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Strange Sentences

By Hal Duncan

Style, so often seen in opposition to story, is a much-maligned, misunderstood creature within the field of genre fiction, it sometimes seems. Story is – so many would say – *content*, the immersive and intriguing illusion of characters, plots and themes. Style is only – they continue – a superficial (and therefore secondary) sheen of tricksiness and technique overlaid upon this story. When we criticize a novel as being overwritten, overwrought... self-indulgent, what we are saying generally is that, well, the tricksiness is excessive. There's *too much* style here. The prose is too ornate, too baroque, too gothic (or inversely too pared-down, too modernist, too minimalist – which is simply to say that the *technique* is overdone; the deficiency of detail is still a surfeit of style).

No, there's a simple story to be told, with clear characters, a straightforward plot, apparent themes... and the author has only gone and messed it all up with this thick layer of impenetrable *style* smeared over the surface of the structure, prettily patterned but a camouflaging confusion of the underlying composition. Or worse still, he hasn't bothered with story at all, just

daubed that gauche and lurid *style* stuff all over a blank canvass, with no attempt at ordered composition whatsoever. That's the argument against style.

Is this a straw man, this antipathy to style as something that "gets in the way" of story, or "disguises" a lack of it? I don't think so. It seems to me rather a common complaint within the field.

Now I want to establish from the start that this is not about Art versus Entertainment. This antipathy to style can come from either philistine or philosopher; both see style as execution, execution as a (potential) barrier to immersion in the composition, that composition as a means to an end, the end being vicarious thrills on the one hand, intellectual insights on the other. Plot and theme. Reading-for-theme tends to have more status than reading-for-plot, but whether you want beard strokes or eyeball kicks, it's all treating the work itself as a means to an end – if that's all you're looking for, that is.

Both philistine and philosopher, these hypothetical extremes of reading only for plot or only for theme, will tend to blame the writer's execution if the composition is not immediately obvious. Aware of obvious tricks and techniques in the text but unable to discern any meaningful patterning of character and plot, they scapegoat style: if there is a story there, they say, it is obscured by the style; in the absence of plot or theme, they say, this is just playing with words. It is pointless. It is pretentious. It has no substance.

But there's a threefold danger here, I think, of misreading the text in terms of import, intent and, most importantly, substance. To focus only on action or theme is to miss much of the potential import of a novel, to deny that others might actually, you know, read for other reasons. And to assume a shallow

purpose in the face of a profusion of literary techniques is to rule out many plausible aesthetic intents, to deny that the author could actually have had any valid reason at all... really, I mean, *honestly*, they're just playing with the pretty words, aren't they? But these are blinkered views. Worst of all though, to assume that either plot or theme are "covered" in style rather than *revealed* by it, unraveled, presented to the reader through it, is to ignore the very substance of the novel and focus on an element that really *is* a superficial effect. This is not just blinkered; it's misguided.

Style *is* substance. The substance of a novel is the words upon the page, the clauses they construct, the sentences they make, the paragraphs, the scenes and chapters. Characters, plots and themes – these are only glosses we put on the text, overarching generalities of who these fictional creations are, of what they do, and of why. The questions of personality, action and meaning *are* integral to the act of composition, but they are no more *the* underlying composition than the title of the novel is; like that title they are simply abstracted encapsulations of the subject. They answer the question "What is it about?" rather than "What is it?"

Ask me what *Vellum* is about and I can give you one of two answers. The first is simple, a complete encapsulation of character, plot and theme in a sentence of only two words:

People die.

I mean, you can't get clearer than that, can you – a basic noun-verb predicate? That sentence tells you who it's about – *people* – what they do – *die* – and the thematic focus is, I think, pretty implicit in the combination of those two. It's not exactly detailed, I'll grant you, but then sketches never are. A more detailed sketch of a draft-dodging Irish angel, a

War in Heaven and the liberating power of nihilism would remain a cursory summation at best. I could draw some more sketches, go into more detail; still it would only be a caricature. So usually, when asked the dreaded question, I go for the second answer. It's a glib answer, a joke, but in a way it's more accurate. What's the book about?

It's about 180,000 words.

That's the substance of the book, the meat of it. But what about the bones, you might ask, the architecture, the underlying composition? Don't we *have* to talk about this in terms of character, plot, theme? Isn't that just the way it is, because that is what the story is made up of?

No, the story is made up of words. The skeleton of the book, what gives the sinews and muscles of sentences an overall shape, is simply larger units of prose, the book as a whole breaking down into volumes, chapters, scenes, paragraphs, sentences, the building-blocks of that larger structure. How the sentences are put together into paragraphs is as much a stylistic choice as the choice of how the words are put together into sentences. How the paragraphs are put together into scenes is as much a stylistic choice again, as is how those scenes are put together into chapters, and so on, all the way up. All choices of substance, of what goes into a book, are stylistic choices, style being only the characteristic choices that distinguish one writer from another (or one book from another, to be more accurate; one writer can have many styles).

To give you a comparison, if we look at painting, the styles of Romanticism and Neo-Classicism (in, say, Delacroix and David respectively) are not just a matter of coloring-in some paint-by-numbers line drawing, using brushstrokes of

different types, wild and thick on the one hand, restrained and smooth on the other in order to achieve different styles. The Romantic and Neo-Classical styles are not simply surface effects; it's as much a matter of structure as anything else, of subject and environment, foreground and background, the character and plot of painting. It's dynamic diagonals and ellipses versus stable verticals and horizontals. It's order versus chaos. One cannot take Delacroix's "The Raft of the Medusa", clean up the wild paintwork and suddenly have a Neo-Classical painting. Nor can one take David's "The Death of Marat", paint over it with rough brushstrokes and suddenly have a Romantic painting.

More to the point, take Cubism or Abstract Art, where the style is defined at least as much by choices of composition as by choices of surface execution: could we take a jpg of Picasso's "Guernica", run it through some filters in a graphics program (right-click, select Effects >> Soften) and suddenly have a work of the Impressionist school? Would browning, ageing, darkening turn one of Mondrian's geometric canvasses into a painting in the "style" of an Old Master?

What it's really about, I think, is the expectation of straightforward representation. In the work of Mondrian or Picasso there's a break from direct representation that can leave the viewer unmoored, unsure of the subject and therefore unconvinced that there actually is one. And without a subject, it follows on, surely there is no substance. It's just *style*. The term "cubism" was first applied as a term of abuse by a French critic, Louis Voxelles, who dismissed the work of Braques as composed of nothing more than "bizarre cubiques". It's just playing with shapes, he seems to be saying. It's just playing

with words, is the equivalent literary criticism. Style without substance. *Strange sentences*. But the substance of a Cubist work *is* those "bizarre cubiques", just as the substance of a novel *is* those "strange sentences".

In *Vellum*, I certainly have some strange sentences. Here's one from the first panel of the fourth section of the twelve section "eclogue" that sits between volume one and two (each of which are composed of seven chapters of twelve sections of four panels each, with a prologue before one and an epilogue after the other (also in twelve sections of four panels)):

He sings of the vast void and of seeds, of shatterings and scatterings and gatherings, of seeds of earth and air and sea and flickerings of flecks, the flash, the flux of fire.

Now that is, without a doubt, a flouncy sentence. My God, the alliteration alone should be enough to get it kicked out of the book and sent sulking home, its hand nailed firmly to its forehead in poetic posture. But it's there exactly because it is so ornate, so artificial. In that eclogue, three different narrative voices are used section by section by section, three different registers, three different syntaxes; one drops away, while the other two gradually merge, because this, as much as the characters, their actions and the meanings of those actions, *is* the story at that point in the book. Reality is breaking down, a living language is blending mundane reality with fantastic myth, so two different narrative voices, one prosaic and one poetic, have to mingle and merge. That structuring technique is far more of an identifying feature of my style in *Vellum* than any single narrative voice, naturalistic or artificial, painted with Romantic passion or Neo-Classical restraint.

Compare that sentence above with the first sentence of the next panel:

He lays his hand on the back of my neck and turns me to face him.

What I'm trying to say is that there is no *more* style, no *less* style, in one sentence than in the other. They have different registers, one highly poetic, the other spartanly prosaic. They have different syntax, one elaborate, the other simple. They have different voices, and one is more artificial than the other. But note that the first sentence has no adverbs and only one adjective in all its pompous grandiosity — the word "vast" as a modifier for "void". As a precise description of an act — the act of singing and the subject of the song — the only excess words in there, other than that "void" are "of" and "and", articulating a list which would otherwise be a formless, incoherent trudge from A to B to C to D to E to F, God help us:

He sings of the void, seeds, shatterings, scatterings, gatherings, seeds of earth, air, sea and flickerings of flecks, the flash, the flux of fire.

Strip down the sentence to the functional and the sense of it is less clearly articulated; add a few stylistic flourishes, an "of" here, an "and" there, and it becomes easier to read because it breaks the sentence into clauses, gives it more structure. The substance is revealed through, not concealed by, the styling of the sentence.

Of course, we could lose some of that detail. I could have just written "He sings about stuff."

People die. End of story. Not much point in writing the novel then, eh?

But this isn't about justifying a particular syntactic choice on my part. It's not about justifying the voice of that sentence. It's about the idea that we should — or even could — take that sentence (or that sort of a sentence) and somehow strip away the "style", make the prose more "transparent", to reveal the story "underneath". That we could and should communicate the same descriptive detail more effectively in a simpler form. Are there more basic synonyms for "earth", "air", "sea" and "fire"? Are the words "shattering", "scattering" or "gathering" not clear and precise? Is it wildly unconventional to twist the verbs into nouns, too choose a more ergonomic "shatterings" over "acts of shattering" and so on? Are the words "flickerings" or "flecks" or "flash" confusing as descriptors of fire? Style is not something that's been superimposed upon that sentence; it's just a matter of the structural choices made in putting it together. I made similar structural, *stylistic* choices putting that sentence together with others, some strange, some not so strange, to make the story as a whole.

Some people will, of course, simply prefer the register of one sentence to that of the other. That first sentence is, without a doubt, flouncy as fuck. That's the technical term, by the way. So, yes: the high-flown rhetorical tone can be grating in its artifice. The pared-down prosaic narrative can be lustreless in its functional simplicity. And to this extent, the narrative voice — not style but *voice* — the presence or absence of a combination of rhythm and vocabulary which has in its own right a certain character, which gives a sub-audible texture to the "surface" of the work, can be a barrier to perception of the "underlying" composition. But if style is, as I am arguing, as much structure as syntax and lexicon, we should not blame our incomprehension on a surfeit of style

over substance. It's like saying there's too much Cubism smeared all over Picasso's "Guernica". Stripping away the Cubism from "Guernica" would not reveal the underlying composition. Strip away the Cubism and there *is* no "Guernica".

So why is it style that gets the blame when the large-scale structuring of a novel is not obvious, when we look at a work and see only these "strange sentences"? I think there are actually two distinct complaints here.

On the one hand there's the power of voice – not style, but voice – to alienate the reader, to irritate with its artifice. I remember when I first started reading Peake's *Gormenghast*, trudging slowly through the first fifty pages, hating the book, despising it, because the prose was so thick, the tone so contrived, the pace so ponderous. Fifty pages in though, suddenly it clicked. I accepted this weird, unnatural narrative voice, understood how intrinsic it was to the novel, to the import, intent and substance of this grand, archaic and eccentric structure. Remove that voice from *Gormenghast*, strip away the style of Peake's strange sentences, and you'd have only a shell without substance. Nevertheless, there are many, I'm sure, for whom that voice never clicked and never will, who can't "get past" the style, who can't "see through" it.

On the other hand there's the rejection of straightforward representation that you get in Modernist art, painting and fiction, where the structure of the work does not map directly to the subject but instead works on more abstract relationships. Fragmenting and recombining, cutting-up and folding-in, this kind of work can render the subject in such an unfamiliar state it seems there is no subject at all. I remember when I first read Burroughs's *The Naked Lunch*, flying through page after page of

centipedes and junkies, orgies and hangings, loving the sheer drive of this drug-fuelled homo-pornographic and fantastic chaos, but having no idea what was going on or what it all meant, no idea of plot or theme. Being a collage, a mosaic, the fact that the reader has to fit its shards of shattered subject back together in their mind, doesn't mean it has no subject at all. Still, there are those, I'm sure, who'll always find Burroughs baffling, for whom there's nothing there "beneath" all the experimentation, all the style.

If it sounds like I'm blaming all incomprehension on the inadequacies of the reader, that's not the point I'm trying to make. The reader is perfectly entitled to read for whatever reason they want, to reject a book because the voice is too affected or the prose too dislocated. I simply think it's a mistake to set up a dichotomy between style and substance, to blame those strange sentences for seducing the callow author with their sensual drift, their sonorous shifts, distracting the writer from their role as purveyor of plot or theme. That's not style without substance. It might be voice saying nothing that we want to hear, or incoherent reconstruction of the subject, or both; but if there's voice at all, if there are words on the page, then there is substance, and even if the subject is entirely unfathomable there's still substance, just as a Mondrian has meaning – import, intent and abstract significance – even in its complete refusal to represent.

And who knows? Maybe those strange sentences you find infuriating at first will win you over with their wiles; maybe they're saying something that's worth hearing. And maybe there *is* a coherent structure to be grasped, if you just step back a little from the novel and, instead of focusing on this bit here and that bit there – instead of focusing on

all those strange sentences which – the substance just as much as they’re the style, the basic components of the underlying composition – look at it as a whole.

Maybe it’s not all just “bizarre cubiques”.

Maybe it’s not all just strange sentences.

Day of the Dead

By Cheryl Morgan

People writing book reviews today all grew up in the 20th Century. When I was a kid the 21st Century was a far-off future inhabited by the characters from Gerry Anderson TV shows. And yet now here we are. In some ways the lives we lead are very science-fictional compared to what we knew back then. But people are still writing science fiction, and I occasionally see reviewers using the phrase, “21st Century science fiction”. What does it mean?

Well, who knows? But let us, for the moment, play the Movements game and try to think how SF written now might be different from what was written then. Here’s a very simple classification.

19th Century SF was centered on Europe and came out of the old empires that collapsed after World War I. Classic writers were Verne and Wells, and the prevailing technology was mechanical.

20th Century SF was centered on the US and began with the idea of space as an extension of the Frontier (Heinlein). From there it evolved into the Galactic Pax Americana of *Star Trek*, and finally to a future ruled by sinister American corporations (cyberpunk). The prevailing technology was electronic and, latterly, digital.

21st Century SF, in contrast, will concentrate on the future after the fall of the American economic empire. It will often be set in former Communist countries, and in countries now regarded as “Third World” such as India and Brazil. The prevailing technology will be biological. Early examples of the sub-genre might be M. John Harrison’s *Signs of Life*, Geoff Ryman’s *Air*, and Ian McDonald’s *River of Gods* (not to mention the eagerly awaited *Brasyl*).

Where does all this lead us? Why, to a book review of course. Indeed, to a review of a book that fits squarely in the definition above. *The Patron Saint of Plagues* by Barth Anderson is set in a resurgent Mexico, led by President for Life, Emil Obregón. The Mexicans have their own Pope, have renamed their capital Ascensión in recognition of their rise to the status of a world power, and they are busily reconquering Tejas.

The US federal government pretty much collapsed along with their economy, but some still cleave to the old ways. David Henry Stark is a crack virus hunter with the Center for Disease Control. Whenever a dangerous plague breaks out, Stark and his fellow experts jet in to isolate the virus and devise countermeasures. Of course Stark doesn’t expect to be called in to combat an outbreak of dengue fever in Ascensión. It doesn’t sound serious enough, and in any case he is American and therefore technically at war with Mexico. Then he gets a mysterious email supposedly from a Mexican doctor who claims that the plague is not dengue at all, and that the true nature of the outbreak is being covered up. Not long after, the official invitation from the Mexican government arrives.

