

EMERALD CITY #129

Issue 129

May 2006

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

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The Write Fantastic: What's the Big Idea?

By Juliet E. McKenna

Well, according to the front of our

leaflet, what we refer to as our “mission statement”, mostly managing to keep a straight face when we do so, goes like this:

The Write Fantastic is an exciting initiative by professional authors aiming to introduce fantasy fiction to readers who have yet to experience the genre. Its mission is also to show those who have stopped reading it, for whatever reason, the breadth and depth which exists today in fantasy writing.

Which we’re very happy with, as far as a paragraph on the front of a leaflet goes. Obviously, there’s a lot more to say.

The project has its roots in a convention. Not an SF&F event, but the annual St Hilda’s Crime and Mystery Conference, held in August 2004. I was talking to Margaret Murphy about the Murder Squad <

<http://www.murdersquad.co.uk/>>.

This is a group of crime writers who have banded together to speak to libraries, literary festivals, reading groups and just about anyone else who’s interested. The objective is to promote crime fiction as a genre and yes, obviously, to raise the profile of their own work as an incidental bonus. Over the last five years, the Murder Squad have been increasingly successful, as libraries, literary festivals etc. have proved far more amenable to a joint approach focusing on wider genre and creative writing themes than to individual mid-list writers pitching what can be misinterpreted as a desperate plea to flog their books. Indeed, the Murder Squad’s success has led to other crime and mystery writers banding together in similar groups, such as the Unusual Suspects.

Because there’s a major issue to be faced here, at least in the UK. The last ten years have seen dramatic changes in the

book trade. The same books are promoted, with the same discounts, in every store. Bestsellers thrive, while writers seen as “mid-list”, and especially those in genre fiction, suffer. Browsing used to be the route by which such authors picked up new readers. This has simply died, since people popping into a bookshop “for something to read” get no further than the volume discount deals, or the books promoted on TV through the Richard and Judi Book Club (the UK’s answer to Oprah). Authors face a choice between grousing into their beer or looking for alternate ways to contact potential readers to bring them in past the discount tables and the bestseller charts.

This was all very interesting, but what really got my attention was Margaret mentioning that Chaz Brenchley was a Squaddie. As discerning readers will know, Chaz is also a fantasy author and, as it happens, one of my pals. So, at the 2004 FantasyCon, Chaz and I mused in the bar on the possibility of doing something similar in collaboration with other fantasy authors. Stan Nicholls, Ariel (of *The Alien Online* website) and Anne Gay were asked for their opinions. As authors and/or ex-booksellers, everyone was well aware of the increasingly hostile retail climate. We agreed that action is always better than inaction, and it was obvious that more people were needed. It was decided, with some regret, that such a group needed a clear focus on fantasy rather than including, say, horror or hard SF writers. Also, since we’d be working closely together, we needed to all get on well on a personal level. Fortunately, the SF&F convention circuit has given us all opportunities to meet and sit on panels with a range of other authors. James Barclay, Sarah Ash, Jessica Rydill and Mark Chadbourn were contacted accordingly. All were enthusiastic about the idea.

Mark Chadbourn made a particularly good point in those early discussions, based on his experiences in the music industry. HMV (a major UK record store chain who also happen to own Waterstone's, Britain's largest book chain) are often blamed for polarizing that market into one dominated by long-established acts, and by heavily-promoted new bands created by marketing men rather than musicians. How is new talent supposed to get that big break? But the hopeful don't bin their guitars and give up. They get out on the road and build a reputation by setting up their own gigs. If writers fear that HMV, as owners of Waterstone's, are leading the book trade down the same ruinous path, let's take hope from those musicians who are finding ways around it.

One of the first things we agreed is that we're not setting ourselves up as some exclusive cabal. Depending on where and when we organize gigs, we're happy to include other local writers, and also to work as part of larger initiatives, such as the Heffer's autumn SF&F event in Cambridge. There is plenty of scope for events to interest those fantasy readers who don't feel inclined to go to conventions. Those are people we're aiming to reach, and others besides. Dedicated SF&F fans are generally keen to read new writers, but those who don't read the genre are often reluctant to try it. Perhaps they tried it long ago, didn't like what was on offer, or grew out of it. Teenage experiences with Asimov or with *The Lord of the Rings* can confer life-long inoculation. But genre literature has broadened, deepened and matured incredibly in recent years. The challenge is letting readers know.

We launched The Write Fantastic <<http://www.thewritefantastic.com/>> with a very successful London evening event in association with the British

Fantasy Society in May 2005. A couple of weeks later, we went to Birmingham, to speak to the Birmingham SF Group and also to appear at the Tolkien Weekend at Sarehole Mill. Stan Nicholls made those contacts and also arranged book-signings at Waterstone's and the late-lamented Andromeda Bookshop. In July Chaz Brenchley organized a couple of days in Newcastle, where we talked to the Literary & Philosophical Society as part of their Tall Ships Week, on whether or not sea stories and fantasy are mutually incompatible. On that same trip, we spoke to Bedlington Library and did an evening event with Ottakar's in Sunderland. I ran a creative writing course for the Farringdon Arts Festival later in July. Since I was free to come up to Birmingham early on the first day of FantasyCon 2005 in September, Stan organized a two-handed gig for us at Hall Green Library. This is how we work; everyone uses their own contacts to benefit the group as a whole, and we aim to maximize the effect of every visit with as many related activities as we can. We supply the libraries and bookshops we visit with leaflets, posters and bookmarks, and publicize the events in genre circles. Again, all these tasks are shared among the group, to spread the load.

How are we funding this? Chaz Brenchley's expertise was invaluable here, as he took on the challenge of making an application to the Arts Council England. We drew up a plan for our first six months, set out a budget and made our case in detail. To our delight, they approved us. Our success in getting start-up funding has enabled us to cover travel and accommodation expenses, to print a full-color brochure and to successively mail-shot targeted lists of literary festivals and libraries. We're producing a booklet with short samples of all our work for distribution at gigs. Once that initial funding is exhausted,

we aim to make our on-going program self-financing. Libraries do have reader development funds available, and organizations such as The Society of Authors are making literary festivals increasingly aware of the need to pay authors' expenses.

How are we doing? So far, it's been great fun and we've been very well received. We've had a lot of interest from libraries and a few literary festivals. For the first half of 2006 we've organized events in St Helens, Leicester, Derby, Lincoln and Birmingham and more will follow in Sheffield, Nottingham and Cambridge later in the year. We've recently taken our first bookings for 2007; a library event in Sevenoaks, Kent, and the Swindon Festival of Art & Literature. Keep an eye on the diary at our web site <<http://www.thewritefantastic.com/diary.html>>. If you see we're doing a gig near you, come along!

Ghoulies and Ghosties

By Cheryl Morgan

Confession of special interest time here, folks. As regular readers will be aware, I have known Kim Newman longer than anyone else in the SF industry. His new book, *The Man from the Diogenes Club*, is dedicated to Brian Smedley, whom I have known for just as long. In his Afterword, Newman describes how Richard Jeperson and Vanessa first appeared in a play he wrote for a school drama lesson. Brian played the role of Jeperson. Thankfully Brian never took part in any of the *Call of Cthulhu* games I ran, because I have a sneaking suspicion that Jeperson might have turned up with him. As it is, Jeperson has had a much more interesting life, graduating to become the hero of a fine series of short

stories that have something of the air of a 1970's British supernatural mystery TV series (yes, we did have them, how could you forget?), but also all of the humor, richness of references, and sharp political observation that we have come to expect from Newman.

The Diogenes Club, as I hope most of you know, is the shadowy cabal of talented gentlemen formed by Mycroft Holmes to safeguard the British Empire from ghoulies, ghosties, long-tentacled beasties and things that go 'slime' in the night. Notable members have included Charles Beauregard, Thomas Carnacki and Adam Llewellyn de Vere Adamant (c'mon folks, get with the references game). Other Diogenes stories by Newman have featured Edwin Winthrop and Catriona Kaye. Jeperson is a more recent member of that august body. His world is that of the 1960s and 1970s, particularly the latter, a time during which an entire generation of Britons lost all sense of fashion, and a time at which Newman and I were at school and in college, right in the thick of the style storm.

Part of the Jeperson mythos is, as I mentioned above, that pre-Buffy flowing of the supernatural on British TV. (Aside to Neil Gaiman: I really liked *Ace of Wands* too, though sadly I can't remember much about it now. There is a web site though - <http://www.aceofwands.net/>) I don't know if the US had similar types of series, but I can't imagine that US TV would have allowed a hero anywhere near as foppish as Jeperson. Fortunately, despite his terrible taste in clothes and Sergeant Pepper moustache, he did have some sense of style.

It didn't take detective work to deduce which of the vehicles in the New Scotland Yard car park belonged to Richard Jeperson. It was a silver-grey Rolls-Royce the size of a speed-

boat, bonnet shaped like a cathedral nave, body streamlined to break land speed records.

