen Dog's Thailand is a study in candy-colored chaos. Bangkok may not be an eye-blazingly bright world where personal happiness is assured. Characters have their hearts broken to the point where heavy drinking and worse become natural responses. Yet the world of Satantienang's film feels ruled by its inhabitants' acceptance of outrageous coincidences. Jin, for example, moves to Bangkok because of a paperback book with a blank white cover that falls into her hands from a doomed plane.

In a way, *Citizen Dog* may remind some viewers of *Amelie's* fantastic Paris. Yet the world of that French film felt hermetically sealed off from the current century. Terrible things happen in *Citizen Dog's* world, such as people beaten to death by the police. But the Thai film also reminds people to look beyond life's awfulness and notice the sources of happiness in front of them.

The Great Yokai War and *Citizen Dog* may eventually reach American theatres or home video. The Miike film was voted Audience Favorite at the San Francisco Indie Fest, and some of Miike's previous films have been commercially released. Luc Besson's Europacorp may distribute the Satantienang film in North America.

But why let one's curiosity regarding worthy films be dependent on a distributor's whim? A film festival appearance is at least a certainty. If nothing else, places such as Rotterdam's festival may be the only sure venue for catching Edgar Honetschlager's Dada fantasy *Erni*. That charmingly strange short film's titular character is a talking chicken in a suit.

The Great Yokai War – Takashi Miike – Five Star Productions, THA Film Factory – theatrical release

Citizen Dog – Wisit Satantienang – Kadokawa Pictures – theatrical release

Erni – Edgar Honetschlager – Edoko Institute Vienna, Corn Institute Tokyo – theatrical release

Interview: Marc Gascoigne of Black Library

By Cheryl Morgan

I first interviewed Marc Gascoigne back in *Emerald City* #101. I have come back to him in this issue for two reasons. Firstly he is one of the Special Guests at Concussion, this year's Eastercon, but more importantly Black Library has recently announced the launch of Solaris, a new SF&F imprint that will publish creator-owned fiction rather than Games Workshop franchises or movie- and comic-tie-ins.

Cheryl: It is two years since the last interview and a few interesting things

have happened at Black Library. I was particularly pleased to see the Dark Future series being launched, and the associated re-issue of Kim Newman's books in that setting. How has Dark Future been selling?

Marc: The series has launched well, especially in the US, which means our plans to expand the range can continue. We're especially happy that the new titles such as Dave Stone's *Golgotha Run* and Stuart Moore's *American Meat* have proved as popular as the Jack Yeovil (Kim Newman) titles, which we all knew already were great fun. We're a bit disappointed no one's tried to sue us yet, but perhaps that will change when we get to *Comeback Tour*. Oops, I can just picture the company lawyer's face. I'm told that I take that all back.

Cheryl: That's OK, this is only appearing on the Internet. No one will ever know.

Cheryl: Anyway, before we get onto Solaris, is there anything else that Black Library and Black Flame have done in the past two years that you are particularly proud of?

Marc: Black Library is utterly delighted that Dan Abnett has just broken the half million sales mark for his books with us, and we're about to release his best book yet in *Horus Rising*, the first in a new series that delves back into the pre-history of the *Warhammer 40,000* setting. As importantly, we have a large wave of new writers who are hard on his heels, from the old-school swashbuckling fantasy of Nathan Long to the Flashman-esque SF of Alex Stewart's Ciaphas Cain series. Black Flame's biggest recent success has been the three-book Fiends of the Eastern Front series by David Bishop, where good old Sven Hassel-style WWII mayhem meets vampires, and goes for the jugular (sorry). It's *Commando* war comics meets *The Bloody Red Baron*, and why not? It seems readers worldwide have got the joke and are clamoring for more, a noise most joyous to any publisher.

Cheryl: So, Solaris. As I understand it, this will be a standard SF&F publishing line, much like Tor or Gollancz. Is that correct?

Marc: Very much so. BL and BF are tie-in lines, but the experience they've brought the BL team has meant it's now time to realize one of our oldest dreams, and start to publish original SF and fantasy.

Marc: We've had that yearning as a pipedream since we started BL, but over the last few years it has become far more concrete as we've encountered so many monstrously talented writers, some of them personal heroes, who have simply not been able to get published. The rise of the modern super-publisher, especially in the UK, has meant that some authors don't sell enough to get published. Others do manage to hit those rarefied levels, but find their publishers can only handle one book a year or every eighteen months under their own name. And if you're a new writer… well, it's very hard even for the most talented. Some days it seems like your only options are the likes of PS Publishing and Telos, who produce some great work but don't always have the distribution reach to really get a new talent out there in the mass-market, or joining the lengthy queue for *Interzone*. It's great to be able to offer an alternative that's compact enough to be able to appreciate midlist sales, but with enough distribution clout through Simon & Schuster to make those sales.

Cheryl: So creators will own their work, and royalties will be competitive with other publishers in the industry. The books won't be work for hire.

Marc: Correct, we're buying rights and paying royalties, and the copyright stays with the authors. We're paying industry

standard rates, based on predicted sales, on industry standard terms. As a result, we've already signed some well-known names, and are negotiating with many more (and their delightful agents, it goes without saying).

Cheryl: Will you be doing hardcovers, or just mass-market paperback?

Marc: Many titles will debut as paperback originals, but the hardcover and trade formats will be used for our biggest titles. Some review venues are still snobby about mass-market books, but we're happy enough to play the game to get the word out. Horse for courses, but yes, some larger formats.

Cheryl: Is there a particular style of book you will be looking for? Is the intention to publish thrilling adventures, to take risks with experimental writers like Hal Duncan, or what?

Marc: We want to publish great SF and fantasy, period. Easy answer, Marco, yes — but what that realistically means is that of course everyone wants to find the next award-winning stylist, the next sensation but we're keen not to lose sight of the traditional, the classic, the "straight down the line". To that end, we're playing up the fact that we want good stories, with good characters. If you can nail those, the hard work is done. Adding a stylized vocabulary or an unusually picaresque way with metaphor is the icing, but let's have the cake there first for us to decorate. (Among the team I am especially known for my crap analogies.) So we're looking for traditional as well as experimental, and whatever your story or style, plot and character and setting must work.

Cheryl: Do you have a position on eBooks? I note that Tor have just joined Baen in producing electronic books free of copy protection.

Marc: I'm keen for us to get a few books out, then we'll see. Black Library has a project we're looking at. If that comes together and works for us, we'll be sure to roll it out for Solaris, where rights allow us. Personally though, I wonder how much of the success our friends at Baen are seeing is because it's a novelty — in other words, is it a great marketing gimmick or is it a real breakthrough in providing books for people who wouldn't otherwise access them? I think the jury's out, but it's great they're having a go at something different. And if they do make it work, well, there'll be a rush to adopt the same ideas and we'll be right there in that mob.

Cheryl: One of the things that really interests me about your company is that you have a presence in both the UK and US. You publish simultaneously in both markets. I can see that being very useful for writers as they only need to sell the book once to hit both markets.

Marc: That's true. Some agents have hesitated on the suspicion that if they could sell a book into two territories in two deals they would automatically get more cash for their authors. But we're paying for UK and US rights, not getting one or the other free. For other agents and authors, our ability to hit the mass-market in both countries (and all the other English-speaking countries worldwide) with no extra deals has been seen as a benefit. I think the biggest issue internally is the ongoing argument as to whether the books should have UK or US spelling.

Cheryl: Are there any noticeable differences between the US and UK markets? For example, Tor in the US have gone for splitting up long novels, apparently in part because of pressure from bookstore chains, but Gollancz in the UK are still publishing enormous fantasy novels.