The city of Ascensión was ungodly, unnatural. It was unnatural in Montezuma’s day, with so many living on

Lake Texcoco that the Aztecs began filling it in to make more room for their growing numbers. And now. Now natural diseases could do nothing – dengue, smallpox cholera – all too weak to leap past the walls of human defense even in such a large, vulnerable city. Pollution and violent crime were ineffectual. War. Nothing could stop this city from growing in its unnatural numbers, expanding at a rate of adding another city every year into this poor little valley. Earthquakes. Volcanoes. Mudslides. Nothing stemmed the human infection here.

Because of the war, Mexico cannot enlist Stark's aid openly. And because of the war it is not easy for him to get there. Consequently a certain amount of techno-thriller rushing around and waving of guns is required. But the seriousness of Obregón's summons is borne out by the agent that he sends to ensure that Stark gets to Mexico.

Her ratty black hair was pushed back from her brow, revealing a hairline that had been shaved back several inches from her face. Unnatural wrinkles distorted her exposed scalp and temples, as if thick twine coiled just below the skin. She looked briefly at Stark, then away, and Stark realized who, what, she was. Her eyes shone in the dark but the gleam wasn't happiness. It was an augmented optic nerve and silicon lens, which turned that organ into another brain, or rather, a computer. Or so Joaquin had once told Stark. She was a sabihonda as the Mexicans called them. A cyborg.

Of course while Obregón might have been very serious about wanting Stark in Mexico, there's no guarantee that he wanted him there to cure the plague. If the virus did turn out to be artificially created, and its virulence and specificity certainly suggested that, then who better

to be able to blame it on than a famous American virus expert?

And then there is another issue. Mexico is a deeply Catholic country. Nothing happens there without it having religious significance. And one major mystery to be solved is how Sister Domenica, a radical nun, was able to predict the arrival of the plague and warn Mexico's poor against it. Not that that necessarily did much good. Those poor people tended to react to the plague in much the same way as other poor Catholics reacted to the Black Death hundreds of years ago.

In susurrant, sliding steps, nearly fifty flagellants in black-leather masks entered the wide zócalo. Haunting in their masks, with zippers up the front of their blank, black faces, they raised their elbows high to deliver blows upon their own backs, sweaty chests thrust forward. A man in a tattered priest's cowl of Holy Renaissance red and black stepped to the front of the procession, holding a cross like a torch. Vampirically pale and wild-eyed, he stood among the snapping whips and pointed into the smoking cathedral, screaming a mad mix of Spanish and Latin. "Virus y veneno! Virus y veneno!"

There are several aspects of *The Patron Saint of Plagues* that are very impressive. To begin with Anderson clearly knows enough about how viruses and immune systems work to sound extremely authoritative. Doubtless readers with medical degrees will be able to point out where he has taken short-cuts or simplified explanations, but for most of us the science will look very impressive.

In addition Anderson has a clear affection for Mexico. Books like *River of Gods* and *Air*, while seriously researched, are clearly not books by people who live in India or Mongolia. *The Patron Saint of*

Plagues, on the other hand, reads like a book by someone who knows Mexico and its people well. Having a smattering of Spanish will help in reading the book as Anderson has no qualms about letting his characters speak in their native language from time to time.

Add to that a well-constructed, politically aware techno-thriller with an intriguing plot and you have a book that should do very well indeed. *The Patron Saint of Plagues* is Anderson's first novel, and there are some rough edges to the prose that I'm sure will fall away as he writes further books. Also I was wholly unconvinced by the relationship between Stark and the entertainingly foul-mouthed Pakistani doctor, Isabel Kushub. But I'm sure that when "best first novel" lists get discussed next January this book will be one of the first suggested.

By the way, when you get to read the book you will note that I've spelled President Obregón's name as Anderson's manuscript has it, not how it was mis-typed by someone at Bantam. I understand that the Bantam editorial team is considering introducing certain management techniques pioneered by a gentleman called Torquemada. Hopefully subsequent editions will allow for it to be corrected.

The Patron Saint of Plagues - Barth Anderson
- Bantam - publisher's proof

Subscriber Draw

By Cheryl Morgan

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

This month, courtesy of Bantam, we have three copies of Barth Anderson's *The Patron Saint of Plagues* available to be won. You may think you don't have much of a chance, but if more people don't subscribe soon those kind people who did send us money are going to start winning a second book.

The draw will take place on May 16th. Rules for the draw are available on the *Emerald City* web site at: <http://www.emcit.com/draw.php>.

More Thrilling Adventures

By Cheryl Morgan

As people are probably getting to know by now, Chris Roberson is a big fan of the pulp ethic, of thrilling adventure stories simply told. His latest foray into pulp revivalism is *Paragaea: A Planetary Romance*, a new novel from Pyr. It tells the story of Akilina "Leena" Chirikov, the pilot of the ill-fated Vostok 7. History tells us that Russian engineers cancelled the launch of that space craft, but actually it did reach orbit, whereupon it vanished into one of those inconvenient space-time discontinuities. Chirikov found herself orbiting a strange planet, at which point her adventures were only just beginning.

The planet of Paragaea is a version of Earth in a parallel universe, or something similar. It is populated by strange races of man-animal hybrids: jaguar men, snake men and so on. The book is dedicated to, amongst others, Edgar Rice Burroughs, and to Alex Raymond, the creator of Flash Gordon, which should give you some idea of what to expect. Along with her companions, Lt. Hieronymous Bonaventure ("Hiero"), a former Napoleonic-period British naval officer,

and Balam, the exiled prince of the jaguar men, she travels through this new world having, well, adventures.

“Easy?” Hieronymous said, pushing off the stool and jumping to his feet. He mimed a martial pose, like a comic opera hero. “And where would be the fun if it were easy? If we have to storm the walls of the Diamond Citadel of Atla, if we have to scale the fire mountain of Ignis itself, well...” He tapered off, looking around the pub and realizing his drink had gone empty. “Well,” he went on, sudden inspiration striking, “isn’t that better than hanging around here till death takes us in our sleep?”

The particular adventure in question, of course, is to try to find another trans-dimensional portal whereby Leena, a devoted servant of the Soviet system, can return to our Earth and report to her superior officers. However, this is primarily an excuse to allow our heroes to wander back and fore across the landscape, meet various strange beings, and get into hair-raising scrapes. *Paragaea* is one of those books in which the heroes find themselves in mortal danger at the end of every other chapter, only to spring free with a single bound in the beginning of the next.

I’m not a great expert on pulp-era fiction, but I think it quite likely that one of the attractions of Burroughs’ and Raymond’s fiction was that they never wrote a book that was 400 pages long. Roberson, on the other hand, has done this. It isn’t long before the reader wonders why. Clearly some of the encounters are necessary to the furtherance of the plot. In particular their teaming up with the android, Benu, is necessary to show that *Paragaea*, far from being the primitive society it seems, is in fact a post-scientific society filled with wonders of nanotechnology

and genetic engineering that Roberson doesn’t need to explain because they are so far advanced that they are indistinguishable from magic.

Some of the encounters are also necessary because Roberson, commendably, does try to do some character development and address the issue of how Leena’s Communist ideals are affected by being thrown into a pseudo-mediaeval world where no one has heard of Karl Marx. However, I have a sneaking suspicion that many of the encounters exist only because Roberson’s imagination is a little too endless for his own good. Burroughs or Raymond would, I suspect, have made two or three books out of Roberson’s one, and I suspect they might have been more exciting because of that.

On the other hand, Roberson has to work within the modern industry where a novel is expected to be in the region of 300-500 pages (or 800 if it is a UK-published fantasy). And his book does do pretty much what it is advertised to do. I’m tempted to say that it would work pretty well as a YA book, except that I think youngsters today are way more cynical than they were when I was a kid. *Paragaea* is probably a book for adults who yearn for simpler times, rather than for kids who want to escape the world they know. But it is a competent piece of escapism, and it does manage to sneak in some serious stuff now and then when the reader isn’t looking. In particular, while it is occasionally critical of Communism, it reserves most of its venom for religious fundamentalists. It isn’t my sort of book, but I’m sure it will find a good market.

I note also that Roberson claims to have included a number of “Easter Eggs” that fellow pulp fans will notice. I’m completely clueless on this subject, but I know that Roberson is very well read in his chosen field and this may provide

lots of entertainment for his fellow enthusiasts.

Paragaeta – Chris Roberson – Pyr – publisher’s proof

The Tournament Tour

By Cheryl Morgan

You have to be a little careful with the publicity for fantasy novels these days. The word from Tor about David Keck’s *In the Eye of Heaven* is likely to be that the book features a young man who fights his way up from obscurity to save the world from evil. And yes, that is a plausible summary of the book. But it also makes it sound just like so many other fantasy novels. From the point of view of selling the book to a mass audience it is probably wise to make it sound familiar and predictable. But I know it won’t sell it to you guys, and indeed it would not have sold it to me. The question here has to be, is there anything different and interesting about this book?

Try this for starters. The book is edited by Patrick Nielsen Hayden, who edited three of this year’s Hugo nominees for Best Novel. And while this is, I believe, David Keck’s first novel, he’s no stranger to the business. His wife, Anne Groell, is a senior editor at Bantam. All of which tends to suggest that Keck is not going to produce something formulaic and dull.

Time for some plot, I think. Our hero, Durand, is the second son of a minor nobleman. He ought perhaps have been sent to the church, but that didn’t appeal to him, and in any case his father had hopes. A knight beholden to him looked like he would die without issue. There had been a son, but he had gone off to war and nothing had been heard of him for years. It looked like there would soon

be a small village needing a lord. So Durand was sent to train as a knight in expectation of getting land of his own.

Unfortunately for Durand, the missing son turned up. His dreams of lordship were dashed, and there was nothing for it but to become a knight errant. In many ways that is a posh term for “sell sword”, but there is the tournament circuit. Young men without money or land can earn fame and fortune on the field of combat. Thus Durand falls in with Lamorick, a duke’s son who is in disgrace and is trying to restore his reputation by fighting anonymously as The Red Knight.

If this sounds a little Arthurian, well indeed it is. Or, more to the point, it is in the tradition of heroic knightly tales from which our modern Arthurian legends are descended. But Keck’s tale has a gritty realism to it. Indeed, at times it sounds rather like a story about a sports club on tour: a bunch of young bravos wandering around the country playing a rather dangerous sport for kicks and glory.

Pale knights filed down to meet him, and the air smelled of beeswax. Scores gathered round him, candle-pale and awful in their breathless silence. Without surprise, Durand understood that the strange knights were dead men. He saw empty wounds. They took the lady from his arms as gently as priests, and he knew she would be safe.

Being a fantasy novel, *In the Eye of Heaven* does have a small amount of magic in it. There are actual bad guys. Lamorick and his crew do end up saving the kingdom from some devious sorcerers. There is also a section of the book set in an enchanted forest, which is a fine Arthurian theme. But victory is obtained primarily through bravery on the tournament field, and by having the

good sense to spot what is going on and do something about it while everyone else is obsessed with petty personal political objectives. Only when all seems hopeless (after the bad guys have triumphed through superior knowledge of parliamentary procedure, no less) is magic rather cleverly invoked.

If you are looking for a “more like this” recommendation, *In the Eye of Heaven* reminded me most of a trilogy of books by Richard Monaco, based around the Parsifal legend, that were published about 30 years back. They brought the same sort of mud and blood-soaked realism to knightly combat. But I guess few of you will have read those books, so all I can say here is that Keck takes a bunch of themes from Arthurian legend (including the love triangle with Lancelot and Guinevere) and uses them to make a story that is entirely his own and a refreshing change from the dull and predictable fantasy of which we see so much these days.

In the Eye of Heaven - David Keck - Tor - publisher's proof

Temeraire in China

By Cheryl Morgan

One of the problems with writing a sequel to a very successful genre novel is that you have probably used up most of your surprises. A well-designed trilogy can be crafted so as to allow the mysteries to be leaked out slowly over the full length of the work. But if instead you are writing the first book of what might become a lengthy series you pretty much have to set the scene fairly thoroughly in book one, and that means nothing new to put in book two.

This may be why Naomi Novik decided use book two of her Temeraire series to

resolve the Chinese problem immediately, rather than have it hanging over Temeraire and Laurence until Napoleon had been dealt with. It takes the characters well away from the hurly burly of Napoleonic warfare and introduces a whole new “alien” landscape in the form of Imperial China. Consequently *Throne of Jade* is a very different book to *Temeraire*, and reader interest is maintained.

Just as a quick reminder, we learned in the first book that Temeraire is a Chinese dragon of the Celestial breed normally reserved for the personal use of the Imperial Family. He had been intended as a gift for the Emperor Napoleon, but having been egg-napped on the high seas by a British frigate he ended up being impressed by Captain William Laurence. The two quickly prove their worth in battle, but no one expects the Chinese to be happy about this turn of events, and so it proves.

At the beginning of *Throne of Jade* we learn that a deputation has arrived in London from China. Led by the Emperor's brother, no less, they are demanding the immediate return of Temeraire to his homeland. Concerned that the Chinese might ally themselves more closely with Napoleon, and possibly even launch an attack on Russia, Mr. Pitt and the Admiralty decide to accede to the Chinese demands. Temeraire, of course, refuses to go anywhere without Laurence, so the two of them end up on a transport ship taking the long journey by sea to the Far East.

Once again Novik shows a deft touch in her handling of the alternate world. She brings in salient contemporary detail, such as noting the existence of the slave trade as they pass West Africa. We learn that Laurence's father, Lord Allendale, is a political ally of Wilberforce – something of a surprise given his crusty

attitudes towards dragonriders. Then there is the whole matter of Darkest Africa. In a world where dragons exist, what strange creatures might menace Temeraire and his human friends on their journey?

Traveling with them are Prince Yongxing and the Chinese delegation, plus Mr. Hammond, a diplomat assigned to the mission by the British Government. Laurence is very clearly completely out of his depth in political matters, and he and Hammond are very quickly at loggerheads. The Chinese, meanwhile, seek to find ways to come between Temeraire and his rider so as to persuade the dragon to leave the unworthy Englishman behind. But some cross-cultural fertilization does take place and by the time the party reaches China a certain amount of mutual respect has been established. Also a certain amount of amusement is caused along the way by highly spiced food.

If I have a criticism of the book it is that I think Novik was too hands off with famous people in the early stages. I liked the way she kept Temeraire and Nelson apart in the first book, but the arrival of the Chinese delegation seems to be a little too high-powered to be left to Admiralty flunkies as Novik portrays it. Pitt may have had other things on his mind, but I would have expected Lord Castlereagh, the Secretary of War, to have taken an interest, or at least to have been mentioned.

However, as we all know, these books are not really about humans. The narrative only really comes to life when the four-legged star of the show is on stage. Temeraire is as cute and lovable as ever. He gets a girlfriend, and the Chinese fill his head full of all sorts of interesting ideas about dragon rights that have some of the humans muttering about Jacobin dragons. It is all great entertainment, and the good news is that

book three is only a month away. I have it sitting by me as I type. Which means I need to stop writing and get reading.

Throne of Jade - Naomi Novik - Del Rey - manuscript

Haunted London

By Cheryl Morgan

Mike Carey has featured in these pages before only as the scriptwriter for the comic version of Neil Gaiman's *Neverwhere*. He's doing a fine job with it too. But he also writes his own stuff. He has worked on comics such as *Hellblazer* and *Lucifer*, and now he has a novel. As you might expect from the title, not to mention from his comics work, *The Devil You Know* is a horror-related book, but it is pretty squarely in the "supernatural detective" sub-genre rather than anything splatter-worthy. The hero, Felix Castor, is a ghost hunter of sorts. That is, he happens to be one of those people who can see ghosts, and sometimes persuade them to go away. Sometimes people pay him to make them go away. This is not always a good thing, especially for Castor, so he tries not to get involved. But sometimes, like all of the best private eyes, he needs the money.

Of course the clients are often the problem. Take Jeffrey Peele for example. The Director of the Bonnington Archive doesn't have much time for ghosts or ghost hunters, and he thinks that getting rid of a ghost should be simply a matter of laying down some anti-ghost powder in the areas it frequents, whereupon it will go away. Like mice, you know. Except that ghosts are not mice, they are people. And one of the things you need to do in order to get rid of a ghost is find out who they are and why they are

haunting the place. Thankfully the archive is full of musty old documents. The chances are that the ghost came in with a recent acquisition, and that it is centuries dead. But if that is so, why is Castor's demon-possessed friend, Rafi, advising him not to take the case? And why has an unpleasant East End brothel owner suddenly taken an interest in Castor?