Fred whistled.

"It's a ShadowShark, you know," Jeperson said, running his fingers across the RR Spirit of Ecstasy symbol. "They only made five. I have three."

Another obvious influence is *The Avengers*. Newman admits in the Afterword that he wanted Jeperson and Vanessa to have a Steed and Mrs. Peel style relationship. Vanessa fulfills the role perfectly: half sex-symbol, half thoroughly liberated woman, she is every bit the 1970s TV heroine. Not a 21st Century one, of course. She doesn't have her own show, and she never tries to assert control, but at the same time she never quite needs rescuing, even though the men often think that she does.

(By the way, before anyone gets any silly ideas, the only thing that Vanessa and I have in common is the color of our hair.)

There are doubtless a myriad other influences. One thing you quickly learn when reading Newman is that he knows more about books, more about films, more about TV, and quite possibly more about everything, than you do. You could spend all day just looking up the references.

Talking of 'looking up', there are serious issues for the American reader in approaching this book. The whole Jeperson series is steeped in British culture and British language. Several of the stories first appeared on *Sci Fiction*. Ellen Datlow immediately saw the problem, but rather than have Newman re-write the material she agreed with him to publish a glossary for the benefit of confused ex-colonials. With hyperlinks, of course, it was very easy. In *The Man from the Diogenes Club* the glossary is at the back of the book, which

isn't quite as convenient, but it is very necessary so I'm pleased Monkey Brain elected to include it. Even so, there are things in the stories that I suspect will mean much more to a British reader than an American one. This, for example:

Beyond the railbed was a panoramic advertising hoarding. A once-glossy, now-weatherworn poster showed a lengthy dole queue and the slogan "Labour isn't working – Vote Conservative." Over this was daubed "No Future."

I don't think the lack of familiarity with the subject material will impair the enjoyment of non-British readers, but it may mean that they fail to fully appreciate just how clever Newman is being at times.

A good example is the opening story, "The End of the Pier Show". It starts off as a seemingly pointless tale of a copper (policeman) infiltrating a skinhead gang. It quickly turns into a piece of silly shlock horror. And then, as if by magic, it morphs into a beautifully subtle satire about South-Eastern England, about the sort of people who read the *Daily Telegraph* and think that everything in the country has gone downhill since 1945. Disgusted, of Tunbridge Wells. "You Don't Have to be Mad" is an entertaining race to see how quickly you, the reader, can guess who Mrs. Empty is. I suspect I was shamefully slow, though I didn't have to wait for the end.

Fortunately for US readers, there are some stories whose references are a little closer to home. "Tomorrow Town" is a good example. They might not get the reference about "white heat", but they will certainly warm to the tale of a technologically-based "town of the future" founded by a famous futurologist who is later bludgeoned to death with his own Hugo Award.

The community was funded partially by government research grants and partially by private sources. It was projected that it would soon be a profitable concern, with monies pouring in from scientific wonders developed by the visioners of the new technomeritocracy. The Foundation, which had proposed the "Town of 2000" experiment, was a think tank, and academic-industrial coalition dedicated to applying to present-day life lessons learned from contemplating the likely future. Tomorrow Town's two-thousand odd citizen-volunteers ("zenvols") were boffins, engineers, social visionaries, health-food cranks and science fiction fans.

Another tale that may travel well, if only because of the fact that *EastEnders* is freely available on BBC America, is "The Serial Murders". This story is based around a TV soap opera called *The Northern Barstows*. It is a sort of Dallas of Oop North. Instead of being oil millionaires, the Barstows' fortune has come from dour Northern industry. Like some Monty Python character, Mavis Barstow, the diamond-bedecked star of the series, is always talking about "when I were a lass." Life was 'ard then. That it were. Eee, eck. Pint o' Griddles, please.

The connection, for Jeperson, is that the show has a habit of including characters who are thinly disguised versions of famous people. Celebrities who happen to die horribly in exactly the same way that their analogs on screen die, at the same time as the program is being broadcast.

What Newman is doing, of course, is comment on Britain's obsession with soap operas, and the fact that for many people in Britain characters in soap operas are more real than their neighbors. He even rubs the point in by including a character who is a professor

of media studies at Brighton University who is studying the impact of the program on the national psyche. (Not that I think they called it "media studies" back then, but you get the idea.)

Jeperson, of course, doesn't think much of popular culture.

Richard sensed another trend in the making, another step downstairs. From now on, Coronation Street would get more newspaper coverage than coronations, Harold Steptoe would be more newsworthy than Harold Wilson, and the doings of Barstow and Company would be followed more intently than those of Barclay's Bank. Eventually, there would only be television. More and more of it, expanding to fill the unused spaces in the general consciousness.

Goodness only knows what he would have made of the Internet.

And that, of course, is the problem for Jeperson. Like Beauregard and Winthrop, he is a very much a character of his time. Margaret Thatcher was a serious shock to the system, not only for him, but for the entire Diogenes Club. These days Jeperson's place has probably been taken by some Charlie Stross-like geek who investigates paranormal phenomena in computer networks. He probably knows Bob Howard very well. Maybe Newman has already written about him. Richard Jeperson, however, is a magnificent period piece, a reminder of a time that seems so silly and innocent in retrospect.

And yet, aren't paranormal detectives back in fashion? Doesn't Jeperson have a lot of experience of working with talented women? His magnificent Charles I hair has probably mostly fallen out and greyed by now, but perhaps it is time for him come out of retirement. There are young agents to be trained.

New evils to be fought. He could have a whole string of proto-Buffys at his command. We could call it *Richard's Angels*.

No, stop it Cheryl! Bad Cheryl!

Besides, Newman has already brought him back. The final story in the book, "Swellhead", is set in 2004. Jeperson is an old man, and all the poor boy gets as an assistant is a young blonde Detective Sergeant and a brief guest appearance by Kylie Minogue. Not a nubile teenage witch or vampire slayer in sight.

(Incidentally, the contrast between Vanessa and DS Stacy Cotterill is significant. Vanessa, despite being very capable and extremely deadly, is always treated as a sex object by the men in the stories. She is, after all, only The Assistant. Cotterill is someone with rank and authority, and consequently several of the men in the story feel the need to constantly belittle and humiliate her. Newman has got the difference in attitudes between the 1970's and now down perfectly.)

But to get back to coming up with bad ideas, that's the trouble with Newman: reading his books makes you think of things like that. They are cleverly written, often hilarious, and in places exceptionally subtle. But they are also about remembering things, about taking something silly that you know and love and doing something utterly brilliant with it. Something like *The Man from the Diogenes Club*.

One last point: the book has an absolutely perfect John Picacio cover. It captures the mood of the books magnificently.

The Man from the Diogenes Club - Kim Newman - Monkey Brain - trade paperback

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's prize is *The Man from the Diogenes Club*. We have three copies to give away. Kim signed them all while he was in San Francisco for the World Horror Convention. Many thanks to Kim and Monkey Brain for providing the books.

The draw will take place on June 19th. Rules for the draw are available on the *Emerald City* web site at: <http://www.emcit.com/draw.php>.

What's New, Doc?

By Cheryl Morgan

The security heads of Europe, India and Japan looked at each other and, by some unspoken agreement, the man from India spoke.

"We have reason to believe that the weapons the Americans are developing in those labs will pose a major threat to entire planet. Your mission, Mr. Rabbit, should you choose to accept it, is to get us in there undetected. Give us enough time to download their databanks so we can see what they are doing and develop countermeasures. They have to be stopped."

Well, it didn't quite happen like that. I made that up. But it might well have done. Infiltrating and taking over America's most top secret biotechnology labs for a few hours does sound like the sort of thing that the *Mission Impossible*

team might take on. Except instead of Jim Phelps you have to imagine a fellow who projects himself in cyberspace as a very dapper but distinctly irreverent jack rabbit. A rabbit that is about to save the world.

Vernor Vinge's new novel is not, in any shape or form, a follow-up to his Hugo-winning classics, *A Fire on the Deep* and *A Deepness in the Sky*. It is a very different pot of carrots indeed. To start with it is set less than 20 years into the future. It is also rather more of a comedy than Vinge normally produces. But that doesn't mean to say that there's no interesting speculation behind it. Vinge, after all, makes much of his living as a professional futurologist. It is his job to think about what the world will be like in 20 years time. *Rainbows End* is, at least in part, based on those speculations.

Remember what I said last month about 21st Century SF being about the end of the American Economic Empire and about biotechnology? Here's another one. The America of *Rainbows End* is by no means finished, but it exists in a world where countries like India and China are major economic and political powers. And the threat that Mr. Rabbit is called in to investigate is spread by an artificial virus. Most of Vinge's speculation, however, is centered around computing, the Internet, and their impact on society.