Marc: I wonder whether the pressure on Tor is more to do with maintaining price

points. Could just be my pet theory of the day, but there is a growing problem between the US and UK markets in that the price of books in the UK has risen regularly over the last ten years, whereas in the US there's barely been a dollar on a mass market book. It's why publishers are experimenting with trade paperbacks and the hybrids like the recent shape that is as tall as a trade but as narrow as a mass-market — it allows you to charge more but still keeps the books in the independent sector's spinner racks. In the UK, extra pages have meant publishers can raise the price — you're getting more for your money, in effect, to justify paying another pound. In the US, your thicker book isn't always followed by an increased price, which might make it uneconomic to print some of the most massive tomes. More prosaically, perhaps some books only work economically in two parts, due to large advances, nervousness about sales or whatever.

Marc: For Solaris, we're trying to stick to the rule that the story is as long as it takes to tell, and the titles will all balance out in the end. We know that many fantasy readers appreciate the deep, immersive experience of a truly brick-sized novel and we're not going to deny them. But I know that the marketplace will ultimately dictate the formats we use. The bigger issue for us might be grey importing of US editions back to the UK, where they might sell for a couple of quid less, since on current exchange rates US versions of UK novels should really be priced at $12-14 rather than the standard $7-8. Not all that much we can do about it though, so we'll remain sanguine and just be content when readers buy our books, period. Sorry, that was all a bit serious and Economics 101-esque. Back to the enthusiastic frothing, eh?

Cheryl: Your initial press release mentioned a group of editors who will be working with you. Who are they and what background do they have in SF&F?

Marc: Series consultant editor George Mann. He joined us a couple of years ago from huge UK book chain Ottakar's, where he was the company SF expert and produced their *Outland* fanzine. His *Mammoth Guide to SF* and his Telos work have shown he's equally at home with fiction and the legacy of our peers, and his insights and connections have been invaluable.

Cheryl: Obviously you will be at Eastercon this year, and presumably FantasyCon as well given that it is in your home town of Nottingham, but will you or your staff be attending American conventions as well from now on?

Marc: Yep, both the Worldcon and more regional events too. As you know, we also have US-based sales and marketing staff, who continue to promote us at US and Canadian shows. Our links to the bigger Games Workshop corporation mean we can also call on local support for manning stands and hitting shows across the US.

Cheryl: Are you going to take any other steps to push Solaris within the SF&F community? For example, are we going to see you starting a blog?

Marc: Our marketing and promotion plans are being assembled, in conjunction with our distributors. Obviously our job is to ensure that the whole SF&F community from genre commentators like you to everyday readers know all about us. The proof of their success will be seen in the sales figures. We have a few innovative ideas, but the most important will be the traditional areas of community, reviews, events and bookstores. The SF&F community is incredibly valuable both as a means of letting people know we

make good books, but also as a support mechanism that will give us great feedback and encouragement to help us grow and produce great books.

Cheryl: Are there any writers that you have already signed up that you can tell us about?

Marc: Nope! We're about four weeks away from our next announcement, which should cover our first signings. We're all contracted, but we're doing this steadily and under control. If I was being cheeky, I'd dare to add that if I give you another press release in a month's time I can ensure we get another mention from you, thus doubling our exposure on *Emerald City* with ease, but that would of course be most ungracious of me…

Cheryl: Fortunately I'm no longer running role-playing games, so nothing bad will happen to your characters.

Cheryl: If you could have a free choice amongst all of today's leading SF&F writers, who would you want to publish?

Marc: Me personally? Well, you know I love that slightly left-of-centre modern fantasy, whether Jonathan Carroll, Graham Joyce, China Miéville, Ian R. MacLeod, Kelly Link, Jonathan Lethem, so many tremendous writers. I've also just had my head explode by a chance discovery of Mark Helprin only a few decades late, and I'm bemused, shall we say, by his apparent lack of a current UK publisher.

Marc: But at the risk of sounding cheesy, I'm more excited by thought of publishing the next great author, not the next book by someone who I've already enjoyed. In our initial contacts for Solaris we've come across a couple of titles that have had us punching the air and champing at the bit to publish, that are new and fresh, exciting entertainments. In both cases we're up against other publishers so I can't go into details (pint of Stella the next time we're both leaning on the same bar, eh?), but if either one comes off I'll be very pleased indeed. That's what it's all about for me.

Cheryl: I'm not sure that you can get Stella in Anaheim, but I'm sure they'll have something suitable, and there's always FantasyCon.

Cheryl: And thinking of Anaheim: realistically what every new publishing company wants is to sell lots of books, but are you also thinking that you might one day publish a book that wins a Hugo?

Marc: Awards are for authors, not publishers. Our biggest reward over the next five-ten years will be picking the right books that sell enough to keep us publishing more of the same. That's worth any amount of awards.

Cheryl: Marc Gascoigne, thank you for talking to *Emerald City*.

Church Procedural

By Cheryl Morgan

In keeping with the somewhat Eastercon-related theme of this issue, I wanted to make sure I included a review of a book by Dan Abnett. I have, after all, gone on a great length about my admiration for M. John Harrison, Elizabeth Hand and Justina Robson, but I've only reviewed one of Abnett's books. So I asked Marc Gascoigne which Abnett book I should review. "Eisenhorn", came the reply. It wasn't until I got back to California that I realized Marc had recommended a three-volume series, albeit one sent to me as an omnibus edition. I didn't have time to read the whole thing, so here,

with apologies to Dan, is a review of the first book, *Xenos*.

Most of Abnett's work for Black Library has been in the various Warhammer universes. *Riders of the Dead* was from the fantasy universe, but *Eisenhorn* is from the *Warhammer 40,000* setting. It is an odd science fiction set-up that takes elements from *Dune* and *Star Wars* and grafts on a bunch of testosterone-fuelled silliness and fantasy tropes to make it appeal to the sort of teenage boy who thinks it would be cool to be a Nazi general and that the enemy really are all sub-human. It isn't necessarily an easy universe to get something interesting out of, but various writers have tried, usually through the use of Imperial Inquisitors as lead characters. I'm still hoping to find time to read Ian Watson's notorious Inquisition War series. In the meantime I have been getting to see what Abnett has done with his own Inquisitor, Gregor Eisenhorn.

When you think of an Inquisitor the tendency is to think of some snively pervert who spends his time directing tortures, preferably of nubile young women he has accused of witchcraft. *W40K* Inquisitors are generally not like that. In fact it helps to think of them more like high-powered policemen. Their job is to root out traitors to the Empire (who by definition are heretics because the Emperor is a god). Because they are pretty much a law unto themselves, how they do so is up to them. Some, like Commodus Voke, spin careful traps that may take decades to come to fruition. Gregor Eisenhorn is more of the Dirty Harry school of policing. He's much more happy barging in and confronting the bad guys directly, preferably with a large gun in his hand, which is an ideal sort of fellow to have as a lead character in a *W40K* book.

The problem for the author is how to write about such a character without having him seem a humorless racist bigot. The *W40K* attitude towards aliens is not exactly politically correct, as Abnett has archaeoxenologist Girolamo Malahite point out:

"Oh, there's no saving them, Inquisitor. They are precisely the sort of xenos filth you people teach us to fear and despise. I have encountered several alien races in my career, and found most to be utterly undeserving of the hatred that the Inquisition and the church reserves for anything that is not human. You are blinkered fools. You would kill everything because it is not like you. But in this case you are right."

Thereby Abnett manages to have it both ways. He questions the racist ideology of the setting, but at the same time pits his hero up against a particular group of aliens who have most certainly been subverted by the Dark Side. They are slaves to a force to horrible for mortal minds to contemplate. Can you guess what it is yet, boys and girls? Here's a clue.

"Most perturbatory," said Aemos, looking at it for the umpteenth time. "Symmetry – at least basic symmetry – is a virtual constant in the galaxy. All species – even the most obscene xenos kinds like the tyranid – have some order of it."

"There's something wrong with the angles," agreed Lowink, furrowing his unhealthy, socket-pocked brow. I knew what he meant. It was as if the angles in the star symbol made up more than three hundred and sixty degrees, though that of course was unthinkable.