Carey is in that fine tradition of British comics writers who have made it big in American comics. His knowledge of London is clear for all to see. Indeed, there are things in the book that may be completely opaque to US readers. I don't suppose many of them will know who Kenneth Wolstenholme was, or why he said, "They think it is all over," but almost everyone in Britain knows. I can explain if you really need to know. And indeed I can explain to Carey why Australians have a fondness for putting raptors on wine bottle labels, something he seems rather confused about.

Enough with the detail, however, you want impressions. *The Devil You Know* is a well-written, entertaining supernatural noir detective story. It has a lot of the usual silly boy stuff about punching each other out, but that's only to be expected. And Castor isn't exactly your traditional thriller hero. Quite the opposite, in fact. He's really very human, as are most of the other characters in the book. A good horror story can be as much about human failings as about the supernatural, and many of the "bad guys" in Carey's book are simply people who are failing at life, not people who are bad through and through (though it has a few of them too).

Then there is Juliet. Nothing wrong with having a succubus as a character in a horror novel, says I. The girl has a Nature. It isn't her fault she gets up to bad things. Besides, she has a certain amount of class. It would appear that

there are to be more books about Mr. Castor, and that Juliet will be in them too. I suspect I may read them just to see what she gets up to.

The Devil You Know - Mike Carey - Orbit - mass-market paperback

Who Was That Masked Man?

By Pádraig Ó Méalóid

Put simply, *V for Vendetta* is one of the best films I've ever seen. Its impact on me when I first saw it was such that I found myself in tears almost continually from beginning to end. On the other hand, I can give you a very good argument as to why the film should never have been made in the first place. More on that later, after a quick synopsis of the film.

The setting for *V for Vendetta* is Britain in the near future, with a far-right, fascist regime in charge. After a brief piece about Guy Fawkes, presumably for the US audiences, who may not have heard of him, the film starts with Evey Hammond, a young PA for British Television Network, going out to keep an assignation with Gordon Dietrich, one of her superiors at work. Evey knows she will be out after the 11:00 pm curfew, but decides to take a chance anyway. She is soon in trouble with the Fingermen, this government's version of the secret police, and is about to be raped and probably killed, when a mysterious figure, wearing a cloak, hat, and Fawkesian mask, appears, kills her attackers in spectacular fashion, and introduces himself with a long monologue largely consisting of words beginning with the letter V. This is worth repeating here, not only because it more or less sets out his basic motivations, and

because I'll want to refer to it later, but because it is also quite a decent piece of writing:

"In view, a humble vaudevillian veteran, cast vicariously as both victim and villain by the vicissitudes of fate. This visage, no mere veneer of vanity, is a vestige of the vox populi, now vacant, vanished; a vital voice once venerated, now vilified. However, this valorous visitation of a bygone vexation now stands vivified, and has vowed to vanquish those venal and virulent vermin vanguarding vice and vouchsafing the violent, vicious, and voracious violation of volition. The only verdict is vengeance. A vendetta, held as votive, not in vain, for the value and veracity of such shall one day vindicate the vigilant and virtuous. Yet verily, this vichyssoise of verbiage veers most verbose, so let me simply add that it is my very great honour to meet you, and you may call me V."

V then brings Evey up to the rooftops of London, just in time for him to conduct an imaginary orchestra in Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*, which starts playing over the city's ever-present loudspeaker system, and which climaxes with the explosive destruction of the Old Bailey, complete with fireworks, just as Big Ben strikes midnight. The date is the fifth of November.

Within hours, the government's various agencies are trying to get to grips with the situation. The Finger, in charge of security services; The Eye, in charge of visual surveillance; and The Ear, in charge of audio surveillance, are all trying to find out what they can. Two further agencies, The Mouth and The Nose, in charge of propaganda and criminal detection respectively, attempt to deal with the situation in their own ways. The Mouth releases a statement about a scheduled nighttime demolition

of what was a dangerous old building, with the fireworks put down to high spirits by one of the workers. In the meantime, Eric Finch, once a policeman but now reluctantly in charge of The Nose, is trying to find the culprit using good old-fashioned police work. From this point, the film goes into high gear, and simply never stops until the very last shot. To say more than that would simply be giving away too much. Along the way it has time to be a political thriller, a detective story, a conspiracy theory, and a love story, of sorts. It's possibly even a SF story, if the fact that it's set in the near future is enough to allow it to qualify. It seems to be influenced by all sorts of things: obviously the original graphic novel by Alan Moore and David Lloyd, but also by things like 1984, *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, and of course the story of Guy Fawkes and the Gunpowder Plot. It's also, of course, a product of the times in which it was made, in the same way the original story was a product of its own times. And it's really, truly, absolutely, one of the finest things I've ever seen on a cinema screen.

From this point on, I may be revealing more about the film than you wish to know at this point, but I'll do my best not to ruin any of the actual surprises. None the less, you have been warned!

V for Vendetta is the story of a year in the lives of three characters – V, Evey, and Finch – and the world in which they live. All three will be transformed by the end of it, and the world they live in will be transformed also. V starts by seeking only revenge for his hideous treatment twenty years before, and finds compassion through love. Evey wishes not to live in fear any more, and finds strength through revelation. Finch wants to find the truth, and is illuminated by

the truth he finds. All three characters are well realized, and very well acted indeed. Natalie Portman, in spite of her slightly wobbly accent at times, is harrowingly good as Evey and Stephen Rea gives a very solid performance as policeman Eric Finch. Hugo Weaving does astonishing things with his role as V, given that he spends the entire film wearing a mask and dressed in black. Subtle movements of the head and slight changes of body posture, along with clever lighting and direction, serve to give what is a fixed and seemingly immutable Guy Fawkes mask a whole range of emotions.

V is probably the most intriguing character to grace the big screen for many years. He's part action hero, part political activist. He's a dangerous anarchist and a champion of democracy. He is, undoubtedly, a demented lunatic, but also a dashing and mysterious romantic male lead. This last aspect – that of an attractive and romantic figure – is certainly one that I would never have imagined, but I have been assured by several ladies of my acquaintance that this is definitely the case. On top of this V's home, the Shadow Gallery, is simply magnificent. It is full to the brim with books and paintings and various cultural artifacts of all sorts, whether high art or popular culture. Jan van Eyck's *The Arnolfini Marriage* shares wall space with a framed copy of *The Beezer*, and native carvings from all over the world are scattered on tables and desks. Evey's bedroom is simply stuffed with precariously stacked mountains of books. It's the kind of place any sane person would want to live, and makes a very attractive and intriguing backdrop for certain scenes in the film.

Lots of other actors give great performances. John Hurt as High Chancellor Adam Sutler is suitably angry throughout, only addressing his

underlings through a huge television screen, much like Big Brother in 1984. It makes an interesting contrast to Hurt's own role in the film version of that book. He played Winston Smith, whose torture and transformation finds an echo in Evey's own transformation. Tim Piggott-Smith is superbly menacing as Creedy, the head of The Finger and a thoroughly nasty piece of work. Stephen Fry, essentially playing himself, gives a very touching and very moving performance as Gordon Deitrich, a performance that would make the film worth seeing all on its own.

On the other hand. . .

Much has been made of the fact that Alan Moore is not a supporter of the movie of *V for Vendetta*. There are good and strong reasons for this, as I hope I can show. To do this, I'll have to delve a little into the history of Moore's work.

I read the first installment of *V for Vendetta* in the first issue of *Warrior* in 1982, where it shared space with another of Moore's finest works, *Marvelman*. I have a long interest in all the works of Alan Moore, more or less stemming from the time I read that first issue of *Warrior*. Moore is undoubtedly the finest and most important comics writer in the world now, and possibly ever. Despite this, he has suffered from very shabby treatment at the hands of most of the comics companies he worked for. The back-story of *V*, particularly, needs to be understood.

The UK comics magazine *Warrior*, in which *V* first appeared, lasted for twenty six issues, ending in 1984, by which point the story was a little over halfway through. At the time there was a lot of interest in comics in the media. The idea that comics were actually a legitimate form of literary expression, and that they could actually be read by adults, was starting to be felt. The way the comics

companies were dealing with the creative people behind comics was also changing. That process would eventually lead to big companies – such as DC and Marvel – publishing comics that were still copyrighted to the original creators, rather than automatically becoming the property of the company as had always been the case in the past. Moore was at the very spearhead of this, along with Frank Miller and others. However, at the time that Moore went to negotiate a deal with DC, along with co-creator and *V* artist David Lloyd, and *Warrior* editor Dez Skinn, those kinds of contracts were still a while away.

The contract that Moore and co ended up with was this: DC would publish *V* as a ten-issue mini-series, beginning in 1988, and subsequently as a graphic novel, which appeared in 1990, and would own the right to the series, and the character, and in general could do as they wished with it, as long as they kept it in print. However, if the graphic novel went out of print, the rights would then revert to Moore and Lloyd. This all seemed fair enough, except that no-one could have foreseen that the graphic novel would be continuously in print from then until now, therefore, by it's very success, forever keeping his creation out of Moore's reach. When DC sold the movie rights for *V* to parent company Warner Bros, they didn't need Moore's permission to do so, and went ahead regardless of his opinions on the subject. Certainly movies had been made of DC properties before, but these were generally of characters that were part of the DC pantheon, and had been written by numerous people over many years, and could certainly not be seen as being the product of a single creative team.

Even at that point, Moore was prepared to allow things to simply proceed as they were. True, two previous movie versions of his works, *From Hell* and *The League of*

Extraordinary Gentlemen (LoEG), were less than wonderful, but at least he more or less knew that was going to be the case and, having sold the rights, was content to leave the moviemakers to it, as long as they left him alone. Unfortunately, two things happened that finally finished Moore's desire to have any involvement with Hollywood, the second of which specifically caused him to take an adversarial position on the movie of *V*.

First of all he was drawn into a court case involving *LoEG*, claiming that that movie was substantially stolen from a screenplay called *A Cast of Characters*. There was, apparently, quite an amount of similarity between the two screenplays, but these similarities only came about in that version, and were entirely absent from Moore's original work. None the less, he found himself giving a ten-hour deposition for the case. It was at this point that he decided that he wanted his name taken off all movies based on his works, and that, if he owned the rights to something, he simply wouldn't sell those rights to Hollywood in the first place.

The final straw for Moore began in 2005 with a phone call from Larry Wachowski, *V*'s writer/producer. Moore politely told him that he didn't want anything to do with films and simply wished to get on with his writing. And that should have been that. But it wasn't... Moore was soon made aware of a press release about a press conference given by Joel Silver, the film's producer, and its cast. In this, Silver said that Moore was, "very excited about what Larry [Wachowski] had to say and Larry sent the script . . ." Moore felt, quite rightly, that his name was being used to endorse the film against his explicit instructions. Indeed that they'd managed to quote pretty much the exact opposite of his actual feelings about the

project, and about the film industry in general. He requested, through his Wildstorm editor, Scott Dunbier, that DC/Warner Brothers should issue a retraction of what he described as “blatant lies — that’s the phrase I’m groping for.” What he wanted, he said, was a retraction, a clarification, and a modest apology, released in a similar manner to the original press release. Silver’s words were removed from the movie’s website, but there was no retraction, although DC’s president, Paul Levitz tried to get Silver to make one. When Moore’s two-week deadline passed, and there was no apology forthcoming, Moore was true to his word. He finished his contracted work for ABC/Wildstorm/DC, which consists of finishing a hardback *LoEG* book, and a story for *Tom Strong*, and will now never work for DC again.

And that’s why Alan Moore wants to have nothing to do with the movie version of *V for Vendetta*.

It is for that reason that I’m so personally torn about the fact that I like the film so much. I absolutely agree that Moore and David Lloyd deserve to have their intellectual property returned to them. On the same line of reasoning, I can see that Moore wouldn’t have wanted the film made, and have no choice but to agree. However, the film did get made, and we can only judge it on what it is, and not what it might have been, or indeed might not have been.

One person who occasionally gets forgotten in all this is David Lloyd, who was the artist and co-creator on *V for Vendetta*. Unlike Alan Moore, Lloyd was fully in favor of the film, and the point could be argued that the film more closely resembles the story drawn by Lloyd than it does the story written by Moore. Lloyd’s role in creating *V* was not just following art direction given by Moore either. The character of *V* was

largely designed by him and the ways in which the story was told, like foregoing thought bubbles and sound effects, were at his suggestion. These ideas had far-reaching consequences as Moore and Lloyd were, unknown to themselves, rewriting the grammar of comics as they went along. I sometimes have difficulties with the story of *V*, which is not without flaws. Even Moore himself acknowledges this in the introduction he wrote for the series. But it is undeniably one of the milestones in the development of comics for a more mature audience, and one of the books on which the current popularity of graphic novels is based.

There are any number of differences between the film and the original graphic novel. If you are going to go see it hoping that it is a direct translation onto the screen of the original then you are bound to be disappointed. The book was originally written in the Britain of the 1980’s, and reflects it’s time. The film was made in the US in the early years of the twenty-first century, and obviously reflects its time, too. Characters are changed, and whole chunks of the book are missing, but none the less the filmmakers obviously had a lot of love for the original work, and manage to drop references to it throughout the film. *V*’s soliloquy, which I quoted earlier, references many of the titles of the installments of *V* from the comics, all of which began with the letter *V*. There were titles like *Vaudeville*, *Vox Populi*, *Verdict*, and so on. Lewis Prothero, although he’s not identified as a doll collector in the film, as he is in the book, still has a few shelves of dolls in his bathroom. The little girl who says ‘Bollocks’ to the cameras still gets to say it, just in a different context. And much else.

On the other hand, the film is riddled with inaccuracies and plot holes. For

instance the Jan Van Eyck painting in the Shadow Gallery, *The Arnolfini Marriage*, is much larger than it should be. We are told at one point that Bishop Lillian, in his earlier days, was paid some ridiculously large sum of money while working at Larkhill, without ever being told why this is the case. Considering that they're meant to be living in an oppressive fascist regime, the people we see in their homes seem to be in no way actually oppressed. Although a lot is made of the fact that Evey hasn't had butter in years, wide-screen TVs, tobacco, and beer seem to be in plentiful supply. Numerous other instances could be pointed out, and no doubt will be. However, as far as I'm concerned, they don't really matter. I loved the film the first time I saw it, and the second time, when I was considerably less emotionally affected and could simply enjoy it for what it was. It's a well-made film, and an important film, especially for the times we live in. It is even a reasonably good adaptation of the original work, at least in some respects. Certainly the film seems to gather oddness and controversy to itself as it goes along. One of the people working on the film during the destruction of Westminster, as part of a work placement scheme, was Ewan Blair, son of the British prime minister. I even managed to walk into my local comic shop just in time to hear a discussion on whether or not Larry Wachowski's alleged forthcoming gender realignment surgery would adversely affect the film.

There is one last aspect of the film that I found fascinating. There is a novelization of the movie, which has been written by Steve Moore. Steve Moore is a very old friend of Alan Moore, and is said to be the person who first taught Alan to write comics. He's also Alan's magical partner, and in general the pair have worked together in various ways for quite a number of

years. I got the opportunity to get a few words from Steve Moore about the writing of the novelization, which are fascinating in themselves:

"Basically, I saw the job as a professional one, where my task was to adapt the screenplay I'd been given as well as I could under the circumstances; while at the same time doing the best that I could (given that I had to follow the screenplay) to make the novel worthy of the original graphic novel, which I obviously admire. That meant that I couldn't deviate from the screenplay, and felt obliged to use the dialogue it contained, although I was given freedom to provide additional material to flesh out the background. For this extra material I tried to draw as much as possible on the original graphic novel (though obviously I had to make sure there was no clash between the two).