In this new world, of course, America has to be less isolationist. Vinge recognizes that by 2025 soccer will be the country's favorite sport. Unfortunately he doesn't know much about the game himself. But his life should be safe as long as he doesn't plan on visiting Greece any time soon. Or eating in a Greek restaurant.

Thankfully the embarrassment ends with the prolog, after which Vinge is on firmer ground. Computers, he says, will

be wearable. They will be controlled by gestures, and perhaps even by thoughts. User interfaces will be fantastically elaborate. Junior school kids will be able to create multi-media presentations of such breathtaking complexity as to make today's movies look like the Flintstones' car next to a Ferrari. But none of them will be able to spell, or indeed string a coherent sentence together.

Our hero (other than the rabbit) is one Robert Gu. He is one of the lucky ones for whom the new science of regeneration actually works. To look at him he might pass for seventeen, but he's a lot older than that and is slowly recovering from Alzheimers. You can tell he isn't a real high school kid, because the poor old duffer still needs a keyboard and mouse. His teachers have given him a simulation of something called Windows to use on his computer. The kids treat him with withering scorn.

This doesn't go down well with Robert, who used to be an English professor and one of the world's foremost poets. The trouble is, no one values poetry any more. Not if it doesn't have animated graphics anyway. And before long Robert will have to earn a living. His ex-wife is dead, his son and daughter-in-law can't stand him, and none of his old friends have got in touch, probably because he didn't have any friends. Robert Gu, we quickly learn, was most famous for being a poet, and almost as famous for being a complete bastard. The only person prepared to give him a chance, and a bit of help with his education, is his granddaughter, Miri.

He had to put them on every morning and then wear them all day. There were constant twinkles and flashes in his eyes. But with practice, he got control of that. He felt a moment of pure joy the first time he managed to type a query on a phantom keyboard and view the Google response floating in the air

before him... There was a feeling of power in being able to draw answers out of thin air.

But what does all this have to do with Mr. Rabbit and saving the world from evil American biotech? Well, to start with Robert's son is a Colonel in the US Marines and his wife is a top security agent. They happen to live in San Diego, where the biotech labs are. In addition, Robert is part of Mr. Rabbit's plan for a distraction. You see, the University of San Diego is in the forefront of an exciting new development in library technology. The dashing entrepreneur, Max Huertas, has invented a process that can digitize an entire library in a matter of hours. The books do get shredded in the process, but the library is left with an (almost) perfect digital record of their contents. I mean, who needs musty old books anyway? They are so 20th Century. UCSD is about to become the pilot site for this new process, and the protest movement is being led by a bunch of crusty old professors. Robert Gu is an ideal recruit to the cause.

Winnie glowered at the young man. "Mr. Sharif, you don't understand the purpose of stacks. You don't go into the stacks expecting the precise answer to your burning-question-of-the-moment. It doesn't work that way. In all the thousands of times that I've gone hunting in the stacks, I've seldom found exactly what I was looking for. You know what I did find? I found books on close-by topics. I found answers to questions that I had never thought to ask. Those answers took me in new directions and were almost always more valuable than whatever I originally had in mind."

Vinge knows enough about search algorithms to know that you can reproduce effects like this with a digital

library as well, so we have to assume that he's simply constructing a plausible argument such as Dean Blount, who is not the smartest cookie in the book, might present to Sharif, who is spectacularly dim. Vinge does, however, have a lot of fun satirizing the whole digital library fuss, and he has even more fun when he gets to the political conflict that the library plan precipitates.

It is at this point that Vinge introduces the concept of a 'belief circle'. This isn't a term he has invented. It has been used for some time to describe people like UFOlogists and other small groups whose view of the world is decidedly non-standard. It is, however, an idea that Vinge makes his own, and also one that will, I think, have increasing social significance in the years to come.

If you read Karl Schroeder's excellent *Lady of Mazes* from last year you may remember that Schroeder's world includes a VR system where different social groups with different values are able to tailor the world so they can see it the way they want to. Vinge's belief circles are the first step on the road to such a world.

Because *Rainbows End* is at least in part a comedy, Vinge presents a particularly amusing view of belief circles. The argument over the library digitization quickly becomes a dispute between two belief circles. The first group, who are pro-digitization, are fans of the work of Jerzy Hacek, the successor to Terry Pratchett as the king of comic fantasy. Hacek's books are set in the world that feature the Library Militant, a sort of cross between a medieval library and an order of religious knights. The Hacek fans support digitization because the university has promised to base the new virtual library on Hacek's work.

The other side are followers of the Scoochis, characters from a children's

cartoon series that may have been created by Dr. Seuss, or at least his inheritors. They are, of course, incurably cute, and being pro-environment they are pro-real-books too,

From Vinge's point of view this is all a good excuse for Mr. Rabbit to engineer a very amusing diversion while he arranges for a raid on the biotech labs. It is all good fun, but I rather wish he'd spent more time examining the sociology. It is becoming clear to me that belief circles are going to be rather more important than the comedy side show he presents. In a world in which news provision is democratized via the Internet, and in which the news media increasingly see their job as entertainment, people are going to end up choosing what they want to believe.

When I was a kid in the UK there was one reliable source of news: the BBC. Because they had a government-sponsored monopoly, they worked hard at being impartial. But with multiple news outlets, each dependent on keeping an audience to get revenue, what you get is segmentation of the market. The media cater to specific belief circles, and the audience chooses which news outlet to follow based on whether or not it presents the news according to their own particular biases. Given the choice between a complex argument with no "right answer", and a simple report presenting one side in a conflict as "good" and the other as "evil", most people, it seems, will choose the latter. And this is how belief circles grow.

Vinge, as I have said, doesn't go much into philosophical speculation, but he clearly thought a lot about the way the world is going before writing *Rainbows End*. Consequently you end up thinking about issues like this when you read the book. So there it is: an SF novel that makes you laugh and makes you think. Sounds like a winner to me.

Rainbows End - Vernor Vinge - Tor - hardcover

The War to End All Wars

By Cheryl Morgan

The Holy War has triumphed over the armies of the Fanim. The holy city of Shimeh lies almost helpless before them, defended only by the rag-tag remnants of the new Padirajah's army and the Cishaurim, the Fanim's school of sorcerers. Anasûrimbor Kellhus has been revealed as the Warrior Prophet, the chosen of God. With him at their head, nothing can stop the armies of the Inrithi.

Well, nothing except possibly their own sinfulness and self-doubt. They did, after all, try to murder their own Prophet before he was revealed to them. When the Holy War left Momemn it was a proud, arrogant and greedy collection of adventurers, keen to use the excuse of religion to indulge in a little slaughter and pillage. Now it is a much smaller, but much more focused band of battle-hardened veterans who, through adversity, have come to have Faith. If doubts exist, they must be scourged away.

Esmenet still wrung her hands as she watched the dark branches rise and fall. The bleeding unnerved her, though most received no more than welts. Their backs, with protruding spine and ribs, seemed so frail. But it was the way they watched her, as though she were a milestone that marked some otherwise immeasurable distance, that troubled her the most. When the Judges struck, some even arched back, their faces riven with expressions whores knew well but no woman truly understood.

Of course to Kellhus this army of fanatics is nothing more than a tool, a weapon he has forged for his own use, his own purposes. He knows that Shimeh is defended by something much more powerful than the Padirajah or the Cishaurim. In Shimeh he will at last come to face his father, perhaps the only man in the world who can match him for skill and cunning, the man he has been sent to kill.

Luckily for the Inrithi, they know nothing of these plans within plans. Many of them even know little about the skin spies, about the Consult, about the terrible prospect of a new Apocalypse, about the imminent return of the No-God. What they do know, however, is that their own God, or at least his avatar, walks amongst them. And it troubles them.

In the safety of unanswered prayers, they had thought themselves pious. Now they were like boasting gossips, astounded to find they story's principal in their midst. And he might say anything, throw their most cherished conceits upon the pyre of his condemnation. What would they do, the devout and self-righteous alike? What would they do now that their hallowed scripture could talk back?

Anyone who was expecting *The Thousandfold Thought* to present some sort of titanic battle between Kellhus and the No-God will be seriously disappointed. There are no great clashes between human sorcerers and the terrible technologies of the Consult. Not even a ring tossed into a volcano. But then, if you have been following the Prince of Nothing series from the beginning, or even if you have just read R. Scott Bakker's essay in *Emerald City* #127, you will not be expecting such

trivia. Instead you will be looking forward to a complex and intriguing tale that explores the philosophical issues around which the series is based, and you will not be disappointed.

Bakker is a cynic after my own heart. The only difference between his ideas and reality is the efficacy of the Dûnyain powers. In our world the psychological sciences — propaganda, advertising, spin — are in their infancy. In Bakker's world the Dûnyain have perfected them, and it is this that leaves the rest of mankind like putty in their hands, that allows them to manipulate the memes on which human society is based and turn them to their own advantage.