Yes, got it in one. Inquisitor Eisenhorn is on the trail of a bunch of bad guys who

are threatening the Empire with nothing more deadly-looking than a book.

From here on in it is all good fun. The story ramps up from a simple police-style investigation of what appears to be a terrorist outrage to a full-scale fleet operation intended to ensure that no trace of That Book remains in the known universe. Given that *Xenos* is only the first book of a trilogy, we can assume that some of the bad guys are going to escape, and that things will get even more desperate as the series goes on. So far there has been no sign of anyone with questionable taste in beards. I hope it stays that way. One of the important ground rules of *Call of Cthulhu* games is that no matter what setting you put our slimy, tentacled friends into, they are always much more powerful than any weapons that the good guys can throw at them. Even if the good guys happen to be armed with entire fleets of planet-busting dreadnaughts.

The writing of *Xenos* is competent, straightforward and inspiring of compulsive page-turning. The characters have a tendency towards stereotypes, but are well drawn for all that. Eisenhorn manages to show himself not to be completely heartless, despite the fact that it is his job to be so. And Abnett's background as a comics writer comes through quite a bit, particularly in the fight scenes. You can tell that he's thinking about how the action will look as a panel when he is writing it, which tends to make it a lot easier to visualize what is going on that if you are reading action described by someone who has never worked closely with artists.

Obviously *Xenos* is not the sort of book that is going to be up for SF awards. Nor, at last as far as the first volume of the series is concerned, has Abnett tired to go for the sort of depth of political sophistication that Karen Traviss talks about putting into her *Star Wars* books. Such an approach is probably much more difficult in the *W40K* world, given that the very rules of that world would have had any putative Luke Skywalkers executed for treason in very short order. Nevertheless, it is clear that a fair amount of effort has gone into writing the book. *Xenos* isn't something that has just been tossed off in a weekend to earn a few quick bucks. It is the work of someone who has respect for his readers and hopes that people other than the target 12-14 year-old male audience will get something out of it. Compared to some of the deeply formulaic and unimaginative fantasy I have read, this is really rather good.

Eisenhorn – Dan Abnett – Black Library – mass-market paperback

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A Life In Books

By Cheryl Morgan

The scene is Boston in the 1960's. Scollay Square is by no means the most pleasant part of the city, but it does have small havens. Flo is on the run from a group of sailors who are even more drunk than she is. She finds sanctuary in the basement of a bookstore, which is just as well because she is heavily pregnant and her time is near. She needs nesting material, but thankfully there are lots of books around. She picks a big one, rips out some pages, and settles down in them.

A few hours later it is all over. A very healthy litter: thirteen in all, and very demanding. Thankfully Flo's bloodstream is full of alcohol that she's lapped up from the streets and bars, so they are soon asleep. Flo sleeps too.

For the runt of litter, life is not so easy. Mama only has twelve nipples, and that means that Firmin is regularly booted

out of the feeding queue. There isn't much to eat in a bookstore, except paper, and Firmin finds it all around him. In desperation he eats some of the nest, but his unorthodox diet has a strange effect on him. After a while he finds that he can understand the mysterious black marks on the nest material. He has been eating a book. It is called *Finnegan's Wake*, written by a human called Joyce, and it is rather interesting. What is more, the store appears to be full of more of these book things. Which would be wonderful, if it wasn't for the fact that Firmin is a rat.

The rest of my family were blessed in a way. Thanks to their dwarfish imaginations and short memories they did not ask for a lot, mostly just food and fornication, and they got enough of both to take them through life while it lasted. But that was not the life for me. Like an idiot, I had aspirations.

The book under review, then, is a memoir of a distinctly erudite individual who loves books and has read more of them than most humans, but who is hampered by the fact that he can't talk and is regarded as vermin by the only people he might talk to. *Firmin: Adventures of a Metropolitan Lowlife*, by Sam Savage, is alternately comic and tragic, but always infused with a love of books, and of the funny, hairless creatures who create and love them.

The only literature I cannot abide is rat literature, including mouse literature. I despise good-natured old Ratty in The Wind in the Willows. I piss down the throats of Mickey Mouse and Stuart Little. Affable, shuffling, cute*, they stick in my craw like fish bones.*

Eventually, however, Firmin finds a soul mate. Jerry Magoon is a writer of science fiction. Well, let's face it, he's a writer of bad pulp SF, some of which just happens to feature Earth being invaded by intelligent giant rats. What Firmin would have made of Douglas Adams' white mice we will never know. Rats, even super-intelligent rats, do not live that long. But I did find myself thinking that it was rather a shame that Jerry never moved to San Francisco as he planned. I suspect that he, Firmin, and Phil would have got on very well together. Phil and Jerry would have hit it off straight away, having similar views about politics and booze, and Phil might even have been smart enough to figure out Firmin's attempts to communicate. Then where would the world have been?

But, as it is, the lives of both rats and drunken pulp writers are short and sad, and therefore so is this book. But not, as I intimated before, without being both funny and deeply fond of books as well. If you are looking for something to while a way a few hours, and you happen to love books (all books) yourself, you will enjoy *Firmin*.

Firmin – Sam Savage – Coffee House Press – mass-market paperback

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Magic Kids

By Cheryl Morgan

The second volume of Amanda Hemingway's Sangreal Trilogy shows every sign of the author intelligently spotting what had worked best in volume one and providing more of it. The book is more avowedly Young Adult in its approach, but it is also more knowing and full of clever use of popular culture as a commentary on the

text. How can any science fiction fan not love a book that has this on page 1?

… the worlds in Nathan's dreams were real, or seemed real, depending on the nature of reality. He went to the kind of school where teachers talked about philosophy and quantum physics, so he knew the chair he was sitting on was provably non-existent, and the entire cosmos was made up of particles too small to believe in, popping in an out of reality whenever scientists studied them too closely. (Sneaky things, particles.) Nonetheless, Nathan was a down-to-earth boy who had yet to find a magical country at the back of a wardrobe, so it was unnerving to find one in his own head.

The book is known as *The Traitor's Sword* in the UK (where it has been out for some time) and *The Sword of Straw* in the US (where it is published this month). The two titles do refer to the same sword, which is of course the same magical artifact from the Grail legends, completely re-interpreted for Hemingway's Arthur-less (and indeed Camelot-less) grail story. Having secured the Cup, young Nathan now has to travel to a different parallel world to secure the Sword. Along the way he gets to meet and fall in love with a princess, but one who shells peas rather than one who tries to avoid sleeping on them. Meanwhile, back in his own world, the bad guys continue to chase after Bartelmy Goodman to try to steal the Grail. And even Barty, who is after all a kindly old wizard, is well rooted in everyday things.

'Well,' Bartelmy said, 'was that helpful, or wasn't it? Do we know anything we didn't know before? Or – at the risk of sounding like Donald Rumsfeld – do we only know things we don't know?'

Thankfully Donald Rumsfeld does not take much interest in strange goings on in small British villages, especially those involving teenagers getting into trouble. So there are no secret service agents trying to discover the secrets of inter-dimensional travel. Inspector Pobjoy, on the other hand, is even more confused then ever, and this time he only has a burglary and a kidnapping to deal with. It is a good job he doesn't question Annie too closely about Nathan's origins, or he might just end up with an unsolvable rape case as well.

She wondered if other victims of supernatural impregnation had felt the same. Rosemary with her baby, Leda, ravaged by a swan (she had often wondered about the technicalities of that). And Mary, who had been honoured and overwhelmed according to the Bible – but then, Annie reflected, the Bible was written by men. Maybe she too had known that instant of raw fury because her body had been used without her permission, invaded by a superior being who thought he was above the rules, and humans were his creatures, to do with as he pleased.

It isn't often that I build a review around a set of quotes. I have done so deliberately here because the plot of *The Traitor's Sword* is simple and predictable. The characters are fun, but mostly fairly stereotypical. It is the meta-narrative – the constant commenting on what is going on from the point of view of an F&SF-reading set of characters – that makes the whole thing so much fun for the likes of us to read. Hemingway's series is light entertainment, but it is fun light entertainment written by someone who can't quite rid herself of the idea that what she is writing is faintly absurd. Consequently I'm very much looking forward to part three.