"After discussions with my editor at DC, I did make some changes to the script: removing a historical prologue about the original Guy Fawkes; retaining the "Violet Carson" rose name, rather than the non-existent "Scarlet Carson" of the film; failing to mention any of the specific dates given in the screenplay so that the actual time-period of the story became more nebulous (and possibly closer to the present day). Obviously, there were a number of other areas in the screenplay where I had to smooth things over or make minor changes, just to make the story work as a novel rather than a film."

Certainly Steve Moore's novelization makes an intriguing third version of the story of V, and I urge you to read it, just as soon as you've been to the cinema to see the film a few times. It goes without saying that you should already own a copy of the graphic novel. I'll leave you with perhaps the most succinct comment I heard on the film, as a crowd of us

gathered in the foyer of the cinema after the preview screening here in Dublin. A friend of mine came up to me with a shine in his eyes and said, "let's go blow shit up!"

V for Vendetta – Andy & Larry Wachowski – Warner Bros. – theatrical release

V for Vendetta– Steve Moore – Pocket Star – mass-market paperback

V for Vendetta – Alan Moore & David Lloyd – Vertigo – graphic novel

Journey's End

By Juliet E. McKenna

The seventh volume of a vast and detailed fantasy series has a lot riding on it. Everything must be wrapped up with a satisfying sense of conclusion, no matter how intricate the story may have become. Yet a straightforward and indeed necessary survey of all the various characters' fates risks undermining the whole series with a fatal sense of anticlimax. There must be surprises and final, unexpected twists, but these absolutely cannot outrage the logical progression of events established thus far. That presents the author with considerable challenges, as the burden of continuity inexorably steers the narrative in directions that are as clearly indicated for the reader as they are for the writer.

Kate Elliott charts a course through these potential hazards with as sure a touch as she's demonstrated throughout the *Crown of Stars* series. The final volume is also called *Crown of Stars*, and we begin by picking up Alain's story. His narrative has been one of those threaded through these books and thus tying the series into a coherent whole. Alain is initially a witness to the chaos following on from the cataclysm in the fifth

volume that returned the Ashioi to this world. As a solitary traveler, he's actually having an easier time of it than many of the nobles trying to find a way home through all the destruction with their retinues trailing after them.

It's entirely logical that everyone would be trying to get home after all the upheavals they've faced and, as a result, the encounters between characters who've been long separated feel entirely unforced. Naturally, they share tales of what they have done and where they have been, enabling Elliott to recap events for the reader with admirable subtlety. I do like writers who appreciate that even the keenest readers may simply not have the time to go back and re-read previous volumes. And as has always been the case from the first volume, these personal stories anchor this series to a human scale. Great events are not merely being played out as intellectual abstraction. Real people, whom we can sympathize with or loathe with a passion, are living through these momentous times.

Nobles whom we've seen plot and counter-plot through the series are now showing their essential character. Some, like Constance and Theophanu, do their best to keep faith with their religion, and with the feudal relationships that oblige them to protect the poor and humble in return for the rewards of their status. Others, such as Conrad the Black and Sabella, are heedless of the suffering around them. They're still fixated on satisfying their own lusts and ambitions and taking revenge, renewing or discarding old alliances as they see fit. As a consequence they're heedless of the dangers that threaten their position. If lords and princes are not fulfilling their feudal obligations, how long can they expect the allegiance of the peasantry? The series has consistently been underpinned by an unobtrusive

exploration of such wider issues of power and responsibility, personal and political. While this never interferes with the wholly engrossing adventure, it gives it an intellectual depth for those readers that like to consider such debates.

With all this turmoil around him, Sanglant is striving to hold onto the kingship his dying father bequeathed him. Yet he lacks so many of the advantages that Henry enjoyed. The Eagles have lost their magical Sight now that the Ashioi's return has changed the whole balance of enchantment in this world. His right to the throne remains disputed, thanks to his illegitimacy, his Ashioi blood and his devotion to Liath with her even more perilous dual heritage. There's also the question of his heir. Their daughter Blessing remains unaccounted for.

Sanglant's enemies, by contrast, have somehow retained their malevolent magic. Thanks to the undying enmity of the vile Antonia, the ghastly galla are still pursuing Sanglant and his beloved, sorcerous Liath. The couple's defenses against these shades are finite, and diminishing. The Ashioi too continue their pursuit of Liath and her daughter. If humankind don't want them, the Ashioi most certainly do. They continue to pursue their own war while the ancient horse-people and their Kerayit allies still contrive against them. And we must not forget Hugh of Austrā, a man with magical skills whose heart is as vile as his face is fair.

Nor should we overlook Alain, for so long our useful witness. There's considerably more to him than this role, and his strange link to the rock-born Eika remains as strong as ever. Their self-proclaimed Emperor Stronghand is determined not to see all his valorous achievements undone even when the consequences of the cataclysm undo the

magic of the wise-mothers that his people have so long relied on, rousing a sleeping marvel in the process.

The pace of this final phase of the story is swift, fluent and exciting. This is definitely not one of those final volumes that rely on the reader's dogged determination to find out what happens to keep them turning the pages. There's no bogging down in minutiae due to failing inspiration at the end of such a long and complex work. Twist by turn, Elliott deftly satisfies and then confounds expectation, with the narrative as fresh and immediate as when it first began.

The sweeping events of the previous books come full circle and spiral towards a climactic final battle. Just as Sanglant must win through force of arms, Liath must wield the knowledge that is her birthright. All the key players are brought to crucial meetings, some unexpected, some anticipated but with wholly unforeseen consequences. Shock follows on from surprise, right through to the multifaceted negotiations necessary once the battle has been both lost and won. The splendidly creative final resolution is a fitting conclusion to what has been a truly inventive series drawing on all the classic strengths of high heroic fantasy.

Crown of Stars - Kate Elliott - Orbit - trade paperback

Disposable Living

By Victoria Hoyle

Only rarely does an ordinarily mainstream author make a foray into Speculative territory that is well received by both "literary" and genre critics. Oftentimes this is a simple matter of 'and never the twain shall meet'. At

other times they do meet but in head-on collision, forceful enough to send whole communities of reviewers into apoplexy (think: Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*). Still, it does happen, every so often, that a novel breaches genre boundaries successfully and proves mutually acceptable. Such a one is Kazuo Ishiguro's Man Booker nominated, Arthur C. Clarke Award nominated *Never Let Me Go*.

Set in an alternate England in the late 1990s, it is the sixth novel from an author who has won universal critical acclaim for his real-world fiction but who, wonder of wonders, has still proven amenable to having his latest work associated with SF. It seems possible that he is even flattered: he recently confirmed that he will attend the presentation of the Arthur C. Clarke award at Sci-Fi-London at the end of this month. Amen to that, say I.

Kathy H., aged 31 and first person narrator of *Never Let Me Go*, has been a "carer" for nearly 12 years and, she admits in her opening words, a rather good one:

"My donors have always tended to do much better than expected. Their recovery times have been impressive, and hardly any of them have been classified as 'agitated', even before fourth donation. Okay, maybe I'm boasting now."

This chatty, easy voice is typical of her and breeds an immediate familiarity. She speaks matter-of-factly and gives herself no context; she asks us to collude with her, addressing the reader with a "you-know-how-it-is" intimacy. She even posits, slyly, that whatever and wherever she is, *we* are in a similar position: "I know carers, working now, who're just as good and don't get half the credit. If you're one of them, I can understand how you might get

resentful..." Of course, we have no idea what Kathy is alluding to but that has its own comfort for genre readers. We thrive on just this kind of obliquity.

Her subject, however, is not to be her (or, by implication, our) present but her past; her mode is retrospective and it is memory, often digressive and uncertain, that she plunders for significance. She begins to narrate her privileged childhood spent at Hailsham, an apparently idyllic boarding school. Like all boarding schools it has its own set of bizarre customs: an enormous emphasis placed on creativity, "Exchanges" in which students buy and sell each other's artwork, "Sales" of bits and pieces of twentieth century paraphernalia, visits from the mysterious "Madame" and "guardians" who look after the children's every need. In describing her friendships with fellow students and the minutiae of their daily lives Kathy H. paints a picture of a childhood and adolescence spent without parents, without holidays (religious or otherwise) and without contact from the outside world.

Her childhood self seems to know and not know that there is something strange about this upbringing. As she says herself:

"...it feels like I always knew...in some vague way, even as early as six or seven. And it's curious, when we were older and the guardians were giving us those talks, nothing came as a complete surprise. It was like we'd heard everything somewhere before."

We, the reader, are kin to Kathy H.'s younger self in this respect. From the beginning we have known and yet not known the truth. Kathy's language has been preparing us, peppered as it is with common words - like "carer", "donor",

“recovery centre” and “donation” – used in disquieting ways. When one of the guardians, Miss Lucy, reveals what we’ve suspected all along – that Kathy H. and all the others are cloned humans, bred for the sole purpose of organ donation – it hardly come as a surprise. Still, it’s a striking reality: Kathy H. and her closest friends, Tommy and Ruth, have been born in order that they might die, in order that some anonymous others might live. This is their biological destiny.

When they leave Hailsham at sixteen they move to The Cottages, a sort of half-way house where they stay until their “carer” training begins. They might be carers looking after older donors for up to a dozen years before they’re called to donate themselves, however once the donation process is initiated it continues until they “complete”. Death is never mentioned, but there is a terrible, desperate inevitability to it. In this sense at least, *Never Let Me Go* is a typical Ishiguran novel of human tragedy.

Perhaps we should begin, however, with what it is not. Certainly it is *not* a novel predicated on vigorously credible cloning technologies. In truth cloning is the narrative’s ur-beast, a fabulous construct upon which Ishiguro builds character and comment rather than story. The word “clone” isn’t part of Kathy’s vocabulary and is used only once, in anger, by another character. It is, if you like, the proverbial elephant in the room. Ishiguro chooses not to reveal the development of the technology, the sequence in which donations are given or the mechanisms by which “donors” survive the removal of up to three vital organs. So if you’re after the actual “science” in the science fiction you may well be disappointed. I’d recommend something like Michael Marshall Smith’s *Spares* (1997) instead. His take on organ

donor clones is vicious in its scientific veracity.

Nor does *Never Let Me Go* have much in the way of traditional “plot”. Even Ishiguro’s denouement is characteristically quiet. Of course, there are questions to be answered – Who is Madame? What is her “gallery”? What sets Hailsham students apart from their fellow clones? – but it is a novel to make your heart ache rather than pound.

Character, however, is key. Ishiguro has always had a penchant for the restrained and the civilized, for deference and repression even, which is well reflected in Kathy H.’s ragged innocence and acceptance of her fate. Although her narration is informal, her brand of disclosure is thoroughly limited: her sheltered life, defined by Hailsham, then by the Cottages and finally by her role as a carer has engendered a circumscribed expression. These basic stages, or rather her memories of them, are all she has to offer us by way of revelation. She isn’t one for diatribes or hot displays of emotion. She doesn’t rail against the scientists who made her or the agencies that have controlled her life. She never admits her ultimate physical destiny. She cannot. She hardly comprehends an alternative existence.

Her contact with the world outside and with non-clones has been wholly fragmentary. The Sales at Hailsham exposed her to a heritage of twentieth century popular culture – videos, music tapes and personal walkmans – but in a piecemeal fashion that loaded each object with peculiar significance. Thus a pencil case or a cassette tape might come to symbolize parental care and specialness in a world with neither. Kathy experiences a mini culture in which material ownership is a signal of received and given love. She turns to her Judy Bridgewater tape for comfort, playing the song “Never Let Me Go” to

herself, and, in a strange way, feels that the tape loves her back. The giving of Sale gifts, the buying of each other's art at Exchanges is the highest act of affection and honoring between the friends. It is an emotional economy laden with pathos.

Sign and action are similarly weirded. Once the Hailsham students move to the Cottages they begin to "collect" gestures from the wider world, enacting them on each other. At one point Kathy describes a way of saying goodbye in exacting detail, even though it is no more than a brief tender touch to the arm. All the things we take for granted – the finer points of human interaction – have never been socialized into Ishiguro's clones. They are appallingly innocent and he does an excellent job of illuminating the truth of it. Kathy H. never considers a life beyond what she is because she is incapable of doing so. She is not physically constrained – she is free to drive about the country, she lives in a bed-sit alone, she chooses her own "donors" – but there is no escape for her.

Yet always beneath the rather flat calm with which Kathy relates events is a typically Ishiguran fury, a pure volcanic turmoil of grief and horror and helplessness that is without real direction. Here is a woman whose interpersonal relationships are hopelessly curtailed, whose selfhood is entirely disregarded, whose humanity is conveniently denied but who absorbs injustice all the same. How does she manage it? Why does she choose to stay? What invisible force keeps her and her fellow donors in orbit of a system that refines them down to just kidneys and livers and lungs and hearts? Whatever it is, Ishiguro implies, these same forces are the ones that keep us all locked in a state of properness. They stop us flailing out at unfairness, stop us killing each

other, stop us killing ourselves. The irony of this properness is that it is at once essential – without it we would go insane – but also impossibly restrictive. In the end though it allows us to live and persist, it allows us to function. Perhaps *Never Let Me Go* is the most potent novel I've ever read about the power of this social contract and the function of the human within it.

The novel also imagines a dreadfully possible reality, facilitated by science but born and nurtured by all too familiar forms of ideological reticence. The kinds that lead us to prioritize some lives over others or allow us to dehumanize individuals over distance. It is the kind that supposes ideas can be controlled, that controversial science *can* be purely academic. It says categorically that this is not so:

"Suddenly there were all these possibilities before us...And for a long time people preferred to believe that these organs appeared out of nowhere...By the time people became concerned there was no way to reverse the process. How can you ask a world that has come to regard cancer as curable to put away that cure, go back to the dark days? There was no going back..."

Because Ishiguro's favored approach to atrocity is indirect what we get is a slow revelation, a gradual build up of tension to this terrible understanding. And there is a certain cathartic joy in being crushed by the weight of a possibility so well evoked. As always with Ishiguro the consolation is in the humanizing reality of our reader's response. We are horrified and that is only how it should be.

Thoughtful, provocative and emotionally rich *Never Let Me Go* should have won last year's Booker Prize. The fact that it didn't may or may not be a

reflection of the entrenched anti-SF prejudices of the judges. What is true, however, is that the novel is now up against tough competition for this year's Clarke Award with stronger-than-strong showings from Geoff Ryman, Charles Stross and Liz Williams. Nevertheless, it could well prove a worthy winner.

Never Let Me Go - Kazuo Ishiguro - Faber and Faber - trade paperback

More Alien Than Space Ships

By Karina Meerman

Bear Daughter by Judith Berman has been lying on my desk for the longest time. I finished reading it weeks ago, but writing the review was daunting. Not because *Bear Daughter* is a bad book, but because I couldn't organise my thoughts to form a proper opinion. The deadline has come and gone and has come again, so I will attempt to unravel my ambivalence.

Bear Daughter is the story of Cloud, a young girl who wakes up one morning in the village of Sandpit to discover she has become fully human. Overnight she lost her bear part. She is very confused about this (as was I when I read it), but the people in the village seem to accept the fact that bears sometimes are people too. Cloud's father is Lord Stink, an immortal bear spirit. Her mother is the lovely Thrush, married to the human King Rumble, who is mightily displeased with Cloud's existence.

The story goes that King Rumble, in his hunger for power, has bound up the ghosts of Cloud's bear brothers and bear father, creating a hole in the mortal world that only Cloud can close. But Cloud wants to be a human girl and

forget about her bear self. She flees Sandpit to escape the cruelty of Rumble and the threat of his wizard, Bone. Her flight becomes a journey that will take her to some very magical places, from "the watery home of the orcas to the celestial seat of the prince of heaven." She travels across what must be Northern America and encounters talking animals, spirit beings and some actual people. During her journey, the ghosts of her brothers cry out to her, asking her to save them.

The story has many recognisable elements in it: bear, girl, soul, family, spirit, mountain, water and dog. But Berman has a peculiar way of combining them. Being almost totally ignorant of Native and/or North American culture, I didn't know what to do with the gods and spirits in the story. To me, the characters were more alien than space ships and I just couldn't relate. I had the feeling I was missing some important information and that I'm from the wrong cultural background to fully appreciate the book.