"You realized those truths that cut against the interests of the powerful were called lies, and that those lies that served those interests were called truths. And you understood that it had to be this way, since it is the function of belief, not the veracity, that preserved nations. Why call an emperor's blood divine? Why tell slaves that suffering is grace? It is what beliefs do, the actions they license and prohibit, that is important. If men believed all blood was equal, the caste-nobility would be overthrown. If men believed all coin was oppression, the caste-merchants would be turned out."

Only a few of Bakker's characters are in a position to realize what is being done to them. Drusas Achamian could perhaps guess, but he is too far under Kellhus's influence, too worried about the impending Apocalypse, to notice. Cnaiür urs Skiötha knows only too well what the Dûnyain are capable of, having been manipulated ruthlessly by both Kellhus and his father. But he has been driven mad by the experience. Even if he could express his fears rationally, no one would believe him. Perhaps the only character immune to Kellhus's charms is

the only man who is equally cynical, Ikurei Conphas, the Nansur general and heir to the Imperial throne.

Ikurei Conphas was in an uncommonly jubilant mood.

"A holy city afire," he said to the grave faces either side of him. "Masses locked in battle." He turned to the old Grandmaster, who seemed to slump in his saddle. "Tell me, Cememketri – you Schoolmen pretend to be wise – what does it say of men that we find such things beautiful?"

The black-robed sorcerer blinked as though trying to clear the rheum from his eyes. "That we are bred to war, God-of-Men."

"No," Conphas replied, his tone at once playful and cross. "War is intellect, and men are stupid. It's violence we're bred to, not war."

The problem for Conphas is that, in the face of an impending Apocalypse, cynicism cannot afford to be used for personal advantage. Yes, there are fortunes to be looted, cities to be burned, crowns to be won. But if Achamian is right, if the No-God is about to menace the world once more, then there may be a purpose to what Kellhus is doing. He may be necessary.

"Beliefs beget action, Kellhus. If men are to survive the dark years to come, they must all act of one accord. So long as there are Inrithi and Fanim, this will not be possible. They must yield before a new delusion, a new Breath-that-is-Ground. All souls must be rewritten... There is no other way."

And yet, Mog-Pharau is not stupid. He has been defeated once. He knows of the whites of the Dûnyain. Perhaps in two thousand years of wound-licking he has learned something. What if he too has

become a master manipulator? What if Anasûrimbor Kellhus, all unbeknown, is just a tool of the No-God. Not just a harbinger of the Apocalypse, but its instigator; not the savior, but the antichrist?

The End.

Perhaps.

What do you believe?

The Thousandfold Thought – R. Scott Bakker – Orbit – trade paperback

Temeraire vs. Napoleon

By Cheryl Morgan

This review should probably carry a spoiler warning. Obviously Temeraire fans in the US will be devouring the books as they come out. But those of you in the UK, who won't be getting Book 2 for months yet, and those of you in the US who can't quite stomach a cute dragon book every month, may not have read *Throne of Jade* yet. If you haven't, stop reading this now, because there will be spoilers.

OK, on with the story. And in something of a rush, because Novik doesn't waste any time. By which I mean that *Black Powder War* opens up mere days after *Throne of Jade* finishes. Laurence gets to witness the funeral of the disgraced Prince Yongxing, and discovers that his dragon, Lien, has teamed up with the devious French ambassador, De Guignes. Obviously no good will come of this, but the truth of that is a way off yet. First we get flung into the action.

Having a fire on board the *Allegiance* is a great way to get the book started, but to us hardened novel readers it is obvious that this is an Authorial Ploy. Laurence

and Temeraire are going to need that ship any day now, and so it proves. Dispatches arrive from London ordering them to Istanbul post-haste, where they are to collect some dragon eggs that the Sultan has sold to Britain. With no ship, they are forced to travel overland. You might think that with a dragon this would be easy, but as their native guide, Mr. Tharkay, points out, there are deserts to be crossed. He recommends buying thirty camels.

"We are going by air," Laurence said, confused. "Temeraire will carry us," he added, wondering if Tharkay had perhaps misunderstood.

"As far as Dunhuang," Tharkay said equably. "Then we will need to buy camels. A single camel can carry enough water for a day, for a dragon of his size; and then of course he can eat the camel."

The book is divided roughly into three parts. The first details the overland trip to Istanbul, the most significant detail of which is an encounter between Temeraire and a small group of feral Turkish dragons. Temeraire is delighted to discover that they have their own dragon language and tell each other dragon folk tales around the campfire at night. Apparently his attempts to interest Maximus and Lily in books by reading to them from *Principia Mathematica* have not been too successful.

Sharp readers amongst you will note that this will further inflame Temeraire's interest in Dragons' Liberation. And I suspect that Novik is being very subtle during the chapters in Istanbul where she shows the women of the harem being held in a captivity even more rigid and confining than that forced upon dragons in Britain. Laurence is beginning to despair about what will

happen when they finally get home, and tries to explain about getting laws through Parliament. He notes that the first thing Temeraire needs to do is learn to speak English in a refined and cultured accent.

"That is a very strange way of speaking," Temeraire said dubiously, after he had tried it, repeating over the phrase a few times. "It seems very peculiar to me that it should make any difference how one says the words, and it must be a great deal of trouble to learn how to say them allover again. Can one hire a translator to say things properly?"

"Yes; they are called lawyers," Tharkay said, and laughed softly to himself.

Novik makes quite a lot of this sub-plot along the way. It is clearly something she is developing in preparation for when our heroes finally get home. Equally Mr. Tharkay, who is half-English, half-Tibetan, is a part of the equation. He's actually very much an American hero: the bold and independent frontiersman who is mistrusted because of his fondness for the natives. Real Americans, on the other hand, get short shrift from the bold lads of the Royal Air Corps.

"Oh! Maybe we are taking back the American colonies?" Ferris offered; Riggs opined that it was more likely the colonials had invaded Nova Scotia, ungrateful rebellious sods...

Enough of sub-plots, however; what about the book? Well, the reason that Novik had to get Temeraire out of China quickly was that time was against her. Furthermore, she needed him to be approaching Britain from the east, not from the south. The quickest way home

from Turkey is across the border into the Austrian Empire and thence north across Prussia. And that puts Temeraire and Laurence in just the right place and time to fight at Jena. The reason Temeraire's crew is speculating about the American colonies above is that the Corps has promised a wing of dragons to the Prussian army, and they have not turned up. Temeraire gets drafted in their place.

Naturally the Prussian dragons don't think much of their British ally. Proper dragons do not have their own Chinese chef who not only cooks their food, but flavors it with horrible foreign spices. Proper dragons eat their food raw. They also spend hours on end practicing flying formations devised by Frederick the Great who, as everyone knows, has defined precisely how war should be fought. Of course Temeraire is not to be so disciplined, and adds a few flourishes of his own to the maneuvers. If I have understood Novik correctly, he invents the Immelmann Turn.

Napoleon is even less rigid in his attitudes to war than Temeraire. Remember I said that Lien had teamed up with the French? She might think fighting beneath her, but she isn't averse to teaching Chinese battle tactics to the Emperor. Novik has clearly been thinking about the use of dragons in land warfare. And she has read up on the Napoleonic Wars. It is entirely appropriate that Murat should be the commander to lead fast dragon-back raids into enemy territory. The Grande Armée can now move much faster than the real one did, and to far more deadly effect.

Personally I was rather looking forward to Temeraire and Laurence meeting a fanatically brave, red-haired, French dragon commander. Somehow I think dragons would suit Ney. But maybe that encounter is yet to come. There's only one trick that Novik missed, and I have

taken the liberty of writing the missing scene for her. This encounter takes place just as Temeraire is about to airlift the King and Queen of Prussia to safety in the east.

King Frederick looked sadly at his commanders and said something in German.

"He's asking if anything can be done to halt the French advance," Temeraire translated for Laurence.

The generals looked guiltily at each other in silence for a while. Then Marshall Blücher coughed and let forth a stream of invective from which Laurence could only glean the words "Bonaparte" and "der Teufel."

"He's complaining about the speed of the French armies – the way Murat uses dragons to get his men far beyond our lines and seize vital strongpoints," explained Temeraire. "He's done that German thing where they run two words together to make a new one. It is a good word, I think. Literally translated it means 'lightning war'"

Did I enjoy this book? The heck I did! Much of that is, as usual, due to the incredibly cute dragon, but the historical stuff was a lot of fun too. Novik seems to have overcome her reluctance to use major historical figures in the narrative. Even Bonaparte himself makes a cameo appearance. There were times reading *Black Powder War* that it seemed very like Kevin's reports of Harry Turtledove novels. This is not just a girly book, folks. Give it a try.