The Traitor's Sword - Amanda Hemmingway – Voyager – trade paperback

The Secret Life of Dreams

By Cheryl Morgan

We don't often review Young Adult fiction in *Emerald City*. For us to do so the book has to come highly recommended, and that was the case with *Dreamhunter* by Elizabeth Knox. UK readers may already be familiar with it, but the author actually lives in Wellington, New Zealand. Knox, it would appear, has conquered the Australian and UK markets, and now has her sights set on the US. She may well succeed.

The story is set in a country that is not quite New Zealand but is nevertheless geographically remote and obsessed with rugby. In a remote part of the south island there is a region known only as The Place. Not everyone can enter it — the ability to do so is given only to a small number of talented individuals. Everyone else just passes through normal landscape as if The Place was not there.

Inside The Place, however, the world is different. There are no people, apparently even no animals, but there are dreams, and a canny hunter can catch them as he sleeps.

The first person to enter The Place was a young man called Tziga Hame. He had no idea that he caught a dream there, but on going back to the normal world he found that he could recall that dream — could dream it again — and could broadcast that dream to others sleeping near him. What is more the dream seemed to have strong positive effects on the health of the sleepers. Hame teamed up with a local doctor to sell cures. Before long he was rich.

Naturally other fortune seekers attempted to enter The Place, and a small number succeeded. Not all of them brought back the same sorts of dreams. Grace Cooper specialized in somewhat risqué romantic dreams, a talent that made her the toast of society parties for many years. Eventually a special opera house was built where Cooper could broadcast toned down versions of her dreams to a huge audience. Maze Plasir, on the other hand, has very few customers. He has the ability to make people in dreams look like someone the dreamer knows. For a suitable fee he will tailor dreams to clients' requirements, no matter how unusual. Can't get that girl? Want to kill that man? Plasir can make it happen in your dreams.

With so much money at stake, and such a high public profile for the business, it was inevitable that the government should get involved. A special office was set up to license dreamhunters, and to make use of their taxes. Several dreamhunters, including Hame and Plasir, signed up to government contracts through which they received an annual salary in return for handing over any dreams they found that were deemed to be of significant public interest. In addition, certain types of dreaming had to be forbidden.

Last, Sandy said, there were Colorists. "Coloring is illegal. I have heard a Colorist can infiltrate dreams and suggest things. They're secret persuaders.

Laura was staring at him, apparently horrified. "What do they persuade people to do?"

"Alter their opinions, invest their money, sell their houses, vote a certain way, leave town, get married, change their wills, like or dislike someone, form suspicions — all that."

Given the small number of top-flight dreamhunters it was perhaps inevitable that Hame and Cooper would end up related. Cooper married the society beau, Chorley Tiebold, and Hame married Tiebold's sister, Verity. With both dreamhunters spending long periods away in The Place, it made sense for the two families to pool resources. The two daughters ended up being brought up as sisters with Chorley and Verity as their effective parents. The arrangement became even more important when Verity died young of cancer.

Everyone expects the two girls to follow in the family profession. As the novel begins, they have just turned fifteen and are legally allowed to take their dreamhunter test. Bossy Rose Tiebold is convinced that she will succeed gloriously, but Laura Hame is far less confident. She's happy to follow Rose's lead. And besides, she isn't entirely sure that dreamhunting is a good idea. Her father has been behaving very strangely of late.

I approached *Dreamhunter* with a certain amount of nervousness. No matter how well recommended it came, it was still a YA book and the central characters were two fifteen-year-old girls. However, I was pleased to find a very serious book that covered important issues about government corruption and the treatment of criminals. Elizabeth Knox is no Philip Pullman, but then few people are that good. She is, however, perfectly capable of telling a serious story that will appeal to adults as well as her intended audience.

I was, for a while, rather confused as to why the story had been set in 1906. I wondered if this was some harking back to the "safer" world of Enid Blyton books. But in fact it was all part of the world building. Knox had realized that for dreamhunting to work as a business it had to do so away from competition from TV and movies. So she set the story at a time when that would be true. She even makes Chorley Tiebold an amateur filmmaker to emphasize the point. Rose, who has an opinion on everything, thinks her father's hobby is a waste of time.

"So you think films are only a novelty?" Chorley asked his daughter.

"No – but they're for recording facts. *They can't do fiction, like dreams can."*

Unusually for a fantasy series, there are only two books. The second volume, *The Rainbow Opera*, is already available in the UK, so UK readers should probably go out and buy both. I have other books I have to read first, but I'm very much looking forward to the US edition of book two when it arrives.

Dreamhunter - Elizabeth Knox – Farrar, Straus and Giroux - hardcover

Scenes from Beyond

By Cheryl Morgan

Last year the collection that everyone was talking about was Joe Hill's *20th Century Ghosts*. This year there is a good chance that its place will be taken by *In the Forest of Forgetting* by Theodora Goss. Goss has already received a lot of critical attention, and one of the stories in the collection, "The Wings of Meister Wilhelm, was a World Fantasy Award nominee last year. Having now read the entire collection, I think it is one of the weaker pieces therein.

What Goss provides, and you'll find this common to all of the short fantasy I like, is elegant but creepy prose that often puts a chill up the spine at the same time as you are admiring the author's eloquence. In addition she has two extra elements. Firstly there is a knowing awareness of the political issues that lie behind the stories. In addition several of the stories have an Eastern European flavor to them — a legacy of Goss's family history.

Although all of the stories are stand-alone, three of them share a common character. Emily Gray is a magical spirit who can aid or punish humans, though even her help generally comes with a price. We meet her three times. In "Miss Emily Gray" a young woman finds out that wishing yourself free of your domineering father can have terrible consequences. In "Conrad" Emily turns up as the nurse of a young man whose aunt is poisoning him so as to get her hands on his inheritance. And in "Lessons with Miss Gray" she teaches a group of Southern Belles the art of witchcraft, with serious consequences for some of them.

"Good afternoon," said a woman in a gray dress, with white hair. She looked like your grandmother, the one who baked you gingerbread and knitted socks. Or like a schoolteacher, as proper as a handkerchief. Behind her stood a ghost.

From "Lessons with Miss Gray"

Cancer is perhaps another favorite theme. The title story, though it sounds like traditional fantasy, is actually about a woman releasing her hold on life despite the urgings of medical staff and her family. In "Lily, with Clouds", a prim Southern society woman is horrified to discover the depravity of the New York bohemian crowd that her dying sister fell in with. It is a lovely study of a character who cares more about her social position that her family.

The most obviously Eastern European story is "Letters from Budapest", which is about a man who helps his talented younger brother enter art school, only for the boy to insist on making art rather than drawing the sort of things The Party wants drawn. Which would not be so bad if there were not powers older than The Party who have a liking for fine art. "A Statement in the Case" looks at the different ways immigrants from Eastern Europe can adapt, or not adapt, to life in America.

The poetry of Sorrow may confuse anyone not accustomed to its intricacies. In Sorrow, poems are constructed on the principle of the maze. Once the reader enters the poem, he must find his way out by observing a series of clues. Readers failing to solve a poem have been known to go mad. Those who can appreciate its beauties say that the poetry of Sorrow is impersonal and ecstatic, and that it invariably speaks of death.

From "The Rapid Advance of Sorrow"

One of the tricks of creating a collection or anthology is to make sure that you have some of the best material at the beginning and the end. The book opens with "The Rose in Twelve Petals," which is a wonderful re-interpretation of the Sleeping Beauty myth. The last but one story, "Pip and the Faeries," is a tale about a woman who was the heroine of a series of children's stories written by her. Although she has since become a successful actress, Philippa Lawson can't forget the magical life that her mother wove for her when she was a girl.