I really wanted to like it, because *Bear Daughter* is a different book, with a magical quality that a lot of mainstream fantasy doesn't have. It was a joy to read a book without white skinned, blond haired fairy kings and queens, helpless women, heroic men, magic rings and wizard trainees. I love the way Berman writes: it is alive and clean and to the point. But it all felt too alien and I just couldn't handle Cloud.

It infuriated me that she acted so powerless while she had so much power within reach. Why didn't she use her anger? Why reject her power just to be a human girl, when her personal path was obvious? Maybe it is a Book With a Message. After all, many women wait too long before they use their real power, and some never discover it. And maybe that annoyed me in Cloud. Maybe that

part of the story was a wee bit too recognisable.

Bear Daughter - Judith Berman - Ace - mass-market paperback

Horrible Favorites

By Stuart Carter

If you like horror movies – not any horror movie in particular, just horror movies in general – then this book is especially for you. If you have ever enjoyed a horror movie – any horror movie – then this book is for you, but you're probably better off borrowing it from someone. Are you an academic, studying the genre from the dim, dusty confines of your ivory tower? This book is probably kind of useful to you. Have you simply got too much time on your hands and are doggedly working your way through the entire horror movie section at your local DVD rental emporium? Yeah, you *definitely* need this book – if only to save yourself some cash and wasted hours of your life that you will never get back.

What's particularly nice about Mark Morris' *Cinema Macabre* is that it is unmistakably an enthusiast's book. Each contributor, all of them SF/F/H luminaries, has turned in an essay that isn't necessarily about The Best Horror Film Ever Made In The History Of The World So Shut Up And Listen There, Especially You At The Back, Fool. No. Instead we have 50 pieces of writing by a quite disparate group of individuals about their *favorite* horror movie. Possibly it is the one that featured the best cinematography, but equally likely, the one that first scared the pants off them as a wide-eyed ten-year-old; or which once struck a chord with them; or the one they recall that disturbed them

for the longest time. A film that, for whatever reason, they *wanted* to write about.

And it's a fine idea, especially given the inherently visceral nature of the horror movie genre. I've read quite enough dry 'textual analysis' of *Alien*, thank you very much, and I'm altogether too familiar with the kinetic cinematography of *The Shining* (perhaps I should get out more). And whilst the essays on both those films contained herein are as readable and thought-provoking as you could hope for, what it was nicest to find in this unpretentious, but not unintelligent, collection is some of the stupid celluloid; the rough diamonds, the films that fall short of what their makers may have hoped for, and yet which, for all their faults, still managed to wring gasps from, to give pause to, and even inspire their audiences. Personally I recall watching Lamberto Bava's *Demons* as an impressionable 14-year-old and absolutely loving it, so much so that, in order not to spoil that memory, I've never watched it since. Now, having read Marcelle Perks' essay on that film, I feel far more confident about doing so.

John Carpenter's *Halloween* and *The Thing* both scared the living daylights out of me when I first saw them, and I still rate them very highly today, so it's a joy to find that there are others who do, too. Muriel Gray's four pages on *The Thing* is an informative delight, as is Terry Lamsley's essay about *The Return Of The Living Dead*. Each rekindled the exhilaration of seeing those films for the first time, and yet also added an extra dimension of understanding to them.

But *Cinema Macabre* isn't simply the literary equivalent of one of those TV nostalgia shows that seem to dominate so much of the schedules here in the UK just now (all of them titled something like *100 Best TV Genocides* or *TV's*

Greatest Enemas!). Although an element of that kind of nostalgia does inevitably (and far from unpleasantly) creep in, there are plenty of films that I'd barely heard of here: some new, some old, and more than a couple of classics I've accidentally managed to miss time and time again. (My wife never tires of reminding me each time I roll my eyes in horror that she's never seen, say, *Return Of The Living Dead*, that I have somehow managed to avoid watching *The Wicker Man* all these years). There are at least half a dozen films mentioned in *Cinema Macabre* that I want to see for the first time, and well over a dozen more that I simply want to see again – *The Night Of The Demon*, *The Old Dark House*, *Let's Scare Jessica To Death*, *King Kong* and, of course, *Demons*, to mention just a handful.

Sadly, even Ramsey Campbell's essay on David Lynch's *Lost Highway* couldn't persuade me to bother seeing *that* film again; however, this is yet another entertaining aspect of this thoroughly recommended, thought-provoking, yet easy to read book: the debate over what is included versus what isn't. I mean, for goodness' sake, where's *Nightmare On Elm Street*? Where's *The Incredible Melting Man*?? And surely the mystery of Julia Roberts' *entire career* comes under the heading of *Cinema Macabre*, doesn't it...?

Cinema Macabre - Mark Morris (ed.) - PS Publishing - hardcover

City of Freaks and Aliens

By Mario Guslandi

The city of Paxton, more popularly known as Punktown, is an Earth colony located on the planet Oasis. There different races and species, both indigenous and foreign, cohabit and

collide. The brainchild of the American writer Jeffrey Thomas – author of the notable horror collections *Aaaaaieee!* and *Honey Is Sweeter Than Blood* – Punktown, with its varied urban setting, has already been the location for a previous short story collection published by Ministry of Whimsy Press in 2000. Now joined by his brother Scott (author of *Westermead*), Jeffrey comes back to the dangerous streets of this alien city to observe and dissect the events taking place in there. The stories feature monsters, mutants, clones, robots and other weird creatures.

An unusual mix of SF and horror (but definitely unbalanced towards SF), this volume collects eight new stories by Jeffrey and seven by Scott. The themes vary from mutant “children” born from an unhappy whore (“Sweaty Betty”) to an alien menagerie at loose in a dilapidated building (“Perfectly Beastly”), to the difficult relationship between a man and a bunch of his own clones (“Hydra”), and so on.

Jeffrey manages to really hit the target with several pieces. In “The Unbearable Being of Light” a huge, bizarre creature dominates the scene in a zone inhabited by enigmatic people and repellent parasites. The alien atmosphere makes the tale dark, fascinating and not so subtly unsettling. “The Hate Machines” relies upon a very original idea. Life sucks in Punktown, and special puppets are made available to get rid of anger and hate, and to allow people to let off steam.

“Adrift On The Sea Of Milk” is an excellent story about a carnival ride and a peculiar doll given out as a prize. The ambiguous nature of the doll (mechanical? animal?) is depicted in a delicate, disquieting manner, revealing an undercurrent of sadness and despair. The beautifully written “Willow Tree” is an offbeat tale of murders taking place

around an old tree at a traffic intersection.

Among Scott's contributions I particularly liked "Pulse", the intriguing report of the strange adventures of a necrophiliac bus driver forced to face murder and violence, and "The Merciful Universe". The latter is a gentle, compelling piece of fiction describing the lives of a young girl and a lonely woman, and the unlucky fate of their pets. The remaining stories I found a bit too "alien" for my own taste, but that is Punktown's nature, I guess.

A mix of strong colours and delicate shades, this collection will disturb more than one reader, delight some, disgust a few, but it won't bore any, which I think is no small merit. Isn't entertainment the first objective of fiction?

Punktown: Shades of Grey - Jeffrey Thomas and Scott Thomas - Bedlam Press - hardcover

Short Fiction

By Nic Clarke

The future is, as usual, bleak. The April issue of *Interzone* (# 203) contains no less than three stories that fall under the broad heading of "future dystopia". Karen Fishler's "Among the Living" has a neatly disquieting premise — experienced but aged soldiers are given new bodies so they can continue to serve their country, and kill foreigners. But the emotional impact of the story is somewhat undermined by its length, and by the unnecessary extra moral sting in the tail, which overplays an already stark scenario. "Ten With a Flag", by Joseph Paul Haines, meanwhile, is a succinct but ultimately predictable exploration of prenatal predestination.

Easily the most effective and original of the bunch — and my own pick of the month — is "The American Dead", by Jay Lake. From its opening lines it is the issue's stylistic standout, the present-tense immediacy of the narrative offsetting the languid heat of the environment:

"Americans are all rich, even their dead. Pobrecito knows this because he spends the hottest parts of the day in the old Cementerio Americano down by the river. The water is fat and lazy while the pipes in the colonia drip only rust brown as the eyes of Santa Marguerite. [...] He sits within a drooping tree which fights with life and watches the flies make dark, wriggling rafts out on the water."

The *colonia's* inhabitants live under the repressive rule of a cadre of priests and their enforcers. The American graves represent young Pobrecito's dreams of escape — of prosperity, and the beauty and ease that he believes will accompany it — which he shares with others by selling pictures torn from a hidden cache of pornographic magazines. But there are hints that America, fallen victim to some unspecified apocalypse, is now unobtainable to outsiders for reasons other than just geography and economic opportunity.

Lake resists the temptation to spell out the details of his world too directly, choosing instead to filter it through colloquialisms and imagery drawn from Pobrecito's experience and surroundings. The result is a tantalizingly spare picture wrapped up in Biblical metaphor and the affecting tragedy of the characters. How did this state of affairs come about? Does the ending suggest that change is imminent? Questions about sex, society, and the sexualization of society — in particular,

how women are continually made into Eves — are raised without hectoring, and without any attempt to provide programmatic answers.

Another strong offering, markedly different in tone and style, is Elizabeth Bear's "Wane". This is a detective story in an alternate history setting: an early twentieth-century world where the US never gained independence, the Aztec Empire still exists, and the moon is the color of copper. It has an engaging lead character in Lady Abigail Irene Garrett, and a flavor of both steampunk (there's a dirigible) and court-politicking high fantasy. The prose is ornate, with an emphasis on intricate description, but not overly so.

Also notable is Paul Di Filippo's "The Furthest Schorr: 32 Fugues Based on the Paintings of Todd Schorr", a collection of vignettes inspired by the titular artist's work that appear spread throughout the magazine. They showcase a wide range of settings and subgenres, from the exploration of alien planets to a greedy child who summons up spirits in quest of an endless supply of chocolate milk. All share the same fundamental structure, however. Each one ends with an ironic, humorously-nasty twist. My personal favorite was "The Torment of Sammy Squashbrains", a splendidly creepy snippet about a group of children invited to a Halloween party thrown by the author of their favorite books.

By way of contrast, the two stories I most enjoyed this past month at *Strange Horizons*

(<http://www.strangehorizons.com>) were a pair of modernist contemporary fantasies. "The Flying Woman" by Meghan McCarron (20 March) is sad, lovely fairytale about a love that dare not speak its name. The narrative is sparse and fractured, structured as a series of snapshot episodes — some retelling events, some simply reflective:

"The Flying Woman in Profile. [...] *If the image were a daguerreotype, she would seem mysterious. If it were a bust, she would seem noble. If it were a holy card, she would be a saint. But the image is a photograph on my wall, and when people see it, they all say, Who is that? She looks so far away.*"

Nia Stephens' "Every Angel is Terrifying" (10 April) is an evocative piece about a dying artist in New York. Like "The Flying Woman", the style is impressionistic and the structure thematic rather than linear. It uses the images of angels to personify abstracts — Death, Beauty, Home — and thereby link together the narrator's recollections of the dead man.

Sybil's Garage #3 (March 2006) (<http://www.sensesfive.com>) is a small-press 'zine of speculative fiction and poetry. Most of its stories wear their genre elements lightly — if at all — and the trend is towards the brief and intriguing mood piece, rather than the intricately plotted epic. My favorite was Cat Rambo's "Lonesome Trail", a succinct, magical transmutation of poetry-writing into a night journey through a luminous desert valley. "So That Her High-Born Kinsmen Came" by Yoon Ha Lee is a haunting glance into the mind of a nursing mother. Eric Gregory's "The Redaction of Flight 5766" begins as the mundane story of a disillusioned airport security worker, but soon becomes something else entirely — and has a fascinating, ambiguous ending.

Two other unusual and funny pieces stand out. "Indentured Advertisements" by Gary J. Beharry is one half of a dialogue between an advert and its target, in which the ad claims to be an indentured servant, pressed into service by "them" and forced to sell liquor

against its will. Brian Conn's "Six Questions about the Sun" is a gloriously inventive alternate cosmology in which the sun is an ambivalent presence in the sky, fuelled by human beings' blood, sweat and tears (fed to it by flocks of tiny white birds), and longs to lay down "the burden of sustaining life":

"Some thinkers have proposed that what the sun wants is a state of darkness, coolness and peace. [...] What it wants is not precisely death, for nothing prevents it from directing its poisons at the birds that bring it fuel, and so destroying itself. No, it yearns rather for the bottom of the sea, where the salty water of life surrounds it, yet where only the most solitary creatures go, where movement and noise are minimal."

Interzone #203 - Andy Cox (ed.) - TTA Press
- A4 magazine

Strange Horizons - Susan Marie Groppi (ed.)
- Strange Horizons - web site

Sybil's Garage #3 - Matthew Kressel (ed.) - Senses Five Press - PDF

Wish I Wasn't In Dixie

By Peter Wong

"What if the South had won the Civil War?" This alternate history query has provided grist for novels by such folks as Ward Moore and Harry Turtledove. To my knowledge, charting the ramifications of a Confederate victory has never before been the subject of a film. Enter Kevin Willmott with his film *C.S.A.: The Confederate States Of America*.

The time is the present day. The place is an America where a black gardener can be casually referenced in a television insurance commercial as "property."

How did this America come to be? The answers are provided by the controversial titular British Broadcasting Service documentary within the film, which forms the bulk of the movie. News bulletins and commercials for such things as Blackie toothpaste provide present-day texture for Willmott's hypothetical world.

C.S.A. traces the history of the Confederate States Of America from the Civil War to the present day using talking heads, film clips, and even the occasional song. The divergence point from our world's Civil War comes when C.S.A. ambassador Judah P. Benjamin convinces England and France to intervene militarily at Gettysburg and rout the Union forces. From that point, Canada eventually becomes the haven for abolitionists and such cultural dissidents as Mark Twain and Richard Wright. The C.S.A., in the meantime, conquers South America, treats (an unconvincing-looking) Adolf Hitler as an ally, and successfully fights a pre-emptive war with Japan.

Willmott's alternate history film may thematically cover a roughly 140-year time period, but the film's strongest alternate history segments come early on with its coverage of the consolidation and expansion of the C.S.A.'s slave-based economy. Greed and/or the desire to improve one's social status prove key to the C.S.A.'s expansion. A mock 20th Century industrial documentary economically and socially equates possessing a slave to possessing a fancy car. In this light, the Civil War becomes recast as a struggle against socially damaging greed. Can one morally justify accumulating wealth or social status if the price for doing so is exploiting other human beings? Given our present materialistic age, that question still needs to be asked.

As the film moves further into the 20th Century, the re-working of American history feels less like a continuity of events and more like a series of dark comic skits of varying levels of success. The most successful tweaking turns the Abolitionists into the C.S.A.'s version of Communism. This invention works because both movements can be perceived as being hostile to the concept of possession of private property. "Possession of private property" may be emotional comfort food. But what counts as private property? What constitutes possession? Other bits of historical invention include making the tale of World War II's all-Nisei Army unit an all-black unit and turning the Bill Clinton "scandal" into one involving a lack of racial purity. Overall, however, the film's individual bits of cleverness don't necessarily translate into the type of comic momentum that carries the viewer through the final reel.

Where *C.S.A.* really falters is its refusal to completely follow through on its initial historical speculations. The film itself offers no hints regarding the relationship (if any) between the U.S.S.R.'s Communist sphere and the C.S.A.'s pro-slavery sphere. In addition it fails to consider relations between the C.S.A. and Canada. Canada serves as the main haven for abolitionists, yet the pro-slavery empire makes no effort to invade its northern neighbor, even though the C.S.A. has successfully waged preemptive war against Japan and conquered all of South America. Nothing indicates that Canada possesses either the military might or the international alliances that would have deterred C.S.A.'s hawks from crushing the abolitionist haven.

Ironically, charting how differently a South-victorious America turned out historically would have undercut Willmott's real goal. The director wanted

viewers to see how in far too many ways our America is not that far removed culturally from his film's alternate America. A "Cops"-style reality show depicting the re-capturing of escaped slaves suggests that white control of "deviant" black behavior is still a major cultural concern. *C.S.A.* features a medical research group dedicated to finding the brain damage or illness that spurs slaves to escape. Our world has mainstream commentators who don't consider economic inability as an explanation for black residents' failure to escape New Orleans before Hurricane Katrina hit.