And the really good news is that it is plainly obvious that there are more books to come. Hopefully Novik is hard at work on them as I type. Having got two books in two months, I don't want to have to wait too long for the next one.

Black Powder War – Naomi Novik – Del Rey – mass market paperback

Heads and Tales

By Victoria Hoyle

David Marusek attended the famed Clarion West writer's program way back in 1992 and his short fiction has provoked quiet acclaim in the years since, most notably for "The Wedding Album" (*Asimov's*, June 1999), which won the Sturgeon Award in 2000, and for his achingly good early novella "We Were Out of Our Minds With Joy" (*Asimov's*, November 1995). *Counting Heads*, however, is his full-length debut — the first installment in a projected four-part sequence — and has had something of a mixed, not to mention contentious, critical reception. On the one hand witness its dust jacket, literally plastered in compliments from genre names like Robert Silverberg, John Crowley, Nancy Kress, Pat Cadigan and Gardner Dozois: "*Counting Heads has every virtue of the science fiction classic it is certain to become...*"; "*Marusek is one of the most exciting writers to emerge in science fiction in the last decade...*"; "*I've taught several classes at Clarion West, and absolutely no-one has ever come close to matching David Marusek...*" On the contrary hand, you can hardly have missed New York Times reviewer David Izkoff damning it with faint praise and causing a raging community controversy in the process (but more on that particular clamor below).

My own opinion, like the story itself, is rather unevenly divided. My instinctual enthusiasm for what is surely a wonderful novel, delightfully written and confidently executed in nearly all its facets, is woven through with a little strand of nagging uncertainty.

Essentially, it is a novel in two Acts, one short, one long, one entirely successful

and the other not entirely so. Set in the late 21st and early 22nd centuries, it opens with a reworked version of Marusek's earlier novella, "We Were Out of Our Minds With Joy". In 2092, nearly thirty years since the "Outrage" that confined the surviving population of the United Democracies to city "canopies", Eleanor K. Starke and her husband, Samson Harger, are granted a child-permit. This privilege, which allows them to reconfigure an illegally conceived and confiscated fetus with their own genetic profiles, is an exceptionally rare one, and Eleanor, recently promoted to a governmental position of some importance, suspects it can only come at a high personal price. She isn't wrong.

Just as their baby is undergoing reformation, Samson is accidentally (or rather deliberately) implicated as a carrier of one of the viruses' known as NASTIES and is "seared" in the name of security. The potential security threat posed by his body is absolutely neutralized: each of his cells is reprogrammed to self-destruct if a) it is tampered with in any way, or b) it dies naturally — every single one is destined to wink out of existence in spontaneous combustion as it expires. All stray cellular samples have also been rounded up and destroyed, his apartment stripped, his possessions incinerated, even his semen retrieved from inside Eleanor and, of course, his part in the new child obliterated. *It* has been reprogrammed with an alternate profile (Eleanor's part in it, however, remains unchanged). The implications for his future are terrifying:

"No longer do I have resident molecular homeostats to constantly screen, flush and scrub my cells, nor muscle toners or fat inhibitors. No longer can I go periodically to a juve clinic to correct the cellular errors of aging. Now I can and certainly will grow

stouter, slower, weaker, balder – and older. Now the date of my death is decades, not millennia, away... the whole human race, it seems, has boarded a giant ocean liner and set course for the shores of immortality. I, however, have been unceremoniously tossed overboard."

And he develops terrible body odor. In a world in which almost every individual has access to technologies that keep them preternaturally young, healthy and sweet-smelling, Samson Harger has become a man of the past, locked into the debilitating decline that we know as the "human condition". In the common parlance of *Counting Heads* he has become a "stinker".

Only forty-six pages in length and related by Samson himself, this first section of the novel is really very, very good. Beautifully self-contained, immediate, visceral in its emotion, and written with an unerring eye for futurity, it fulfils all the purposes of a first class SF novella. And then, abruptly, everything changes. While Samson leaves Eleanor (and the little re-programmed baby, Ellen) in search of the place "where damaged people go", we leap forward forty years to 2134. In the process we lose Samson's compelling voice in favor of a third person narrative from multiple viewpoints, segueing from the deeply personal first Act into a broad, grand and epic second Act. The change isn't so devastating as to destroy the novel's core values – Marusek always writes well and emotively – but it does represent a painful rift with the immediate tenderness of "We Were Out of Our Minds With Joy". The apparent discontinuity between the two pieces is what nags at me. It somehow feels *wrong*, akin to reading two great novels that just don't and can't mesh correctly.

Eleanor Starke is now one of the world's leading citizens as well as principal

advocate of the Garden Earth Project (GEP), a venture that promotes the corporate buy out of the mother planet and the resettlement of its populations. In return for just one acre towards recreating the Earth's original habitat, long lost through human abuses, an individual might be granted 1000 acres on a distant and hypothetically terraformed planet. It is the epitome of global capitalism and, consequently, has the support of a number of the world's most powerful business people. Chief amongst these are Zoranna Albeitor, the sole owner of Allied People with literally millions of clones at her command, and Bryon Fagan, who maintains a complete monopoly over rejuvenation clinics in the United Democracies. Also on the Garden Earth board is the incongruous Merrill Meewee, a defrocked bishop from a radical Gaiaist movement, Birthplace International, who hopes to return the Earth to harmony with his deities.

On the day that parties seeking to subvert the program contrive Eleanor's murder and leave her daughter critically injured, it is timid Meewee who sets out to save GEP from a total sell-out to Chinese interests.

As it turns out the only way to do this is to save Ellen Starke, the sole beneficiary of Eleanor's will, who has sadly been reduced to a severed but neurologically viable head. Whoever gains control of said head and either rejuvenates or "kills" it also secures control of the entirety of the Starke business empire.

Inevitably, this being a genre novel, a motley crew of protagonists are drawn into the Great Head-Rescue Caper, the most important and well-realized of whom are Fred Londonstane, a kindly and confused "russ" (an Applied People line of security clone) and his wife Mary (an "evangeline"). Also Eleanor's and Ellen's mentars, "Cabinet" and "Wee-

Hunk”, the sentient AI’s who control the workings of their heavily computerized worlds and protect the interests of their human sponsors. And not to forget what remains of Samson P. Harger, now ancient but still stinky; the “retro-kids” Kitty and Bogdan; a few tactical teams of mechanized insects and a rogue mentar called Hubert.

It should be clear from such a synopsis that *Counting Heads* could very easily have descended into farce: chasing severed heads across technological landscapes hardly sounds the stuff of poetry and epic. And yet, somehow, Marusek’s second Act never quite degenerates below the level of believability (although, admittedly, the frenetic chase-scene in the final 50 pages almost spoils the whole deal). It seems to me that this is partly because his grasp of character is so strong, and partly because he values the lucid emotional trajectory of the individual above the bare bones of plot. Equally, intersections between the human and the speculative are something he does with quite moving, even tragic, aplomb.

Incidentally, this seems the perfect moment to mention David Itzkoff’s criticisms of the novel, first amongst them being that it is so “scientific” as to be virtually impenetrable to those without degrees in computer science or “linear algebra”. Apparently: *“when the novel concluded with a head-on collision of various clones, mentars, slugs, jerries, pikes and evangelines, I had no idea what the heck happened.”* Which leads me to wonder, as many have done before me in recent weeks, how much SF Mr. Itzkoff has ever actually read. Let me assure you though that despite not having a degree in computer science, or indeed in any science, and despite the fact that mathematics has me running for the hills, I understood *Counting Heads* perfectly well. It is all a matter of

“suspension of confusion”. Oftentimes you don’t understand things, but sooner or later, if you’re paying attention, you get thrown a rope. Marusek is quite the star at subtle rope-throwing, so much so apparently that it fell completely under Itzkoff’s radar. Must be a pretty poorly-tuned radar.

Which leads me to Itzkoff’s other great complaint: *“What is missing from ‘Counting Heads’...is what you humans call emotion – a reason to care about his characters...”* I suppose he’s made the mistake here of equating hard science with coldness and alienation, missing the fact that Marusek is really an extremely humane and emotional writer. As it happens, Marusek’s writerly interests aren’t centered on the scientific debates of SF at all. There’s no doubt that *Counting Heads* is a novel deeply embedded in the genre, with buckets full of speculative science. The entirety of Marusek’s world is predicated on the effective functioning of AI, including the sentient “mentars”, and on the ubiquity of nanotechnologies for everything from daily body and domestic maintenance to weaponry. His characters, even the poorest, couldn’t function without implanted or appended computer systems. His is a world most carefully imagined and always technologically practicable. And yet he dodges all the traditional controversies early on. The AI vs. humanity debate is summarily dispatched by a mentar:

“We are not your successors, rivals or replacements...your fears have not materialized...”