Some of the stories have little or no fantastical elements to them, though they all read as if they were fantasies.

"Death Comes for Ervina", for example, is a simple story about a dying ballerina looking back on her youth in post-war Hungary, her rise to fame in the west, and the young American dancer for whom she was too old to be the lover she wanted to be. Other stories are totally off the wall. "Sleeping with Bears" tells the story of the wedding of Miss Rosalie Barlow to Mr. T.C. Ursus. Blanche, the bride's younger sister, can't understand why Rosalie chucked an ambitious and successful young lawyer to marry a bear. And no, it has nothing to do with Goldilocks.

I could go on enthusing about all of the other stories. There are sixteen in all, and not a bad one amongst them. Theodora Goss is a writer you'll be hearing a lot more about in the future.

In the Forest of Forgetting – Theodora Goss – Prime – publisher's proof

Brilliant Idea

One of the most common complaints made about best-selling SF&F series is, "the original novella was much better." It is surprising just how many really famous books began life as novellas, which is why I am so pleased that Brian M. Thomsen and DAW have created an anthology of them. *Novel Ideas* is quite simply an anthology of stories that went on to become very famous books. A book like this doesn't need a review as such because the material is so well known, so I'll content myself with looking at the contents. We'll start with the really famous ones:

"Beggars in Spain" by Nancy Kress, first published in *Asimov's*, a Hugo winner in its own right and nominated for a Hugo a novel.

"Ender's Game" by Orson Scott Card, first published in *Analog* as a novelette, which was nominated for a Hugo, and later a Hugo winner as a novel too.

"The Postman" by David Brin, first published in *Asimov's*, nominated for a Hugo as both a novella and a novel, and later a motion picture staring Kevin Costner

"Fire Watch" by Connie Willis, first published in Asimov's, a Hugo winner as a novelette, and the first story in the setting that later produced the Hugo-winning novels, *The Domesday Book* and *To Say Nothing of the Dog*.

"Blood Music" by Greg Bear, first published in *Analog* and later to become a Hugo-nominated novel.

"Air Raid" by John Varley, first published in *Asimov's*, a short story nominee for both Hugo and the source for the Hugo-nominated novel, *Millennium*.

And that is almost it. The only story that isn't an award winner is "The Lady in the Tower" by Anne McCaffrey, first published in F&SF, and the source for *The Rowan* and subsequent best-selling novels. That's as weak as the book gets.

Of course serious short fiction fans will already have all of these stories as part of "year's best", or even in the original magazines, but for everyone else this is simply a book that you should own.

And while you are about it you might also pick up the companion fantasy volume, edited by Thomsen and Martin H. Greenberg.

Novel Ideas: Science Fiction – Brian M. Thomsen (ed.) – DAW – mass-market paperback

Novel ideas: Fantasy – Brian M. Thomsen and Martin H. Greenberg (eds.) – DAW – mass-market paperback

Down in Ancient Sumer

By Cheryl Morgan

I'm probably not the best person in the world to be reviewing poetry, but I do have a strong interest in mythology, and when I heard that Catherynne M. Valente was producing a series of long-form poems based on "descent into the underworld" myths I was going to be first in the queue for review copies. Especially as the first title in the series happened to be *The Descent of Inanna*. I might not know much about poetry, but I am probably one of the few people in the SF&F community who owns a translation of the original Sumerian poem (Wolkstein & Kramer, for those who are interested).

[Note for the mythologically challenged: Inanna is the Sumerian original from which the Babylonian goddess, Ishtar, was derived. She's sort of a combination of Venus and Diana. The poem tells the story of her journey into the underworld to visit her sister, the death goddess, Ershkigal.]

As poetry goes, translations of Sumerian religious verse don't stack up to well. I suspect that the original material was designed for chanting rather than to be read, and after translation it looses any rhyme and scansion it might have had. It ends up sounding rather like a literal translation of the libretto for the chorus of an Italian opera. Nevertheless, it still has some punch.

The Ereshkigal fastened on Inanna the eye of death.
She spoke against her the word of wrath.
She uttered against her the cry of guilt.

She struck her.
Inanna was turned to a corpse,
A piece of rotting meat,
And was hung from a hook on the wall.

Faced with material like this, what Valente has done is try to transform the story into something that retains the spirit of the original but is rather more in tune with modern sensibilities. She keeps much of the repetitive nature of the original, but at the same time she freely uses modern terms and idioms where they add to the text. One of my favorite parts of her adaptation is the section in which Inanna is trying to persuade Neti, gatekeeper of the underworld, to let her in. The original goes like this:

Neti said:

"If you are truly Inanna, Queen of Heaven,
On your way to the East,
Why has your heart led you on the road
From which no traveler returns?"

Valente's version plays up the level of insult that Neti gives Inanna (which is found in other parts of the original). It adds a lot to the sense of pagan religious concepts, and it drops in a very modern last line.

"If you are Inanna whose-legs-lie-open,
why would you come here
through the muck and mire,
past the dung-beetles' sentry?
There are no flush-skinned lovers here,
or fields sown with carrots.
Here is only swamp-winds wending,
apples browned to sopping,
and Ereshkigal on her pitch-soaked throne.

Go home.
This is no place for tourists."

Valente is also very much aware that the dispute between Inanna, Queen of Heaven, Goddess of Love and War, and her sister, Ereshkigal, Queen of the Underworld, is a classic female rivalry. In deference to the Sumerian origins of the tale she allows Inanna to keep her dark hair (in a true American version she would be blonde and Ereshkigal dark). But she also recognizes the Hollywood nature of the confrontation between the sisters.

"I always thought, you know,
out of the two of us,
you were prettiest,"
said the deathshead, pale as sturgeon.

She drew back her hand,
and struck Inanna full-knuckled.

Overall I think Valente has produced a very nice balance between keeping the spirit of the original and making it more approachable to a modern audience. I'm very much looking forward to future poems in the series.

The bad news is that initially the seven poems will only available as limited edition hardcovers at $50 each. They'll be beautifully produced, but beyond the means of most of us. (And Papaveria were serious about limited – I reviewed the poem from a PDF.) However, late next year, once all seven individual poems have been released, a paperback compilation of all seven poems will be issued. If you want to buy Inanna now, the Papaveria web site <http://www.papaveria.com/> is your best bet.

The Descent of Inanna – Catherynne M. Valente - Papaveria Press - hardcover

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In Search of Viriconium

By Cheryl Morgan

Those of you who know me well are probably somewhat astonished that I haven't reviewed this book before. *Parietal Games*, a book of critical writings by and about M. John Harrison, has been out for months. However, I have put off reviewing it until the issue before the Eastercon at which Harrison will be Guest of Honor because I know the book will be easily available then, whereas you are not likely to find it in shops.

The majority of the book, some 250 pages, is taken up with reviews and essays that Harrison has written over his career. It includes material for *New Worlds*, *Foundation*, *The Times Literary Supplement* and *The Guardian*. Much of this is book reviews, and of course old reviews are of limited interest if they are of books you haven't read and probably never will read (especially after Harrison has skewered them). Nevertheless it is all entertaining. The best of the material is probably that from *New Worlds*, because here Harrison had a degree of editorial control and was able to talk much more generally about genre fiction than you can in a review written for a newspaper.

Having said that, one of my favorite pieces is actually one written for *Speculation*. It is called "The Chalk Won't Stay On The Biscuits" and it takes the form of a dialog between two unnamed characters, one of whom is book reviewer and one of whom isn't. In the essay Harrison makes the point that a reviewer is very much like a garage mechanic. Why? Well, you can't diagnose what is wrong with a car if you don't know how cars work and what they are supposed to do. Ditto, you can't say anything sensible about a piece of fiction unless you know something about how fiction works and what it is

intended to do. So many reviews I see these days, especially on the Internet, never rise above summarizing the plot and a few words as to whether or not the reviewer liked to the book. Here we do at least try to do what Harrison recommends.