The director sees prejudice against blacks as interlinked with denying equality to women and Asians, amongst others. Once prejudice against one group becomes culturally acceptable, it becomes easier to accord other groups the same treatment. Thus in *C.S.A.*'s world women never receive the right to vote. A film clip from a melodrama about the conquest of South America treats the anti-C.S.A. forces as sub-humans unworthy of retaining their land. Yet while it is part of human nature to have individual preferences (e.g. this review you are reading), what is the dividing line between individual preference and mass prejudice?

Willmott argues that institutionalized hate ultimately impoverishes America's soul. Racism becomes a casual part of *C.S.A.*'s business world, as demonstrated by its commercials. More importantly, James Baldwin and Richard Wright do not impact American belles lettres because they are black. Jazz and American popular music fail to get revolutionized by the contributions of Miles Davis, John Coltrane, and the Motown sound. Elvis Presley is mentioned, but as the guy who implicitly packaged black musical moves for white consumption. In short, the

ability to culturally contribute or to have that contribution valued should never become the sole birthright of one race or group.

C.S.A. may fall short as a work of genre fiction. But as a springboard for re-examining the persistence of racism and sexism, Willmott's film provides an entertaining entrée for discussion.

C.S.A.: *The Confederate States Of America* - Kevin Willmott - IFC Films - theatrical release

A History of Judgement

By Joe Gordon

It is 1977, and a new international movie sensation called *Star Wars* is bringing SF to mainstream attention worldwide. In Britain punk rock jars with celebrations for the Queen's Silver Jubilee. Something else is stirring in Britain though, a new science fiction weekly comic with the (then) futuristic title of *2000AD*. With only *Doctor Who* and repeats of *Space 1999* to watch, no VCR, no internet (no home computer!) and Terry Pratchett's chart-conquering novels years away the kids (and some adults) were desperate for accessible SF. And here it was, in a weekly format in a comic you could actually find in any normal high street newsagent for "8 pence Earth money". It was a comic book that would be an important career step for some of the best names in modern comics, including Alan Moore, Grant Morrison and Brian Bolland.

Judge Dredd was not the most popular character in the comic to begin with. In fact, he was not even in the first issue, making his debut with Prog 2 (*2000AD* has programmes, not issues). These days Dredd is known as the UK's greatest comics character, and Rebellion are now

collecting all of Dredd's tales together in chronological order, from Prog 2 onwards, in large black and white volumes which are a little similar to Marvel's Essentials series of graphic novel collections. Well, almost all of the tales – there are a few parts of the "Burger Wars" saga which certain fast food franchises have ensured will never again see the light of day. Some people have no sense of humour, while Dredd, for all its tough credentials, has always had a nice line in satire.

Even for readers like myself, who remember reading these tales the first time round, it is still surprising how different early Dredd is from the now-iconic character he has become. It is like watching early episodes of classic *Star Trek*, where the characters haven't settled down and Spock seems a little too emotional – you recognise the characters but they don't seem quite right compared to what you are now used to. (This is even more noticeable with DC's new *Superman Chronicles* which goes right back to 1938's first strips). The early Dredd is a little different, certainly much more human than he would appear in later years. He has a nagging Italian (stereotype) landlady, a comedy sidekick in Walter, his servant robot with an annoying speech defect, and he even *smiles* occasionally. The world of Mega City One too is somewhat different, with a mayor, a normal police force beneath the Judges, and citizens who are not quite as eccentric as they would become.

However, everything Dredd would become is here in rough form, including his incredible speed, reflexes and skill: the result of being trained since childhood in the Academy of Law. We are introduced to this establishment in the first volume, giving us a glimpse of children being inducted as cadets at the age of five, and of rookie Judges

graduating years later to their ultimate test, action on the streets under the supervision of a full Judge. (In volume 1 we meet a character who would become a later regular. The future Judge Giant, then being trained by Dredd, is the son of the Aeroball player, Giant, from *Harlem Heros*, an early 2000AD future sport strip.) Dredd's complete dedication to the law is made apparent straight off – littering will be dealt with as swiftly and harshly as robbing a bank. This has been a central aspect of his character ever since.

The fascinating and endlessly adaptable canvas of Mega City One itself is as much a part of the Dredd strips as the iron man of the law himself is. Even in some of the simpler, more basic early stories the reader is exposed to a fabulous futurescape of towering structures called Starscrapers (later called Cityblocks). These tower over the old Empire State Building (now a derelict building used by criminals to hide in). There are twisting roads which spiral up and around them miles into the air with no visible means of support, and fantastic future vehicles roaring along them (thanks to the imagination of Carlos Ezquerra). In fact so fast and numerous are these vehicles that MC-1 has its own version of Devil's Island: a prison for violent offenders marooned inside dozens of lanes of constantly moving computer-controlled traffic zipping past at 200 mph. Underneath is the Undercity – a region so polluted it was concreted over – home to mutants and criminals (long before *Futurama* did the same). Few SF cities of the future had shown such an incredible vision since *Metropolis*. Bear in mind this is years before *Blade Runner* would stun our minds with its future vision of Los Angeles.

The 22nd Century world of Dredd expands incredibly quickly in these first

two collections. After some standalone stories to establish Dredd's character, we quickly get the first big multi-part story, *The Robot Wars*. This provides the readers with their first sight of masses of Judges acting together to protect the city. It has a wonderfully camp villain in Call-Me-Kenneth, the droid who leads the robot revolution against the "fleshy ones." Later in the first volume we see Dredd on the moon, because he has been chosen to be Judge Marshall of the Luna-1 colony for six months. As well as showing us more of the 22nd Century, this gave the writers an excuse to introduce some amusing Western-style tales, including a showdown with a robot gunslinger. (Shades of *Westworld*, but even Yul Brynner's robo-gungslinger wouldn't want to face Judge Dredd!). In the First Lunar Olympics stories we get to see something of the other cities beyond what used to be America in this post-nuclear war future. These include the Sov Cities, complete with their own Judges. (This may seem odd to us now, but remember the stories were written during the Cold War when no-one imagined the Soviet Union would disintegrate).

Volume 2, although still very early (covering Progs 61 - 115) is, for me, where Dredd really starts to come into his own. The multi-part *Robot Wars* had been very well received and, although the standalone tales would always be popular, it is with the epic tales that Dredd really began to draw in a big readership. This second volume contains not one but two of these early epics: *The Cursed Earth* and *The Day the Law Died*. In the former we get our first real look at the radiation desert between the mega cities. The Cursed Earth, blasted and irradiated during the great atom wars, is home to criminals, mutants and even feral dinosaurs (resurrected in a *Jurassic Park* style for dino national parks, but free to roam after the wars).

Dredd has to cross thousands of miles of hostile terrain. He encounters mutant gangs by Mount Rushmore (which has a carving of then-president Jimmy Carter added to it affording a good visual gag when an attacking mutant in a hover vehicle is shot down by Dredd and crashes into those famous teeth). He also meets rabid Tyrannosaurs, corrupt mafia Judges running Las Vegas, southern slavers who brutalise aliens as slave labour, and even the last president of the United States. The latter was sentenced to 100 years in suspended animation in a vault in Fort Knox by the Judges for the crime of starting the great atom wars (at which point the Judges took over the government of the Mega Cities, the only remaining civilisation in America).

This is all undertaken on the pretext of delivering a vaccine for a terrible plague to Mega City 2 on the West Coast (air transport not being possible for rather flimsy reasons), but that is simply a device to set up a terrific series of adventures as Dredd travels the ruined America in his Land Raider (famously based on a then-contemporary Matchbox die-cast toy – yes, of course I had one!). His companions include his bike-man, Spikes Harvey Rotten, ‘the greatest punk of all time’, with his grenade earring, right out of the punk rock scene. It also affords a classic cover (reproduced in the collection) which epitomises Dredd’s iron constitution and utter determination as a Judge. Clad in the ragged remains of his uniform, Dredd struggles on his knees through the radiation desert towards the end of his mission. The speech bubble with the words:

“This Cursed Earth will not break me. I am the Law. I am Dredd... Judge Dredd.”

The Day the Law Died shamelessly mines the history of Classical Rome and the

more eccentric (well, stark raving mad to be honest) emperors such as Caligula and Nero. Deputy Chief Judge Cal uses his own version of the Praetorian Guard, the Special Judicial Squad (SJS), to secretly assassinate the Chief Judge and seize power (Chief Judges rarely die in their sleep in Dredd stories). Cal assumes dictatorial powers. Most of the Judges are conditioned to obey him through subliminal messages hidden in their daily crime briefing tapes (yes, *tapes* - this was the 70’s after all). Dredd is recovering in hospital from an attempted assassination and so avoids the brainwashing.

Along with some old and injured Judges who teach at the Academy of Law, Dredd leads a desperate resistance to Cal’s reign while Cal himself becomes increasingly unhinged. He punishes one Judge by making him carry out his duties in only his underpants, boots and helmet. He appoints his pet goldfish as Deputy Chief Judge (“Hail Deputy Chief Judge Fish!”). Yes it does sound crazy, but real life emperors have done far worse. When Dredd’s group gets too close Cal brings in huge crocodilian alien mercenaries, the Kleggs, to terrify the population and finish Dredd off. Fleeing to the Undercity, the resistance end up with the eccentric, hulking figure of Fergee, the self-styled King of the Big Smelly (as the polluted Ohio River is now called). He is still one of the most memorable characters in Dredd history. When Cal sentences the entire population to die (he starts alphabetically with Aaron A Aardvark who changed his name to be first in the phone book) Dredd needs every ally he can get hold of if he is to save the city.

While reprints of classic comics material are nothing new, there has been a recent – and welcome in my opinion – trend by various publishers to reproduce classic series with good packaging, in

their original chronological order and with respect for the source material and the fact that they represent important parts of comics history. Examples include Titan's *Classic Dan Dare* library and Fantagraphics excellent *Complete Peanuts* series. This does not mean that you should consider these volumes to be merely for those interested in comics history or looking for a little nostalgia (although I plead guilty on both counts) – while they do fulfil both those qualities they are also what they always were, inventive and hugely enjoyable comics. Older *2000AD* readers like myself will enjoy these but they are also a perfect introduction to the back history of Britain's top comics character for newer readers and look set to build into an excellent full Dredd library over time.

Judge Dredd: the Complete Case Files 01 – John Wagner – Rebellion – graphic novel

Judge Dredd: the Complete Case Files 02 – John Wagner and Pat Mills – Rebellion – graphic novel

A Long, Slow Dance

By Cheryl Morgan

When I read Steve Cash's debut novel, *The Meq*, I concluded that it was an interesting idea but that there were problems with the execution. The second volume in the series, *Time Dancers*, is now due out, and I'm sad to say that things have not got any better.

Let's begin by recapping the scenario. The Meq are a race of exceptionally long-lived beings. They are able to delay the onset of puberty until such time as they decide to have children, at which point their age normally again. Some of them have spent thousands of years being twelve years old. This presents, or at

least should present, significant challenges.

From Cash's point of view this allows him to play a little with history. It is clear that one of the things he is getting out of the books is the ability of have his child-like heroes play a small part in major events without anyone questioning why they are not known to history. Who notices kids, right? Therefore the new book, which takes us from WWI to WWII sees cameo appearances by characters such as Babe Ruth, Charles Lindbergh and Josephine Baker.

But from the reader's point of view there is an expectation that the issues raised by Meq life will be addressed in the books. It is one thing for an immortal character to go unnoticed for decades as a thirty-something adult. It is quite another for ordinary humans not to notice that certain kids stay twelve years old for decades. Cash makes cursory mention of the problem every so often, but it never seems to cause any real trouble for his characters.

Then there is this question of sex. One reason the Meq are happy to put off puberty is that they each have a "one true love" whom they will one day meet, but who may not be born for hundreds of years. That's fine until they have met. But Cash's viewpoint character, Zianno, has now met his beloved, Opari. She's a few thousand years old. That's a long time to wait for a perfect boyfriend, yet there seems to be no urgency to their relationship.

Indeed, one of my problems with the series is that nothing seems to have much urgency. The books are very flat. The characters are largely indistinguishable and the pace of the writing never seems to alter along with the pace of events. Obviously this is a matter of writing technique, and Cash may well improve with time, but I found

Time Dancers a real struggle to get through.

Then there is the issue I highlighted in my review of *The Meq*. For the most part the characters do no seem to act very much. Rather they respond to the actions of others as the author requires in order to move them around the plot. In particular the bad guy, the renegade Meq known as the Fleur-du-Mal, has an amazing ability to completely out-fox our heroes at every turn. Like some teenage Moriarty he always turns up at the worst possible moment and always escapes completely unscathed.

If all of that wasn't enough to put me in a bad mood, the book ends on an even worse cliff-hanger than part one of Scott Westerfeld's artificially publisher-truncated *Risen Empire*. I suppose that is intended to encourage us to read the next book. I'm not sure that it worked.

Time Dancers - Steve Cash - Del Rey - publisher's proof

A Place of Learning

FESTSCRIFT - "A volume of learned articles or essays by colleagues and admirers, serving as a tribute or memorial especially to a scholar"

Or in this case, one very learned man who, rather famously, is not an academic, and one very charming lady who is also a talented artist.

The book is called *Polder*. It is edited by Farah Mendlesohn with a glittering cast of contributors from all over the science fiction community. And it is a tribute to two people and one building: John and Judith Clute, and 221b Camden High Street, London.

Let's start with the man. John Clute is a critic of incredible erudition whose reading in the field is so vast it prompted the not-normally-shy-and-retiring Bruce Sterling to write in his contribution, "Upon witnessing John Clute's towering, God-almighty collection of sf reference works, I realized that I was a hick." In our own little community, Clute is a phenomenon, a force of nature. You simply cannot (or at least should not) attempt SF criticism without being aware of Clute.

Naturally asking a bunch of fellow critics to contribute to a Festschrift is a red rag to a bull. Several of them cannot resist the temptation to comment upon one or two of Clute's better known prognostications. These are entertainingly diverting for those who us who enjoy such hair-splitting, but perhaps not so for others. Suffice it to say that with time all forms of SF will die, or at least become moribund. But, hydra-like, each time one head dies two more interesting, and sometimes bizarrely different, heads will grow to take its place. The function of the critic is merely to identify which heads are busting with vivacity and which merely zomboid. That nostalgia for certain lost heads results in a feeling of THINNING amongst their adherents should not surprise any reader of Clute.

THINNING - the idea that a fantasy world is somehow becoming diminished and decayed, often as a result of the action of a DARK LORD.

(A definition cobbled together by me because I don't have a copy of *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* to hand.)

Rather more importantly, other contributors, in particular Gary K. Wolfe and Edward James, make note of the fact

that in many cases we are only able to have such debates because Clute has defined the terms for us. Were you perhaps wondering where the title of the book came from?

[Roz Kaveney] *"Are people going to know what the word means? I mean, Dutch land reclamation? Is this an accessible concept?"*

John looked at me with those narrowed eyes and suddenly more intensely domed temples which means he has made up his mind.

"They'll know," he said, "because I will define it for them."

POLDER - "An enclave of toughened reality, demarcated by boundaries from the surrounding world."

From *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*

Which brings us to the building. It is an apartment, currently residing above a sports shoe shop, but quite likely of a more permanent nature than any commercial enterprise it may share its Camden Town footprint with. It wears the same plain black colors as Clute himself. You come in off a street infested with multifarious examples of London's long and eccentric fashion history: punks, Goths, skinheads, Rastas. You name it; Camden High Street has a fashion store catering to it. From there you climb a narrow staircase lined with bicycles because there is nowhere else to keep them. You turn a corner past the (only) restroom, and suddenly you are in Book Heaven.

By now I realized that the house itself was bit like the Tardis, somehow dimensionally wrong, with more space inside than outside.