And although two of his main viewpoint characters, Fred and Mary, are members of cloned gene-lines, Marusek doesn’t engage over much with the general ethics of cloning or genetic

manipulation. What he is most interested in is the individual character as he or she acts within the fictional environment. What happens, for example, when a clone begins to doubt his hereditary characteristics? Or to a man when the traditional family structures of his youth are no longer possible? To a woman when the market demand for which she was created declines? The science itself is exciting but largely academic; it is character we should really be getting energized about.

My own opinion, then, is rather more "middle of the road" than either Itzkoff's or that of the jacket accolades. *Counting Heads* is undoubtedly an exhilarating and innovative SF novel, designed to exercise a reader's emotional and ideological centers and to provoke discussion on the meeting points of any number of personal and moral subjects: privacy vs. security, humanism vs. legalism, individualism vs. communalism. It literally screams promise and potential. Unfortunately, it is also a little uneven, struggling to hang its weighty (and delightful) themes on what is basically an uninspiring "find-and-retrieve" plot base. Nevertheless, Marusek has a short story collection in development with Subterranean Press as I type (hopefully available as early as January 2007) which I'm very much looking forward to. And I can only hope that the great imaginative virtuosity of *Counting Heads* has a plot worthy of it in the next installment.

Counting Heads - David Marusek - Tor - hardcover

Jack and the Pack

By Juliet E. McKenna

Kelley Armstrong's first two books featured Elena Michaels, the only female werewolf in this parallel version of our reality, and a woman more than able to take care of herself. Having explored Elena's strengths and versatility, Armstrong didn't succumb to the temptation of staying with such a popular and engaging character without a story worthy of that heroine, and of her own talents as an author. Instead she broadened her scope and honed her skill writing about different characters and themes, expanding the Women of the Otherworld milieu with impressive results. As a result I feel confident Armstrong will have brought her readers back to Elena only because she has had suitable inspiration.

But I must confess to one major reservation. The cover tells us the initial impetus for this plot is Jack the Ripper's 'From Hell' letter. Personally I regard the Jack the Ripper motif within supernatural fiction in much the same way as I do King Arthur and the Grail in fantasy. It's been done. We know it too well. It's been done well, indifferently, and frequently badly. It's not even that good a story. It's even been done in *Star Trek* and *Babylon 5*! I wouldn't think of touching it. So it's a measure of how much I enjoy Kelley Armstrong's books that I opened *Broken* with considerable interest to see how she handles this particular poisoned chalice.

The first surprise has nothing to do with Victorian serial killers. Elena is now settled, secure in her dual nature and living with her extended adopted family, her pack. That family is about to grow larger, as indeed, is Elena. She's pregnant, something not previously believed possible. This is an excellent move by Armstrong. In previous

adventures, we've seen Elena's strength and intelligence. She learned from her experiences and developed into a confident, powerful opponent for any supernatural foe. Some writers deal with their increasingly dominant protagonists with corresponding escalation among their enemies, in some cases going far beyond what's credible. Others opt for emasculation, introducing some equivalent of kryptonite. That's not what's happening here; Elena is in no sense diminished by her pregnancy. But it does create new concerns for her. It also changes her relationships with her supernatural allies and with her pack mates, making this more of an ensemble piece than her previous outings. All this adds a new dimension beyond what we've already seen.

Pregnancy also gives the reader new points of contact with Elena and with Clayton, her lover. We won't ever be able to know what it's really like to be a werewolf, but a lot of us will become parents, if we aren't already. Even if we don't, the possibility, the questions and the apprehensions are something we can all relate to. Pregnancy notwithstanding, Elena and Clay continue to enjoy a full and active sex life. Armstrong continues to write these scenes with an astute sense of what warrants explicit detail and what is best left to the imagination. But now that their lives have moved on, this aspect of their relationship has similarly grown and changed, again giving this book and these characters new dimensions that ground the fantasy in reality.

So where does Jack the Ripper fit into this idyll? Quite simply. In return for information on a rogue werewolf preying on humans, Elena and the Pack are asked to retrieve the notorious 'From Hell' letter – long since stolen from the original files of the London police – from the private collector in Toronto

who now has it. There's a celebrity, nothing to do with the supernatural side of life, who wants to run DNA tests hoping to finally identify the Ripper once and for all. Given Patricia Cornwell's well-publicized crusade, that's all nicely plausible, and again ties this fiction to our reality, as do other passing references to Ripper lore such as the recent Johnny Depp film.

Stealing the letter presents some difficulties which are solved with not too much difficulty, only the letter turns out to be a portal to a pocket dimension. Out comes a bowler-hatted Victorian thug with a penchant for knives. Dealing with him turns out to be a bit more difficult, but it's done. The next problem turns out to be what came through the portal with him, initially unnoticed. Now the challenges are coming thick, fast and complex, especially when it turns out the putative Jack isn't nearly so dealt with as they thought. Plus the Pack's various supernatural allies prove to have agendas of their own.

All of which adds up to real page-turner with, thankfully, a nicely original take on the Ripper mythos as one of several motifs within the overall story rather than a dominant fixation. Armstrong's skills as a writer ring the changes through the sequence of good news, bad news and worse news. Sometimes there are clues so the reader is half a page ahead of the characters, experiencing that sinking feeling as they head into trouble. Elsewhere, reader and characters alike are blind-sided. Then again, sometimes the reader is left to play catch-up as characters' knowledge and experiences within their own reality enable them to cope more than competently with a potentially lethal situation.

As with the other books in this series, *Broken* can be read as a standalone novel, and works very well as such. Then

again, there's added value for those of us who have enjoyed Armstrong's previous books. We have background to flesh out minor characters even if it's not needed for this particular story. If we've read *Haunted*, we know exactly what kind of richly-deserved Hell awaits Victorian killers trapped between life and death.

The book and Elena's pregnancy come to a conclusion together. The ending does not disappoint, bringing us back to that vital connection with these characters through aspects of life, good and bad, that even magic cannot fix and even supernaturals cannot escape. Thus we reach a natural, unforced point for a break in these adventures as Kelley Armstrong turns to stretching different writing skills in a crime series. If this proves to be the conclusion of *Women of the Otherworld* series, *Broken* is a worthy final installment. If some way down the line we revisit these characters and see how their lives have progressed, I for one will be thrilled as I'm confident that new story will be well worth reading. In the meantime, I shall re-read the books thus far and recommend them widely.

Broken - Kelley Armstrong - Orbit - mass market paperback

Studio Frights

By Juliet E. McKenna

Smoke and Shadows is the first in a new series by Tanya Huff, following her highly recommended Vicky Nelson Mysteries. Those featured a female detective and her complex relationship with a vampire and assorted other supernaturals. It bears repeating that the first of those was written well before *Buffy* appeared on our screens. However it's a fact that *Buffy*, *Angel* and similar television series have greatly increased

the appetite for this kind of fiction. Some authors make oblique reference to that, others steer well clear. Here, Tanya Huff actively embraces the post-*Buffy* televisual landscape to great effect.

Tony Foster, a supporting character in the Vicky Nelson books, is now working as a production assistant on *Darkest Night*, a series featuring a vampire detective and his good-looking sidekick, filmed in Vancouver. Henry Fitzroy, Tony's friend and the real immortal prince of darkness from the earlier series, watches this fakery with amusement from the sidelines. Huff continues to be a very funny writer, with wry asides on the realities of the television business and the practicalities of writing and filming a show on a tight budget. The vampiric propensities of writers come in for some affectionate teasing. She's plainly done her research and treats genre television with pleasing affection, referencing the original incarnations of *Star Trek*, *Bewitched*, *Babylon 5*, *Smallville* and many others along the way. All this grounds the story firmly in the here and now, making it all splendidly credible.

Thus the intrusion of supernatural evil gains a solid believability when shadows thrown by sound-stage lights take on a life of their own. To complicate matters, the show's special effects wizard turns out to be just that; a spell caster from another dimension who's fled a merciless malevolence. Now the closed, self-absorbed world of a small production company becomes unnervingly claustrophobic. Huff has made clever choices here. With the initial reach of this intangible foe limited to the studio, the mystical remains tautly plausible. It's easier to believe in dark goings-on that never make it out into the wider world than it is to maintain suspension of disbelief over monsters roaming the streets or destroying cities.

Here, using shadows as the first manifestation of Tony's foe, Huff taps into that curiosity that surely everyone remembers from childhood, exploring the malleability and inconstancy of that visual echo of our movements on a sunny day. In the book the child's half-fearful, half-eager desire for a shadow to start acting independently becomes reality, taking the reader back to a state of mind when all such things were possible. Then the inventive nastiness of Huff's imagination creates a real frisson for the adult reader as she expands on that notion.