Of course, just like the rest of us, Harrison doesn't always follow his own advice. There are certain types of genre fiction whose purpose is obvious, and which perform that purpose admirably, but which Harrison despises because of that purpose. The shorthand term for such books is Consolatory Fantasy, though "cod-medieval Valium" might be a better term were it not probably a trademark infringement. Harrison's *New Worlds* essay, "By Tennyson out of Disney" was one of the first pieces to lambaste the dreadful mire into which so much modern fantasy has sunk. You probably all know the arguments by now, and if you don't then just buy the book (and Michael Moorcock's *Wizardry and Wild Romance*) so you can get the story direct from the main protagonists.

Although Harrison's fiercest ire is reserved for fantasy, SF doesn't escape his attention. He's particularly scathing about the pretensions of much SF to be deeply intellectual when it is often just as formulaic as fantasy.

Dr Who*, then, is sci-fi, while Frank Herbert's* Dune *is not.* Dune*, you see, is about ecology, anthropology, sociology, etc, etc.* Dr Who *is just about giant worms (and things that jump out and suck your head off in the dark). If you think* Dune *is just about giant worms too, you are being cynical and obstructive, go to the bottom of the class.*

From a book review column in the *New Manchester Review*

Having said that, Harrison is happy to acknowledge quality scientific input when he sees it. Al Reynolds is perhaps not the sort of writer you would expect Harrison to praise, but Harrison knows what Reynolds' writing is all about, and why people love it.

But though it could do with a little more, humanity isn't really the point of space opera. Vast, unhealthy exciting cosmological speculations are the point. The infinitely recessive qualities of the plot and background act as a direct metaphor for our scientific relationship with the world – the more you think you know, the more there is to find out. […] Al Reynolds occupies the same frenzied imaginative space as Philip K. Dick or A.E. Van Vogt: that he occupies it as a working scientist is what makes this book so exciting.

From a review of *Redemption Ark* in *The Guardian*

Finally, Harrison is all too aware of the way in which a science fiction sensibility has entered modern fantasy, reducing much of the genre to mere space opera with swords instead of ray guns.

For instance, the moment you begin to ask (or rather to answer) questions like, "Yes, but what did Sauron look like?"; or, "Just how might an Orc regiment organise itself?"; the moment you concern yourself with the economic geography of pseudo-feudal societies, with the real way to use swords, with the politics of courts, you have diluted the poetic power of Tolkien's images.

From "What Might It Be Like To Live In Viriconium?", published on *Fantastic Metropolis*

Of course if you must write medieval fantasies it is probably better to ask these questions and produce historical novels

from alternate worlds, but if you want real fantasy the likes of Elizabeth Hand and Graham Joyce are where the action is. Or you can write books that are deliberately weird in their own strange ways, like those by China Miéville or Jeff VanderMeer.

Anyway, if you are interested in getting a good grounding in genre criticism and enjoy being hugely entertained along the way, *Parietal Games* is the book for you. Two thirds of it is written by Harrison, and his non-fiction, though generally written in more of a hurry because of editorial deadlines, is just as incisive as his fiction.

What, however, of the other third of the book, the bits that are about Harrison rather than by him? Well, it is something of a mixed bag. The first point to make is any comparisons are inevitably unfair, because Harrison is a brilliant writer whose work in the book set out as much to entertain as to inform, whereas the other contributors are professional critics who set out primarily to inform. Only John Clute manages to match Harrison for style. Furthermore, the critical material itself is mixed: some of it is definitely in an academic style, other pieces are still academic but more approachable, and two are reprints of book reviews. I'm loathe to criticize the editors, Mark Bould and Michelle Reid, over this because I suspect it was inevitable, but it does make the last third of the book read a little oddly.

Bould contributes an introduction, which as usual is full of interesting ideas. However, when reading Bould I often get the impression from context that words he is using, while they might appear normal, are actually intended to have special meaning in Lit. Crit. jargon. Also Bould makes no apologies for the fact that he is a Marxist Literary Critic, which is very honest of him but sometimes makes him read like he comes from another world.

Rob Latham's contribution, which provides an overview of Harrison's career, is excellent. It is very approachable, but equally very well informed. It is a model of how academics should write for a wider audience. Graham Sleight's piece on *Climbers* is also very good – the first few paragraphs provide one of the best summaries of Harrison's position on fantasy I've ever seen. However, I wish it has been a little longer and spent a bit more time talking about the relationship between Harrison's approach to climbing and his approach to writing fiction, which seem to me to have a lot in common. Harrison is a risk-taker. Indeed, it often seems he isn't happy unless he's putting himself in some really difficult position from which it will require all of his skill to extricate himself.

The one piece that I think fell short of the mark was Graham Fraser's essay on *The Course of the Heart*. Obviously it is a big ask for me to be happy about someone's views on one of my favorite books, but Fraser does seem to have got something of the wrong end of the stick. Reading his essay I got the impression that he thought what Pam and Lucas were doing with The Coeur was a valid form of psychotherapy, rather than two sad and damaged people clinging to a myth in desperation. Then I found this:

Pam and Lucas (and so many of Harrison's other characters) seek to evade life and escape the world not because they do not value the world but, ironically, because they value it to the point of paralysis: they feel its preciousness and fear the pain of losing it.

This to me sounds muddle-headed. Harrison's characters don't value the

real world. What they value is a dream; an idea of what the real world might be. Or, to go back to the Roger Waters line I quoted in my own review of *The Course of the Heart*, a fleeting glimpse of something better, seen as a child, which the adult has never been able to recover.

Still, I'm not going to let one weak essay spoil my enjoyment (or yours) of a fine book full of wonderful critical writing by one of the best practitioners of the art alive today. If you are interested in genre criticism you need to read this book.

Parietal Games – Mark Bould and Michelle Reid (eds) – SF Foundation – trade paperback

The Science of Fiction

By Cheryl Morgan

In many ways I am the wrong sort of person to be reviewing Samuel R. Delany's new book, *About Writing*. You see, the book is intended as a guide for professional writers of fiction, and I am not one. I have, on occasion, tried to write fiction, but the results have been so laughably poor that I haven't spent much time trying to get any better. However, as I noted in my review of *Parietal Games*, you can't hope to review fiction properly unless you know a bit about how it is made. With that sage advice from M. John Harrison in mind, I'm trying to educate myself about the process of writing, hence I read Delany's book.

The first thing that strikes you about *About Writing* is how deeply Delany has thought about the issues he is discussing. Most of the "how to write" books that I have seen have been the sort of quick fix lifestyle books that are so popular these days, and which promise success without work. "How to lose weight and gain love in 10 easy lessons", "How to write a best-selling novel in 10 easy lessons." They are all very similar, and similarly dishonest. Delany, however, pulls no punches. Right from the start he makes the case that becoming a successful writer is Hard.

The increased size of the new, democratic field that today produces both readers and writers, the increase in competition for fame and attention – not to mention the increased effort necessary to make a reasonable living from one's work – all transform a situation that was always risky into one that today often looks lunatic.

Of course the one point you can make about the self-help books is that they focus solely on what you need to do to sell books (preferably in large quantities). They don't care much, and indeed may advise you not to care, about literary quality. Delany, however, cares passionately. You can make a lot of money turning out formulaic tripe. That isn't Delany's way, and if it is what you want to do then you should not buy his book. If, on the other hand, you want to learn how to write well, then he has a lot of good things to say, starting with (you guessed it) that it is Hard.

To learn anything worth knowing requires that you learn as well how pathetic you were when you were ignorant of it.

Or, to put it another way, if I had read a lot more John Clute and Gary Wolfe 10 years earlier than I started I would be a much better book reviewer now. You never stop learning, and you should never want to. Indeed, Delany too has wise things to say about the whole process of reading and criticism.

It is only relatively wide-ranging readers who can respond to writerly talent, because they alone experience what it is different from.

This is entirely true, although of course you don't actually learn how true until you have written your first few hundred book reviews.