Sean McMullen

It isn't just that Clute has more books than anyone else I know (except perhaps Charles Brown with those famous library stacks), it is that he has more interesting books, more rare books, more important books, and they are all out on display in serried, ordered ranks.

(Later, of course, you discover that Clute has an entire cellar full of other books, ones he doesn't have room for in the house and which he doesn't need to refer to quite so often. Not to mention an entirely separate library in North America. You also discover that every single one of these books is catalogued with ferocious precision, and that Clute knows where each one of them is.)

Remember that scene at the beginning of *V for Vendetta* when Evey wakes up to find herself surrounded by piles of books? The Clute house is like that, only orders of magnitude more organized.

The fame of the building is not merely a result of the air of erudition it conveys, but also its role as a home from home for science fiction persons the world over. Whilst the number of guests it can hold is relatively small, the guest book is always busy. Every one of the contributors to *Polder* has, I believe, stayed at the house at one time or another. Many are regular visitors. One or two have written famous works while staying there. When you see me comment in *Cheryl's Mewsings* that I am staying Chez Clute, it is to this small haven, this polder, of sfnal reality to which I have come. And a haven it most certainly is, in more ways than one. Which brings us to Judith.

Judith doesn't feature in the book nearly as much as John. This is hardly surprising, because most of the contributors to the book are word people, not picture people. I'm certainly not competent to pronounce on Judith's art, except to say that I like it, especially

her use of color. But the 221b experience is very much a Judith experience. She is, after all, in charge of the guest book. And as John is almost always busy doing something (or away on a trip) it is mostly Judith memories you'll come away with: Judith heading out into Camden to get fresh bread and fruit for breakfast; Judith supplying a succession of inventive and tasty meals; Judith telling amusing tales of her experiences as a guide on London Walks tours. The house just wouldn't be what it is without Judith.

There is, of course, one member of the Clute family we haven't touched upon, though at least one contributor did remember to mention him. As might be expected from a Clute pet, Mr. Pepys is one very smart cat. He also has a certain reputation for viciousness when offended. So please, don't tell him he hasn't been included in the book. I'd hate for anything bad to happen to Farah.

Finally, back to the book, because beyond the LitCrit stuff I haven't said much about the content. It is very varied. Some authors such as Geoff Ryman, M. John Harrison and Liz Hand have contributed extracts of their books that are set in Camden. Others have written stories. Brian Aldiss even has characters called John and Judith Clute, and one called Farah Mendlesohn who has unaccountably dyed her hair bright gold. Somehow I can't see Farah defecting to the Blonde Side. William Gibson wrote a poem. Others just reminisce.

This was the coolest thing about John: he treated me as if I were as smart as he is. And so I would need to be, if I were going to survive the conversation without breaking anything. And he treated me (he treated anyone he was talking with) as if my opinion had weight and merit, or rather, he was capable of picking out bits that had weight

and merit from the gubbins and detritus of burble, and pointing them out to me. And that was magic.

Neil Gaiman

As the book shows, there are very many reasons for remembering a visit to the Clutes, but Neil perhaps comes closest to my own experience. My father always used to tell me that a day in which I hadn't learned anything new was a day wasted. One thing I can be sure about when Chez Clute is that I will not waste a day in that way.

Of course there is also the fact that John and Judith Clute are two of the nicest people I know. Judging from *Polder*, many other people feel the same.

Polder - Farah Mendlesohn (ed.) - Old Earth Books - hardcover

Model J. Ford

By Cheryl Morgan

Often a collection provides a useful way to get a good idea of the work of a new author. Recent books such as *In the Palace of Repose* by Holly Phillips, *In the Forest of Forgetting* by Theodora Goss and, of course, *20th Century Ghosts* by Joe Hill all fulfilled this requirement. *The Empire of Ice Cream* by Jeffrey Ford is another matter entirely. To start with I have already read and reviewed many of the stories it contained. And that, of course, means I am very familiar with Ford's writing. So why did I want a copy? Well firstly for the fabulous John Picacio cover. But mainly because I wanted all of those wonderful stories in one convenient volume where I could find them and come back to them easily.

This, you will remember, is from Cheryl, who really doesn't like short fiction all that much. Not only do I want to own a collection of Jeffrey Ford stories, I want to be able to read them again and again (well, if only I had the time).

Just to rub the point in, the book opens with "The Annals of Eelin-Ok" from *The Faery Reel*, which was my favorite piece of short fiction from last year. I was stunned that it didn't get onto the Hugo ballot, but it did win the Fountain Award. Then there is the title story, "The Empire of Ice Cream", which won the Nebula for novelette in 2004 and was short listed for Hugo, World Fantasy and Sturgeon Awards. Moving back into 2003 we have "The Weight of Words" from Jeff Vandermeer's *Leviathan* #3 anthology, which was a World Fantasy nominee. And oops I just missed that "The Trentino Kid" was an International Horror Guild nominee for short story in 2004. Two other stories from the collection, "The Beautiful Gelreesh" and "A Night in the Tropics" were mentioned in the Locus Poll but did not get any other awards.

The dead kid came up spluttering, silently coughing water out of his mouth and nose. His eyes brimmed with terror.

"What the hell are you?" I yelled.

His arms, his fingers, reached for me more urgently.

From "The Trentino Kid"

That, ladies and gentlemen, is one heck of a collection already. And if you are not yet convinced, there are other stories. I particularly liked "Jupiter's Skull", a very creepy tale about a small town that may not exist and a shop called Thanatos whose owners tend to commit suicide. Also very good was "Boatman's Holiday", in which Charon the

Ferryman is given a day off from his work in Hell and decides to find out whether it is true, as some souls have told him, that there is a way out.

Three steps forward and the prescription would be filled. A short flight of freedom, a moment of calm for the tortured soul, and then endless rest on the rocks below surrounded by the rib cages and skulls of fellow travelers once pursued by grief and now cured.

From "The Beautiful Gelreesh"

What concerns me about all this is that I know Jeffrey Ford quite well. With other writers you might wonder where they get their ideas from, but with Jeff you wonder how he comes up with all this weird and creepy stuff and is still so sane. I mean, this is Jeff, right? I have sat in bars and drank beer with him. Maybe, like Jeff VanderMeer has his Evil Monkey to write rude things in his blog, Jeffrey Ford has an Inner Demon who writes his stories while he has a beer with his mates. But however he does it, I am glad that it works. You won't find a much better collection of short stories than this anywhere.

The Empire of Ice Cream - Jeffrey Ford - Golden Gryphon - hardcover

Collected Collections

By Cheryl Morgan

The nice people at PS Publishing are making available *Impossible Stories*, a large collection of tales by Zoran Živković. Many of the stories appeared in *Interzone*, mainly through 2000 and 2001, so they will be familiar to a number of UK readers. On the other

hand the book also includes the World Fantasy Award winning story cycle, "The Library", which was previously only available in Jeff VanderMeer's *Leviathan #3* anthology.

I mentioned the term "story cycle" above, and that deserves a little explanation as it is something that is rarely done but which Živković has very much made his own. Rather than produce just one story from an idea, he produces several. It is almost as if he is setting himself an exercise. He comes up with an idea for a story, then sees how many different ways he can express it. Sometimes the connection is fairly tenuous – for example a group of stories all featuring a mysterious mist. Other cycles are much more involved – suppose that The Devil (or at least someone who might be The Devil), offers people the ability to travel in time; how might this be a torment as well as a boon? This reminds me of Samuel Delany's book, *On Writing*, in which he takes a single scene and re-writes it in several different ways. But for Živković, rather than changing the style, he's changing the plot while using the same basic ideas.

Actually, if I were to predict that something bad was going to happen, I'm certain almost no one would believe me. This seems to be part of human nature. If you tell people something that suits them, they all accept it eagerly, regardless of how implausible or even impossible it might appear. Sometimes it seems the more incredible the favorable prophecy, the easier it is for them to accept. They don't quibble. And of course, if you tell them something that doesn't suit them, they immediately become doubtful and suspicious. They launch into a debate on reliability, and then on the meaning of divination, endeavoring to show it's all pure quackery that only the gullible would swallow. If

that's true, then why on earth did they come to see me?

From "Line on the Palm"

Mention of style brings me to something that may be an issue for some readers with such a large collection of Živković stories. Firstly his characters tend to have a lot of common. They are nearly all loners, and they all seem to be stuck somewhere in the early half of the 20th Century because they have an obsession with proper social behavior. Indeed, the horror that the characters suffer in the stories has as much to do with their being put in positions they find socially uncomfortable rather than any fantastical perturbation of the normal state of the world.

In addition the stories tend to all be told in the same Živković voice. I found a few stories where the narrator turned out to be female but, having received no clues early on, I had assumed that she was male.

"Don't you get it?" she asked. "There is only one other possibility."

He stared fixedly at her back, over which the thin nightgown was now wrinkling like ripples on the surface of the water. "I don't get it. What possibility?"

"This is not reality. This is also one of his stories."

From "The Artist"

Having said that, the book is well worth reading for the ingenuity of Živković's stories. He is extraordinarily clever and has a particular talent for devising awkward moral dilemmas for his characters. His writing is also, as Paul Di Filippo found out when trying to write an introduction, quite unlike that of

anyone else. The fact that all this is achieved in relative isolation in Serbia, and is rendered into perfect English by the very talented Alice Copple Tošić makes the whole achievement even more remarkable.

Impossible Stories - Zoran Živković - PS Publishing - publisher's proof

Book on the Wall

By Cheryl Morgan

As you may have guessed, I'm rather fond of books. I'm not by any means a collector, but I try to treat my books well. I don't write in them, I don't dog-ear them, and even when I use Post-Its to mark passages I want to refer back to in a review I make sure I take them out once it is written. Here, however, I have a book that I'm very tempted to cut up. Why, because it is full of gorgeous John Picacio art and I'd love to be able to have some of it on my walls.

Thankfully I do have a small amount of self-restraint. In any case, some of my favorite Picacio works, in particular the cover for *The Empire of Ice Cream*, are warp-arounds and cover two pages of the book so they'd be hard to extract.

Enough frothing, however. Regular readers will know how much I like Picacio's work. I was delighted to see him win a World Fantasy Award last year, and I'm even more delighted to see him on the Hugo ballot. He is very, very good. But what about the book: *Cover Story: The Art of John Picacio*.

You might wonder about an art book coming from a small press, but the folks at Monkey Brain have done a fabulous job here. This is no cheap trade paperback, it is a big, solid, beautifully produced hardcover. It is the sort of

book you should be proud to have on your coffee table, and it very much deserved the exquisite care that Picacio took in packaging it up to send it to me.

The text content of art books is obviously of less interest than the pictures, but I did learn a fair amount about Picacio. I had no idea, for example, that he got his first big break by being asked to provide a cover and illustrations for the 30th anniversary edition of Michael Moorcock's *Behold the Man*. He also provided the cover for the 35th anniversary edition of Harlan Ellison's *Dangerous Visions*, a job he got simply by handing Ellison a sample of his work at a convention. Harlan isn't easily impressed, but on the basis of some chutzpah and one poster he decided that Picacio was someone he wanted to work with.

Really, of course, you don't want a John Picacio art book; you want John Picacio prints, or better still originals. But we can't all afford that, and we certainly can't afford quite so many wonderful pictures as this book contains. Just buy it, OK?

Cover Story: The Art of John Picacio - John Picacio - Money Brain - hardcover

Fear of the Future

By Cheryl Morgan

There are basically two ways to approach an academic study: one is to look at the material and come to conclusions based on what you find; the other is to start out with a theory and look for material that confirms it. *Technophobia!* by Daniel Dinello is a classic example of the latter. The thesis of the book is very simple. Dinello believes that science fiction is inherently technophobic, and that its purpose is to

warn us about the evils of science and technology.

OK folks, jaws up off the floor please. I'm being serious here. That is what the book is about. The story goes a little like this. Dinello opens up by stating his opposition to George W. Bush and the military-industrial complex, not to mention everything DARPA. He then goes on to talk about technoevangelists such as Ray Kurzweil. Unlike Joel Garreau in *Radical Evolution*, he appears to regard them as dangerous lunatics who Must Be Stopped. The rest of the book is devoted to finding examples from science fiction of just how awful the future will be if Kurzweil and his crazy friends are allowed to have their way.

If this sounds a little froth at the mouth, I should point out that Dinello defines his title in a fairly restrained way:

The book's title, Technophobia, is meant to suggest an aversion to, dislike of, or suspicion of technology rather than an irrational, illogical or neurotic fear.

He also admits:

Of course, not all science fiction is technophobic, and not all scientists serve military-industrial interests – just most.

On the whole book is clearly and cogently argued. A solid case is made. But that doesn't stop Dinello from concluding:

In its devotion to technophobia, science fiction paints a repulsive picture of a future world where technology runs out of control and dominates all aspects of human behavior. Technology's inherent structure requires

suppression of human spontaneity and obedience to its requirements of order and efficiency. This extends the social controls initiated by the cybernetic ideological system. Asimov's laws of robotic obedience have been reversed into technology's laws for human submission.

How, one might ask, can anyone come to such a bizarre conclusion? I know an awful lot of science fiction authors, and most of them are technophiles of one shade or another. Most fans I have talked to about Dinello's ideas have reacted with astonishment and/or laughter. How can Dinello have misunderstood SF so badly? I read the whole book just to find out.

One of ways in which you can come to this conclusion is, of course, to concentrate mainly on movies. The majority of the material in Dinello's book is based on media SF rather than on the written word. For example, he very much approves of Michael Crichton (even though Crichton is a big favorite at the White House because of his support for the denial of global warming).

The inhumanity of scientists, the dangers of technological addiction, and the unpredictable human-violating consequences of man-machine symbiosis are central to this story [Terminal Man] and much of Crichton's work...

What Dinello doesn't seem to have quite grasped is that there is a major difference in dramatic structure between movies and books. The majority of movies are simple adventure stories with good guys and bad guys. In a science fiction movie it is pretty much inevitable that the bad guys will be using futuristic technology in some spectacular

way. Therefore almost all science fiction movies feature “bad” technology.

Perhaps more to the point, there simply isn’t time in a movie to develop a complex philosophical argument. Generally there is only time for the hero to confront the bad guys and blow them up. A novel, on the other hand, can address issues in considerably more depth, and is therefore more likely to be balanced and considered in its approach to the technological “menace”. Dinello doesn’t seem to appreciate this at all. Indeed, discussing *Blade Runner* he notes:

...the movie strengthens Dick’s vision of a technology that dwarfs and controls humans.

As if Ridley Scott were somehow correcting a failing in Dick’s original novel.

Having said that, Dinello has clearly read widely in addition to his watching activities. Many well known SF novels are referenced in the book. Almost all of them are held up as examples of SF’s technophobic attitudes in some way or another. There is, however, one SF writer whose attitudes are so out of tune with those of Dinello that his anomalous nature cannot be ignored. He is, of course, the Great Satan of Science himself, Isaac Asimov.

Rather than try to recruit Asimov to his cause (clearly a hopeless task) Dinello sets out to mock him instead. He cites many examples of SF that question the viability of the Laws of Robotics as evidence that Asimov was fatally flawed in his belief that robots can be tamed (or perhaps as evidence that he was a pawn of the military-industrial complex). References to the idea that robots might be persuaded to follow laws, or that they might choose to be friendly to humans,

are generally described as “fantasy”, whereas the idea that the first thing that robots will try to do on attaining sentience is wipe out all of mankind is treated as being so blindly obvious that it doesn’t need justification.

Naturally Ken MacLeod’s *The Cassini Division* is held up as an important text. Ellen May Ngwethu’s rants about the evils of the Fast Folk are quoted at length. No mention is made of Jay-Dub, or indeed of any of MacLeod’s other work, for example his theory in *The Sky Road* that environmentalists will come to embrace nuclear power as the only viable solution to global warming.

Elsewhere Dinello is a little more circumspect about who he recruits to his cause. For example, he makes much of the perceived awfulness of the worlds described in books such as *Snow Crash* and *The Diamond Age*, but wisely stops short of accusing Neal Stephenson of being a technophobe. In other places he is really quite cunning in how he recruits people to his cause. One of the last people I would expect him to latch onto would be Donna Haraway. Someone who promotes cyborgization as a solution to sexual discrimination is a technophobe? Well, not quite, but Dinello cleverly notes that Haraway’s ideas were heavily inspired by the fiction of Marge Piercy, and Piercy, well, go and read *He, She and It*. See, Haraway is a technophobe after all.