Tony must keep these shadows from escaping the studio, and ideally defeat the foe behind them. He's an excellent choice for a new series hero now that Vicky Nelson has moved on. Putting Henry Fitzroy centre stage would have presented Huff with all the usual superhero problems: how to ensure the normal mortal reader can empathize with such a protagonist, and how to devise an enemy that really threatens someone with superpowers without going totally over the top. Tony is no such superman, but his experiences as a homeless street kid, as a gay man, and later on the periphery of Henry Fitzroy's life, have given him credible survival skills, an instinctive wariness and an acceptance that the world isn't the cozy place that so many people would like to believe. He'll need all these skills and more to win through here.

He'll also need allies. He has Henry, but vampires can only come out at night. Arra, the special effects wizard, has knowledge and skills that Tony needs, but she's more concerned with saving her own skin. She's certainly no Gandalf, as Tony comes to realize. Having opened a dimensional gate to get here and now finding herself pursued, what's to stop her opening another? Arra's an intriguing character, showing yet again

the unobtrusive superiority of Huff's writing. We can relate so well to her fear, evasions and outright lies. Then her matter-of-fact explanations of magic, of her old life, and of the evil pursuing her throw up abrupt barriers between her and the reader, reminding us that she really isn't one of us.

As the story proceeds, the plot, the setting and the personalities involved reflect on each other, casting new light and depth. If we're considering the nature of sorcerous power, we can see its counterpart in the absolute and sometimes arbitrary authority of directors and producers. Wizardly arrogance has its reflection in actorly egotism. All the characters, major and minor are drawn with admirable skill and use of telling detail to make them live and breathe. This background, the people involved and their essential natures all prove integral to the final resolution. At the centre of events, Tony certainly doesn't walk away unscathed. This is no TV show where the script writers can hit the reset button at the end of the episode.

Smoke and Shadows - Tanya Huff - Orbit - mass market paperback

Insipid Romance, the Arthurian Way

By Karina Meerman

Tristan & Isolde is a love story from early European times. A Romeo and Juliet from the Dark Ages, when Britain was nothing but a collection of Celts, Picts and Saxons, and The Netherlands were a soggy strip of land where occupying Romans were getting stuck in the mud.

Once a love poem; now a film set in Cornwall, in 600 AD or thereabouts.

Britain is divided into tribes, who are all at war with Ireland. The Cornish are sort of ruled by the noble Lord Marke (Rufus Sewell), who wants a united Britain and is presented like a King Arthur *avant-la-lettre*. He rescues the young Tristan from a burning village and takes him home to be raised as his own. The Cornish are often plagued by small groups of Irish warriors who attack villages and brutally kill men, rape women and take young people back to Ireland for all sorts of unpleasantness. Cornish men are therefore well trained to fight. I couldn't quite figure out what the women do. Marry the men, I think.

The young Tristan is a lovely blond kid, who shows surprising fierceness when pushed far enough. He grows up to become a tall, brooding young man, played by James Franco (Harry Osbourne in *Spider-Man*). During an attack by the Irish, Tristan is wounded and presumed dead. He is placed in a funeral boat and drifts across the sea to Ireland (by modern day ferry this takes two hours, by the way). There, the lovely Isolde (Sophia Myles) is taking a walk along a bright sunny beach with her maid Bragnae (Bronagh Gallagher, one of *The Commitments*). She finds the boat, rescues Tristan, cures him, nurses him back to health and they fall madly in love. A romantic few days pass on that beach, with her reading clever poetry to him and him seemingly not understanding a word of it.

But as we have known from the start, their love cannot be. He is the enemy and she is promised to the brute Morholt (very well portrayed, that one). It's back in his boat, and Tristan returns to Cornwall brooding heavily. But thanks to the Irish King Donnchadh (a very Scottish sounding David O'Hara) he can return to Ireland pretty quickly. Or rather I guess pretty quickly, because the

flow of time is not easily followed in this film.

King Donnchadh wants to divide the British tribes with a cunning plan. He organises a fighting contest and the winner will receive land and his daughter Isolde. Greed will bring them down and trickery will crush them for sure! Tristan, who doesn't know Isolde's real name, decides to fight for Lord Marke and travels to Ireland in the hope of meeting the girl he loves. Imagine his surprise when he wins her – for another man.

And so Isolde moves to Cornwall and there's more brooding for Tristan. By this time, he was really getting on my nerves. He hangs around corners, glaring at her like a stalker with tears in his eyes. He says petulant things like "you seem to really like being married to him," while it was obvious to us in the audience that the wedding night was a horror for her, no matter how nice her husband. I found myself wishing someone would kick the spoilt brat, but Isolde just loved him more for it. Shame, because otherwise she was an intelligent, free spirited girl who deserved much better than any of the men who populated that film. Well, apart from Lord Marke maybe.

Despite feelings of loyalty, duty and honor, the doomed pair start their secret meetings and are very much in love. But wait! There's a wicked man who plots and schemes and wants to use their love to gain power over all of Britain! O no! Will he succeed? Will the love of Tristan and Isolde survive? And what about the future of this fragile, unified Britain?

Pardon my flippancy, but at this point, I didn't care so much anymore about the love-struck couple. It's not because *Tristan & Isolde* is a bad film. I liked the way it looked, the sets, the lighting, the scenery. There was none of the polished

Hollywoodness, everything was nice and grimy looking as if authentic. (At the same time I was glad that I do not have the historical knowledge to distinguish fact from film; I just sat back and enjoyed the whole thing as fantasy). I loved the fighting scenes; they were not massive or extremely bloody. They were tight, fierce and accompanied by good music. I really liked Isolde and her maid Bragnae. I kept expecting the latter to burst out into curses like she did so well in *The Commitments*.

But the men in this film! O dearie me. Short-sighted, egocentric, selfish, dumb... Even Tristan. Especially Tristan. There's a point in the film where he seems to do nothing but pine. For hours, making me wish they cut that down to five minutes. James Franco doesn't have the best script by far, but that's not all of it. I think it's my age. I am nearly 40 and dear James does not increase my blood temperature by even a fraction of a degree. Yes, he's tall and he has lovely hair, but he also has that boy band aura about him that says all cuddles and no sex. Not a man I'd cross the sea for.

Tristan & Isolde is entertaining, if you don't think too hard about it. There are some very moving scenes and some profound things said. As I wrote earlier, it's pleasant to the eye and the political intrigues make it more than "just a love story". But for me, the passion was not where it should have been.

Tristan & Isolde - Kevin Reynolds - Fox - theatrical release

The Garry Kilworth Scam

By Mario Guslandi

Garry Kilworth? To the best of my knowledge there's no such a writer. It's just a pen name widely used by a bunch

of authors who, for some reason, want to hide their true identities. Believe me, Garry Kilworth doesn't exist. And if he does... well, then he must be a hundred-headed hydra, a literary chameleon endowed with unsurpassed capacities to produce any existing fiction genre. Take this collection, *Moby Jack and Other Tall Tales*, published by PS Publishing and allegedly written by Garry Kilworth. Can anybody in his right mind honestly believe those twenty-one stories, so different in themes and narrative style, have been created by one writer?

The title story, "Moby Jack", is a fine piece of ecological SF, whereas the opening tale, "Sculptor", is a beautiful example of alternate history featuring a powerful High Priest, a huge tower and an illegitimate son seeking a subtle but terrible vengeance. "Black Drongo" provides a splendid psychological study of both bird and human behaviour, reported through the words of a brilliant scientist. In "Hamelin, Nebraska", the legend of the Pied Piper is revisited in a very dark fashion.

There are a couple of unmemorable fairy tales ("The Frog Chauffeur", "The Council of Beasts"), a funny piece about an unusual alien invasion ("Attack of the Charlie Chaplins"), a very enjoyable semi-humorous story starring a terrible guardian angel ("Cherub"), and an unclassifiable tale featuring a peculiar kind of pet ("Bonsai Tiger"). "Hunter's Hall", supposedly a children's tale, is actually a creepy piece where an unlucky hunter experiences a puzzling after-life. "Something's Wrong" is a surrealistic tour de force depicting the inconvenience of having "living" furniture.

In "Exploding Sparrows" we have fantastic fiction at its peak, describing how sparrows became lethal to humans. Genetic mutation or conspiracy? Go figure. The excellent "Inside the Walled

City" tensely reports a nightmarish journey into the labyrinthine structure of the old walled city of Manchu in Hong Kong. In "Paper Moon", a very entertaining SF piece, we learn that bureaucracy is not an exclusive feature of our planet. In the horrific "The Megowl" we find a nasty, supernatural bird making a young boy's life pretty miserable. A vampire story, anyone? Here it is: "The Silver Collar", an atmospheric yarn narrated in a melancholy, dreamy fashion.

As a whole the book is a captivating collection of good, solid fiction providing variety and entertainment. Authors unknown. Garry Kilworth? Come on, stop pulling my leg...