All of this, however, is peripheral to the main question, which is to do with how one actually writes. I'm not going to try to go deeply into this because, as I said earlier, I'm not a fiction writer. However, I was particularly impressed with the way in which Delany demonstrates that the same scene can be written in a vast number of different ways. Let's stop thinking of writing for a moment and think about baseball (the new season being about to start). Any old coach can say trite things like, "keep your head steady and hit through the ball." A really good coach will sit you down in from of videos of your swing, and that of Barry Bonds, and show you how they differ so that you have some basis for managing your training program. Delany teaches writing in the same way.

If the book has a fault it is that it isn't written from scratch, but is rather a collection of essays, letters and interviews lumped together to form a book. This means that there is a certain amount of overlap in material between the sections, and a lack of overall flow. But I would much rather have a book like that than not have the book at all. (I should add also that, as a journalist, I think the interviews published are not good interviews. They take the form of the interviewer asking very simple questions and Delany writing a multi-page essay in response. However, as distilled essence of Delany wisdom they are just as valuable of the rest of the book so I'm not complaining.)

I'll add here that I have seen *About Writing* discussed on the blogs of several writers and they have all been as impressed with it as I am, so the people it was written for like it too. All I can say is that I hope it gets read by a lot of those self-published authors out there who think that because they have read a "How to Write a Best Seller in 10 Easy Lessons" book they know all that there is to know about writing. It is so sad seeing so many people with such great hopes and so little talent.

About Writing – Samuel R. Delany – Wesleyan University Press – trade paperback

Out of Synch

Not much to mention this month, but fabulous material all the same.

The US edition of *Temeraire*, known locally as *His Majesty's Dragon*, will be in the shops any day now (swiftly to be followed by the two sequels).

Dave McKean and Neil Gaiman's *Mirrormask* is now available on DVD, so those of you who don't live near an art house cinema can now see it.

His Majesty's Dragon – Naomi Novik – Del Rey – mass market paperback

Mirrormask – Dave McKean & Neil Gaiman – Sony - DVD

Miscellany

Hugo Nominees

Here's the official list:

A total of 533 people cast valid Hugo Nominating ballots this year.

Best Novel (430 ballots cast): *Learning the World*, Ken MacLeod (Orbit); *A Feast for Crows*, George R.R. Martin (Voyager; Bantam Spectra); *Old Man's War*, John Scalzi (Tor); *Accelerando*, Charles Stross (Ace; Orbit); *Spin*, Robert Charles Wilson (Tor).

Best Novella (243 ballots cast): *Burn*, James Patrick Kelly (Tachyon); "Magic for Beginners", Kelly Link (*Magic for Beginners*, Small Beer Press; F&SF September 2005); "The Little Goddess", Ian McDonald (*Asimov's* June 2005); "Identity Theft", Robert J. Sawyer (*Down These Dark Spaceways*, SFBC); "Inside Job", Connie Willis (*Asimov's* January 2005).

Best Novelette (207 ballots cast): "The Calorie Man", Paolo Bacigalupi (*F&SF* October/November 2005); "Two Hearts", Peter S. Beagle *(F&SF* October/November 2005); "TelePresence", Michael A. Burstein (*Analog* July/August 2005); "I, Robot", Cory Doctorow (*The Infinite Matrix* February 15, 2005); "The King of Where-I-Go", Howard Waldrop (*Sci Fiction* December 7, 2005).

Best Short Story (278 ballots cast): "Seventy-Five Years", Michael A. Burstein (*Analog* January/February 2005); "The Clockwork Atom Bomb", Dominic Green (*Interzone* May/June 2005); "Singing My Sister Down", Margo Lanagan (*Black Juice*, Allen & Unwin; Eos); "Tk'tk'tk", David D. Levine (*Asimov's* March 2005); "Down Memory Lane", Mike Resnick (*Asimov's* April/May 2005).

Best Related Book (197 ballots cast): *Transformations: The Story of the Science Fiction Magazines from 1950 to 1970*, Mike Ashley (Liverpool); *The SEX Column and Other Misprints*, David Langford (Cosmos); *Science Fiction Quotations*, Gary Westfahl (ed) (Yale); *Storyteller: Writing Lessons and More from 27 Years of the Clarion Writers' Workshop*, Kate Wilhelm (Small Beer Press); *Soundings: Reviews 1992_1996*, Gary K. Wolfe (Beccon).

Best Dramatic Presentation: Long Form (364 ballots cast): *Batman Begins*. Story, David S. Goyer. Screenplay, Christopher Nolan and David S. Goyer. Based on the character created, Bob Kane. Directed, Christopher Nolan. (Warner Bros.); *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Screenplay, Ann Peacock and Andrew Adamson and Christopher Markus & Stephen McFeely. Based on the novel, C.S. Lewis. Directed, Andrew Adamson. (Walt Disney Pictures/Walden Media); *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. Screenplay, Steven Kloves. Based on the novel, J.K. Rowling. Directed, Mike Newell. (Warner Bros.); Serenity Written & Directed, Joss Whedon. (Universal Pictures/Mutant Enemy, Inc.); *Wallace & Gromit in the Curse of the Were-Rabbit* Screenplay, Steve Box & Nick Park and Bob Baker and Mark Burton. Directed, Nick Park & Steve Box. (Dreamworks Animation/Aardman Animation).

Best Dramatic Presentation: Short Form (261 ballots cast): *Battlestar Galactica* "Pegasus" Written, Anne Cofell Saunders. Directed, Michael Rymer. (NBC Universal/British Sky Broadcasting); *Doctor Who* "Dalek" Written, Robert Shearman. Directed, Joe Ahearne. (BBC Wales/BBC1); *Doctor Who* "The Empty Child" & "The Doctor Dances" Written, Steven Moffat. Directed, James Hawes. (BBC Wales/BBC1); *Doctor Who* "Father's Day" Written, Paul Cornell. Directed, Joe Ahearne. (BBC Wales/BBC1); *Jack-Jack Attack* Written & Directed, Brad Bird. (Walt Disney Pictures/Pixar Animation); *Lucas Back in Anger* Written, Phil Raines and Ian Sorensen. Directed, Phil Raines.

(Reductio Ad Absurdum Productions); *Prix Victor Hugo Awards Ceremony* (Opening Speech and Framing Sequences). Written and performed, Paul McAuley and Kim Newman. Directed, Mike & Debby Moir. (Interaction Events). (There are seven nominees due to a tie for fifth place)

Best Professional Editor (293 ballots cast): Ellen Datlow (*Sci Fiction* and anthologies); David G. Hartwell (Tor Books; *Year's Best SF*); Stanley Schmidt (Analog); Gordon Van Gelder (*F&SF*); Sheila Williams (*Asimov's*).

Best Professional Artist (230 ballots cast): Jim Burns; Bob Eggleton; Donato Giancola; Stephan Martiniere; John Picacio; Michael Whelan. (There are six nominees due to a tie for fifth place).

Best Semiprozine (219 ballots cast): *Ansible*, Dave Langford (ed); *Emerald City*, Cheryl Morgan (ed); *Interzone*, Andy Cox (ed); *Locus*, Charles N. Brown, Kirsten Gong_Wong, & Liza Groen Trombi (eds); *The New York Review of Science Fiction*, Kathryn Cramer, David G. Hartwell & Kevin J. Maroney (eds).

Best Fanzine (176 ballots cast): *Banana Wings*, Claire Brialey & Mark Plummer; *Challenger*, Guy H. Lillian III; *Chunga*, Andy Hooper, Randy Byers & carl Juarez; *File 770*, Mike Glyer; *Plokta*, Alison Scott, Steve Davies & Mike Scott.

Best Fan Writer (202 ballots cast): Claire Brialey; John Hertz; Dave Langford; Cheryl Morgan; Steven H Silver.

Best Fan Artist (154 ballots cast): Brad Foster; Teddy Harvia; Sue Mason; Steve Stiles; Frank Wu.