There are areas where Dinello doesn’t seem to have understood the argument that an SF novel is making, or perhaps has willfully misunderstood it. Here’s an example from his discussion of uploaded minds, which centers around Greg Egan’s *Permutation City* (yes, Egan is a technophobe too).

If a Copy is not the same person, then the techno-prophets’ vision of immortality

through duplication and download is a meaningless religious fantasy and a mere propaganda tool.

This is such an egregious simplification of a very complex argument played out through many science fiction novels that I began to wonder about Dinello's honesty. If nothing else the idea that copies are not the same person as the original is central to many novels such as David Brin's *Kiln People*, and is used as an argument for the *humanization* of the technology.

Another book that Dinello uses extensively as an example of science fiction's technophobia is Rudy Rucker's *Software*. I happened to attend a reading by Rucker shortly before writing this review so I asked him for his opinion. Having read the couple of pages devoted to his book Rucker agreed that the description of the plot was entirely fair, and yet a book he had thought was a bit of fun (eating brains and all) was being held up as a dire warning about the world to come.

John Shirley, who was at the same reading, said that he viewed SF more as a modeling tool. Science fiction writers use their books to think about how the world may develop. The argument is often of the form of, "things could go this way, or that way, depending on choices we make." I suspect that many of his fellow SF writers would agree with that.

Dinello, in contrast, doesn't read the books like that. His fear of technological change is so intense that he sees any description of a future world different from our own as a terrible prediction of what will happen rather than as the more neutral thought experiment that was intended. In the end I came to the conclusion that *Technophobia!* was more an expression of its author's own fears

than an objective study of the field. However, as I have explained many times before, once a book leaves an author's PC and finds its own way on the bookshelves of the world, the author loses all control over how it is interpreted. If Dinello chooses to read most SF as technophobic well, that's his right. But he should also expect to be regarded as mildly crazy by authors and readers of SF alike.

Technophobia! - Daniel Dinello - University of Texas Press - trade paperback

Meaning and Mr. Wolfe

By Cheryl Morgan

When I reviewed Robert Borski's *Solar Labyrinth* I noted that there was a lot more analysis for the vast New/Long/Short Sun series needing doing, and that you should buy the book to encourage Borski to finish the job. Obviously you did, because he has come out with a new volume, *The Long and the Short of It*. Maybe I have some influence after all.

The new book, however, is not quite what I was expecting. Rather than provide in depth coverage of the Long Sun and Short Sun books, it begins with a look at some of Gene Wolfe's other fiction. There are, for example, chapters on *The Fifth Head of Cerberus* and *Peace*. These books are just as devious as the Sun series, and thoroughly deserving of a little scholarly illumination. In addition there are chapters on some of Wolfe's short fiction. This is inevitably somewhat less interesting because Wolfe has rather less room in a short story to set up really intriguing puzzles. Nevertheless these chapters do provide an interesting insight into the convoluted workings of

the Wolfe mind. And boy do we need it at times.

...what a tangled genealogical skein it is when your great-grandfather's a robot, your grandfather has been killed by your father, you are the son of a clone who addresses you by number, not name, and you have no only a possible lost sister, but also multiple triplet brothers who've been sold off as slaves...

There is a chapter that deals with werewolf themes in Wolfe's fiction that speculates that Latro is in fact a werewolf. That's about as much analysis of the Soldier books as we get, but maybe Borski is waiting for Wolfe to finish the series before embarking on a deconstruction. There is no material on *The Wizard Knight*, but that is understandable because it is so new. There is one chapter that, quite frankly, looked like filler. And then, at last, we get 35 pages on *The Book of the Short Sun*.

Interestingly Borski elects not to devote much time to *The Book of the Long Sun* on the grounds that it is a fairly simple and straightforward series. Certainly it is more straightforward than both its predecessor and its sequel, but I think the general reading public could still do with a study guide. As for the *Short Sun*, he's right; Wolfe doesn't get much more devious. Hardly anyone is quite what they seem. To start with there are the vampiric inhumis, whom we know can impersonate humans. Then there is the way that Horn's mind gets uploaded into Silk's body after his death on Green. But this, Borski speculates, is only scratching the surface of what is going on.

The key issue here is that Typhon, the dictator from Urth who launched the generation ship, *Whorl*, must have had some plan in mind. Wolfe has stated

publicly that the *Short Sun* system was Typhon's intended destination all along. But whilst on board *The Whorl* Typhon/Pas and his family have all be masquerading as gods while actually residing as uploaded intelligences in the ship's central computer system, Mainframe. We know that the "gods" have the ability to piggyback themselves onto the minds of living beings. And, as Scylla so charmingly put it, Typhon would never have set out on the expedition if he hadn't arranged for some means of lording it over the colony world when they arrived.

Borski therefore sets out to investigate two major questions: why did Typhon head for that particular solar system, and what did he and his family get up to once *The Whorl* arrived? The answers he comes up with suggest that almost no major character in the *Short Sun* books is quite who they seem.

I've said before that I think Borski has a tendency to take his Wolfe-tracking paranoia too seriously at times, and ends up with ideas that are rather too bizarre even for Wolfe to have come up with. On the other hand, even if he is wrong his speculation still makes fascinating reading. If nothing else, reading Borski's books will help you understand why people say that Gene Wolfe is one of the greatest (if not *The Greatest*) writer working in English today.

And just for the record, no, I'm not convinced that Typhon is a Neighbor. I'm happy with the argument that he's an alien. But if he was a Neighbor surely he would have known about the inhumis, and Wolfe has said he did not. I suspect that there is something else involved. But of course I haven't got a clue what it might be.

The Long and the Short of It - Robert Borski - iUniverse - trade paperback

A Reader's Guide to Australians

By Cheryl Morgan

SF reference books come in all shapes and sizes. *Australian Speculative Fiction: A Genre Overview*, by Donna Maree Hanson, is about trade paperback size but in landscape format. This makes it look more like a coffee table book than a work of reference, but while it may not have the solid authority of a Clute encyclopedia I very much like it.

Here are two important features. First it tries hard to be inclusive. Writers such as Jack Dann, Anna Tambour and Scott Westerfeld who were born outside of Australia but now live there are included. So are the likes of Tom Arden, Jay Caselberg and Glenda Larke, who have left Australia for parts foreign. In addition it makes no attempt to pass judgment on the worth of authors by devoting more space to some than others. There's a basic divide that if you have had a book published you get a whole page, and if you have only published short fiction you get a half page, but that is as far as it goes. Judging worth requires the deft touch and vast knowledge of a Clute, and other people should not attempt it.

The largest section in the book is devoted to authors who have had at least one book published. As I said, they get a page to themselves. A book cover and a photo are used for illustration – well, except for Greg Egan, who was uploaded into silicon a few years ago and is no longer comfortable with images of his former meat-body being used. There is some biographical and bibliographic detail, and occasionally a few thoughts by the subject. Hanson sent each author a questionnaire, and some

responded with interesting opinions. Quite a few touch on the perennial, "What does it mean to be an **Australian** writer?" question, and as I expected their answers are very different.

One limit on the book is that it concentrates solely on living authors. There is no entry, for example, for George Turner, despite his superb output and importance in the field. I have no objection to this. You have to draw the line somewhere, and I'm happy that Hanson chose to include young, up-and-coming writers who can benefit from the exposure rather than dead people who can't.

I discovered a number of interesting things. For example, there are more Australian SpecFic writers that I am not familiar with than that I do know. This is bad, considering the origins of *Emerald City*. In addition I now know that I really must get around to reading my copy of *The Stone Ship* by Peter Raftos, and I must get hold of some books by Alison Venugoban. Much to my surprise I discovered that Edward James, far from having taken up a teaching post in Dublin, is actually living in South Australia under the name of Fletcher Anthony (or so I conclude from the photograph).

There follows a short section on illustrators – there are not nearly as many of them. On the other hand, Nick Stathopoulos and Sean Tan are two of my favorite artists, and I now know that I want to buy a print of "Music city" by Greg Bridges
<<http://www.gregbridges.com/images/Home-mc.jpg>>.

Section three is on magazines and anthologies. Again there is far more material than I had expected. Finally there is a section on up and coming writers: the people who have published short fiction but have no books (yet).

All in all, this is a very useful guide to what is going on in the Australian SpecFic scene. Obviously I can't comment on its accuracy, but I haven't heard of any complaints and in any case simply listing many of those writers was news to me. It therefore seems a shame that it has been published by an Australian small press and will be difficult to find if you are not in Australia.

Australian Speculative Fiction: A Genre Overview - Donna Maree Hanson - Australian Speculative Fiction - landscape paperback

Out of Synch

By Cheryl Morgan

It is another quiet month for re-issues of books I have already reviewed, but the one book that I do have to list is one that I hope has been eagerly awaited by American readers. Any day now the Del Rey edition of Hal Duncan's *Vellum* will be in the shops. If you have read Hal's article in this issue you'll have a good idea of what to expect.

Vellum - Hal Duncan - Del Rey - trade paperback

Miscellany

By Cheryl Morgan

Philip K. Dick Award

The winner of this year's Philip K. Dick Award is *War Surf* by M.M. Buckner. There was a special citation for *Natural History* by Justina Robson. Congratulations to both. As usual it was a very strong field.

BSFA Awards

The BSFA Awards were presented, as usual, at Eastercon. Our commiserations to John Jarrold who went down with the convention flu on the Saturday and was too ill to host the ceremony. Here's hoping he is feeling better now. The winners were:

Novel: Geoff Ryman for *Air*.

Short Fiction: Kelly Link for "Magic for Beginners".

Artwork: Pawel Lewandowski for the cover of *Interzone* #200.

Non-Fiction: Gary K. Wolfe for *Soundings*.

The Non-Fiction award was judged this year rather than voted upon by Eastercon and BSFA members. The judges, Tiptree-like, also issued a short list: "Speculative Poetry: A Symposium", Mike Allen, Alan DeNiro and Theodora Goss, ed. Matthew Cheney (*Strange Horizons*, editor in chief Susan Marie Groppi); "Science Fiction, Parable, and Parabolas", Brian Attebery (*Foundation* #95, Farah Mendlesohn (ed.); SF Foundation); "Blank Pages: Islands and Identity in the Fiction of Christopher Priest", Paul Kincaid (*Christopher Priest: The Interaction*, Andrew M Butler (ed.); SF Foundation); "A Young Man's Journey to Ladbroke Grove: M John Harrison and the Evolution of the New Wave in Britain", Rob Latham (*Parietal Games: Critical Writings by and on M John Harrison*, Mark Bould & Michelle Reid (eds.); SF Foundation); *The History of Science Fiction*, Adam Roberts, (Palgrave); "Perverting Science Fiction: Thinking the Alien Within the Genre", by Chris West (*Foundation* #94, Farah Mendlesohn (ed.); SF Foundation).

Eastercon also presents two other awards:

The Doc Weir Award (for services to fandom) - Steve Lawson;

The Richard Evans Award (for unjustly ignored writers) - Pat Cadigan.

Ditmars

Also presented over Easter were the Ditmar's, Australia's fan-voted awards. The winners in the main professional categories are:

Best Novel: *Geodesica: Ascent*, Sean Williams & Shane Dix.

Best Novella or Novelette: "The Grinding House", Kaaron Warren.

Best Short Story: "Fresh Young Widow", Kaaron Warren.

Best Collected Work: *Daikaiju! Giant Monster Tales*, Robert Hood & Robin Pen (ed.).

Best Professional Artwork: Cover to *Australian Speculative Fiction: A Genre Overview*, Nick Stathopoulos (which you can see on this web version of this issue).

William Atheling Jr. Award (for criticism): "Divided Kingdom: King Kong vs Godzilla", Robert Hood.

Eurocon Awards

Also taking place over Easter was this year's Eurocon, held in Kiev. Awards were presented, of which here are a few:

Best Author: H.L.Oldie (Ukraine).

Best Translator: Asta Morkuniene aka Anita Kapociute (Lithuania).

Best Magazine: *Mir Fantastiki* (Russia).

Best Publisher: Hekate (Latvia).

European Grand Master: Harry Harrison (Ireland); Arkady and Boris Strugatsky (Russia).

SF in SF

It was another good evening in San Francisco for the April SF in SF meeting. I think the crowd was a little smaller than for the opening event, but there were enough people to suggest that the readings will get a regular audience. The Locus folks didn't turn up, but then the next issue went to press that day so they were probably slaving over hot keyboards all evening.

John Shirley read from a new novel he is writing which he claims will "take back Judgment Day" from the religious right. Interesting idea, and what he read worked well. Here's hoping he manages to produce something good rather than just a revenge fantasy like some of Sheri Tepper's recent books have been.

Rudy Rucker read an absolutely hilarious story about a plan to convert Mars into a giant nanite Dyson sphere computer, an idea which he freely admits (and you may have guessed) was inspired by reading *Accelerando*. The story, "Chu and the Nants", will appear in the June *Asimov's* and will form the first chapter of a forthcoming novel, *Postsingular*. If you can't wait for that Rudy, uber-geek that he is, recorded his reading and has posted it as a podcast on his blog <<http://www.rudyrucker.com/blog/>>.

There followed the usual discussion session in which a certain amount of scorn was poured on the idea of Mundane SF, I shamelessly gathered material for the *Technophobia!* book review, and John and Rudy talked about how great it was to be part of the Cyberpunk movement.

Editorial Matters

By Cheryl Morgan

The first thing that I have to do this issue is apologize for all of the typos, spelling mistakes and grammatical errors. Kevin has been very busy at work this week and Anne has had Penguicon to prepare for. Both of them are away this weekend. So the proof reading has been done by me.

You may be wondering why I didn't just give it another week and publish on the 30th, but we have had the usual 4-week gap and if I waited another week I'd end up having to publish #129 while I was as Wiscon. That doesn't make sense, so this issue goes out on the 23rd and #129 will be done before Wiscon.

I could have done with the extra week for other reasons. I'm totally overwhelmed with books right now. Somehow I managed to review 13 books this month, which is about twice as many as I'm comfortable with, but 4 fewer than I really needed to get through. I think there's only one that I missed that I had firmly promised a review to. Profuse apologies to Sharyn November and all involved with *Firebirds Rising*.

May is going to be pretty frantic too. We have the World Horror Convention coming up (guests include Kim Newman and Peter Straub). What with a John Picacio art show at Borderlands Books, SF in SF, and a probably Speculative Literature Foundation fund raiser, I'm likely to be in The City for the best part of a week.

I'm also very busy at Real Work. Consultancy is like that. Sometimes you get an extended famine (like most of 2005), and sometimes you get more work that you can cope with. Right now I feel like I'm trying to hold down two full time jobs.

This does mean that I am very pleased to welcome some more guest reviewers. Victoria and Nic will, I hope, become regular contributors, while Pádraig and Joe may only drop in when they have something to review that fits their areas of expertise. Pádraig, of course, adds another country to our staff list. And Joe will probably claim that Scotland is a separate country too. Delighted to have you all on board, folks.

Now if only I could find someone to review US magazines, anthologies, YA books...

For next issue I have novels lined up from R. Scott Bakker, Storm Constantine, Greg Keyes, Naomi Novik and Andrew C. Murphy. I'm expecting Chris Roberson to have copies Monkey Brain's new Kim Newman anthology, *The Man from the Diogenes Club*, at World Horror. In the non-fiction department I have NESFA Press's Ken MacLeod collection and a book of reviews by Tom Disch. Karina has been to see the movie, *Tristan & Isolde*; Juliet has a Kelley Armstrong novel; and Victoria is looking at David Marusek's *Counting Heads*. Mario is reading a collection by Gary Kilworth. There may well be some reporting from World Horror, and we are expecting the results of the Nebulas and Arthur C. Clarke Award. Nothing like being busy.

Best wishes,

Cheryl

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