Best Interactive Video Game: Category dropped due to lack of interest as per section 3.6 of the WSFS Constitution

John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer (186 ballots cast): K.J. Bishop (2nd year of eligibility); Sarah Monette (2nd year of eligibility); Chris Roberson (2nd year of eligibility); Brandon Sanderson (1st year of eligibility); John Scalzi (1st year of eligibility); Steph Swainston (2nd year of eligibility). (There are six nominees due to a tie for fifth place)

The John W. Campbell Award, sponsored by Dell Magazines, is not a Hugo Award, but appears on the same ballot as the Hugo Awards and is administered in the same way as the Hugo Awards.

Hugo Commentary

Novel: I'm very pleased to see Robert Charles Wilson on the list, but I suspect that Charlie and George are the favorites. No *Anansi Boys*. Hmm…

Novella: I'm delighted for Jim, Kelly and Ian, but I suspect Connie will win. Must do some reading.

Novelette: Goodness knows, I haven't read any of them. But I suspect Cory will win.

Short Story: Very happy about Margo. No idea who will win.

Related Book: The Orbital Mind Control Lasers are armed. You will vote for Gary Wolfe, you will vote for Gary Wolfe…

BDP Long Form: Yawn. Serenity, probably on the first count.

BDP Short Form: Kevin and I are absolutely delighted that two productions from our stint running Worldcon Events have made it to the ballot. I'd like to point out in particular that asking Kim and Paul to present the Hugos was Mike & Debbie Moir's idea. We just trusted them to run with it, and were delighted with the results. I'd also like to make brief mention of Alastair Cameron, John Maizels and the rest of the Tech team, without whose hard work none of those events would have happened. As for the *Doctor Who*, I still

have a few episodes to watch, but having a TV program filmed in the Millennium Stadium winning a Hugo is a remarkably attractive concept.

Editor: Congratulations to Sheila for making it onto the ballot at last. Ellen will win.

Artist: For those of you who are wondering who Stephan Martiniere is, go take a look at the cover for Pyr's edition of *River of Gods*. The guy is very good. But you all know who I am voting for, don't you? Go Picacio!!!

Semiprozine: Woo hoo! Playing with the big boys now, eh? I am just so pleased. Thank you, everyone.

Fanzine: *Plokta's* quest for world domination continues, and I suspect will be unabated.

Fan Writer: Lovely to see John Hertz get nominated. Congratulations in advance to Dave for another well deserved win.

Fan Artist: Go Frank! (Someone from BASFA needs to win, and it won't be me.)

Video Game: So, fans do not play video games after all. They do, however, look at web sites. Hint, hint…

Campbell: I'm very happy for Kirsten, Chris and Steph. I expect a runaway victory for Scalzi.

The BDP Short Form category seems to be the one attracting the most discussion. Here are some comments based on stuff I've seen:

The large number of *Dr. Who* episodes nominated does not mean that nomination was dominated by British fans. There are lots of *Who* fans here in California. I know several people at BASFA who have seen the entire series and have voted. And there is a very large regular *Dr. Who* convention in Los Angeles.

The fact that three *Dr. Who* episodes have been nominated does not mean that none of them stand a chance because of split voting. The Hugo final ballot is not a first past the post system. Provided that *Who* fans use their preferences sensibly there will not be a problem. As each episode is eliminated its preferences will go to the remaining episodes until there is one *Who* episode left to slug it out with *Battlestar Galactica*.

The two Interaction events did not get nominated because of lack of interest in the category. BDP Short Form got more interest that all but Novel, BDP Long Form and Editor. The categories in which there was least interest were Fan Writer, Fan Artist and Related Book. My guess is that the Interaction events got nominated a) because they were good fun, and b) because almost everyone who nominated in the Hugos saw them.

And talking of numbers, my guess is that around 7000 people were eligible to nominate. Only 533 actually did. That is very disappointing. On the other hand, over 500 people visited the *Emerald City* Hugo Recommendation List page in the week prior to the voting deadline, which is rather pleasing. I'm assuming that many of them were voters.

Editor Split Trial

With the Hugo nomination period over and Worldcon yet to come, we have a window in which to think about the Best Editor split. As currently specified the new categories will be defined as follows:

Best Editor Short Fiction: The editor of at least four (4) anthologies, collections or magazine issues primarily devoted to less than novel-length science fiction and / or fantasy, at least one of which was published in the previous calendar year.

Best Editor Long Fiction: The editor of at least four (4) novels of written science fiction or fantasy published in the previous calendar year.

This seems a very sensible split to me (and congratulations to Patrick Nielsen Hayden for guiding it through). However, the Business Meeting debate at L.A.Con IV will doubtless throw up objections about how the split will work, so I thought it would be interesting to give it a test. I'm therefore giving you folks the opportunity to say who you would have nominated in each category if the split had been in effect this year. The results will be posted here <http://www.emcit.com/hugo_section.php?rec.htm>. Email me with your suggestions. Hopefully this will give the Business Meeting some useful data to debate.

Awards at ICFA

Many awards are presented at ICFA's Saturday night banquet. Here are the highlights.

Meghan Sinoff won the Dell Magazines Award for best short fiction by a student. We'll doubtless be hearing of her as a star new professional writer in a few years.

The Lord Ruthven novel award went to *The Historian* by Elizabeth Kostova, with *Fledgling* by Octavia Butler as runner up. This caused a certain amount of murmuring. Kostova's book has been well received in mainstream circles, but some of the reviews I have seen have not been kind.

And finally, the Crawford Award went to Joe Hill. There were, as usual, many fine books on the shortlist, but the consensus view of the panel was that *20th Century Ghosts* was the best, and I'm very pleased with the result (apart from the fact that only one person can win). Joe, as usual, was very graceful about the whole thing.

SF Hall of Fame Inductees

The 2006 Science Fiction Hall of Fame Inductees will be: George Lucas, Anne McCaffrey, Frank Herbert and Frank Kelly Freas.

Light Sequel in Pipeline

Nova Swing, M. John Harrison's sequel to *Light* will be published by Gollancz in November. I can't wait.

Editorial Matters

By Cheryl Morgan

March has been a very funny month. It should have started off well because I was headed back to California, but in fact it turned out really bad because the hard disc on my laptop died just after I got back. Fortunately I am a good girl and take regular backups. Even more fortunately I take the main backups at the end of the month, so I lost very little. Even so, it was a real pain, and cost me several days of time I would otherwise have spent being productive.

Of course I got a bit of help, so this month I'm even more grateful than usual to our guests contributors, Karen, Farah and Scott, all of whom had good backups of versions of their articles I had sent them. Thanks folks!

Then there was a convention. Well, a holiday I guess. Several days sitting in the sun by a hotel pool in Ft. Lauderdale talking to clever people about books. ICFA isn't for everyone, because most of the attendees are academics, and most of

the programming is academic papers, but I love it.

And then, just to show how funny life can be, everything turned rosy. In the space of two days I saw Emerald City be named Site of the Week at SciFi.com and get a Hugo nomination for Best Semiprozine. I got a nomination for Best Fan Writer too. Obviously I'm not going to win either of these — I'm up against really strong opposition — but I'm delighted to be nominated and very grateful to everyone who voted for me/us.

I say "us" very deliberately, by the way, because this magazine is now very much a team effort. I could not produce anything anywhere near as good myself. So any kudos attached to the semiprozine nomination should also reflect back on Kevin, Anne, Tony and all of our guest reviewers and feature writers. I'm just the one who gets to go to the party and wear speccy dresses.

Goodness only knows how April will turn out, but I have a huge pile of books waiting to be read, so I guess I had better stop wittering and get on with reading them. The books covered will (probably) include Chris Roberson, Barth Anderson, Mike Carey, Naomi Novik, Kate Elliot, Kazuo Ishiguro, Steve Cash, David Keck, Robert Borski, Daniel Dinello and Zoran Živković.

Best wishes,

Cheryl

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