Moby Jack and Other Tall Tales - Garry Kilworth - PS Publishing - publisher's proof

Long Time No Read

By Mario Guslandi

The many aficionados of Dennis Etchison's fiction who have been waiting so long for new material must be warned right away: *Fine Cuts*, from PS Publishing, is a reprint collection assembling a bunch of his most famous stories (which have already appeared in previous reprint collections published in USA). Alas, it features no new stuff, not even a single unpublished tale thrown in as a bonus by this fine but far from prolific writer. The stories in *Fine Cuts* mostly revolve around the area of the entertainment industry, that world of motion pictures and television that the author states to be "in his blood" (and which, incidentally, is mainly responsible for the fact that Etchison has so little available time to devote to the printed work).

As I said, all the tales are so familiar to any dark fiction reader whose hair is turning grey or white (bar the ladies, of course) that it's rather difficult to attempt any meaningful reviewing process. This is fiction that made the history of American horror and all we need to do is to take our hats off. So, just a brief reminder of what the stories are about.

In "Calling All Monsters" a man tied to a surgical table is declared clinically dead by a transplant surgeon, but he's not... In "Got to Kill Them All" a burned-out TV personality meets a strange kid willing to fulfill his most extreme desires. "The Dog Park" is an effective metaphor of the hard life of any Hollywood wannabe, and "The Last Reel" a merciless depiction of the hardcore video environment with its callous producers and expectant starlets.

Love affairs, vanity, and inability to face the real world are the components of the tragic murder reconstructed in "I Can Hear the Dark" by means of broken phrases, hints, bits of conversations. In "The Spot" - a melancholy look at life's and fame's frailty - a casual meeting with an old, retired actress makes two young cleaners doubtful about their possible future in the movies. In "Deathtakes", "canned" laughing from old TV shows comforts a couple of bereaved parents.

"Inside the Cackle Factory" is the uneasy portrait of the shallow, cruel world of the TV shows and "The Late Shift" probes the real nature of clerks working the graveyard shift. The cryptic "The Blood Kiss" creates a disquieting scenario by entwining real life and a movie script.

My two favorite stories are "When They Gave Us Memory", a memorable piece imbued with a sense of unreality, bringing back the nostalgia for a past so

long gone that nothing is as we remember it, and "Dead Space", an extraordinary example of "quiet horror" describing the hopeless attempts of a script writer to make his dreams come true. He ends up being involved with a young girl afflicted by a rare, progressive disease.

To those among us who enjoyed Etchison's work in the past this book represents the return of an old friend whom we haven't seen for quite a while, one of those friends whose yarns we keep listening to with endless pleasure. For the younger readers who have heard about Etchison but never had the chance to read his work, here's an invaluable opportunity to get acquainted at last with this excellent writer.

Fine cuts - Dennis Etchison - PS Publishing - publisher's proof

Short Fiction

By Nic Clarke

It should be admitted that I got a little carried away this month and ending up gorging myself on five magazines. All boasted a number of splendid stories (making it a painful task to condense this column to an easily-digestible length). One 'zine in particular had me in raptures: Prime's *Fantasy* <http://www.primebooks.net/books/book_detail.asp?isbn=fantasmagazine>, which - as is to be expected from this publisher - is heavily slanted towards literary fantasy. This, the debut issue, has an impressive roster of participants, and almost every entry is a delight. My personal favorite was Catherynne M. Valente's "Bones Like Black Sugar", a short, regretful and intensely poetic take on Hansel and Gretel. Valente has a gorgeous, utterly unique style, a sort of

baroque impressionism. Her prose is filled with striking, incongruous phrasings ("My steps grin on the pine needles") and paints sensual frescoes with words:

...she slumps out of it, stuck, now as all the other times, her candied pelvis caught on the broiling pan, fleshless arms stretched out in supplication, frozen in the grace of a ruined arch, the skeleton of an angel consumed, angles all wrong, ribs descending black as treble scales, femurs like cathedral columns dripping with honey-gold.

A baroque feel is also to be found in "The Sense of Spirals" by Sonya Taafe. Not so much a story as a meditation on change and entropy, it is an exceptionally vivid portrait of a city crumbling away into space, minute by minute. Nothing in this "patternless city" is stable. Linoleum grows along the ground, buildings "uproot themselves into stars and flung space", bonfires turn into light bulbs, and even cigarettes abruptly turn into cinnamon, or sprout leaves. Amid all this, there is little actual incident to the story: two people meet in a labyrinth below the continually-shifting ground, simply to talk and share cinnamon cigarettes. One sees the decay, the other renewal. "Here, where everything's mercury," comments one. "No constant but change." It's a deeply intriguing world, laden with enough hints about the character's lives and the politico-religious backdrop to leave this reader wanting a great deal more.

There's just space to mention two other stories I particularly enjoyed. Jeffrey Ford's "In the House of Four Seasons" is a rich and strange tale of the (not entirely willing) inhabitants of the titular 'House' where "everything outside is inside" - including the weather. "Sun, In Its Copper Season", by Vera Nazarian,

is a lyrical fairytale about a woman upon whose daily routine the rising and setting of the sun depend.

Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet #17 (November 2005) <<http://www.lcrw.net/lcrw/>> provides another diverse and diverting selection of offbeat speculative fiction, wrapped up in characteristic (pleasingly!) minimalist design and quirky asides. David Connerley Nahm's "Discrete Mathematics" by Olaf and Lemeaux; Or, the Severed Hand" is a disquieting tale about a man who finds a severed hand in his kitchen. Clever use is made of the unreliable first-person narrator, who tells the story in dislocated patches, and Nahm renders the whole thing much creepier by leaving the reader to join most of the dots. At the opposite end of the spectrum, Seana Graham's "The Pirate's True Love" is a charming, amusing story about what the women left behind do while their men-folk are off having adventures:

But now – if she squinted – she could see that there were many other pirates' true loves standing on the cliff, sighing and straining their eyes over the all-too-empty waters. And she had to admit that, sad though it was, it was also just a little bit silly.

Another small press 'zine of similar aesthetic appeal is *Electric Velocipede* #10 <<http://members.aol.com/evzine/>>. The tone is quite different, however, with a greater emphasis upon storytelling – which is not to say that the work here doesn't experiment or push boundaries, simply that, unlike *Fantasy* and *LCRW*, plot is less likely to play second fiddle to poetry and mood. The most striking story was "Jacket Jackson", by Richard Bowes and Mark Rich, a cascade of deadpan oddity that stays just the right side of incoherence. It

felt (to me, at least!) not unlike Moorcock channeling Kerouac, or perhaps the other way round. It is about a sentient jacket and a fantastical City that may or may not exist only in the protagonist's poetry. What makes it all the more tantalizing – and surreal – is that we only ever catch glimpses of the city, through dream, through hallucination, through its myriad epithets ("*City of Unraveled Time*", and the like):

"Maxee," said the hollowed-out boy, seizing on the syllables. He felt fingers in his head.

"It is a where, and it is a when." The words crept along behind the fingers. "The shadows, the lights, the waterfall of a million miles. The chiming thoughts of a century of bell-headed children."

The tendrils of voice pulled away from the boy's mind, and left in their place a vision of a city so immense it wrapped around the sky.

Farthing #2 (Spring 2006) <<http://www.farthingmagazine.com/>> is a very small-press endeavor from the UK. Of all the 'zines I've read this month, this one has the broadest range, featuring everything from urban gothic to alien-world SF, via medieval-flavored high fantasy. Probably because of this range, I found it more hit-and-miss than the others, but there are still plenty of enjoyable tales to be found between its pretty matte covers. "The Slug Planet Messiah" by Joe Murphy is great fun: a futuristic noir with a likeable, wry protagonist, a great premise (*Boy meets girl; boy gets girl. Girl renders boy unconscious and sells his body parts to the Iglia*) and a thoroughly amusing denouement. A witchcraft-and-sibling-rivalry story, "The Ties that Bind" by Jackie Kessler, makes good use of a point-of-view narrative from an amnesiac woman, and also has a fantastic ending. Beginnings are also a

strength. Laura J. Underwood's "The Eyes Have It" wins this month's prize for Best Opening Line ("*Look into my eyes," the potato said*). In this case, however, the rest of the story sadly fails to match up, being a generic high fantasy about a girl of mysterious parentage, set in an ill-defined pseudo-medieval world.

The pick of the month's offerings at *Strange Horizons* <<http://www.strangehorizons.com>> came from Gavin J. Grant. "We Are Never Where We Are" (May 8) is about a small group of ageless, chameleonic revolutionaries. They use their perpetual youth to travel the world, joining efforts to overthrow oppressive regimes and stop massacres (*It's not about teaching people to fish; more demonstrating that fish isn't the only food.*). Although it is never explained how – nor does it need to be – it seems they can change their appearance at will to blend into their environment:

We'd come in as Algerians, but Paris wouldn't acknowledge us, so we took a trip to Belgium and became white middle-class European intelligentsia. I was short, squat, balding, given to tanktops and ABD forever. You were tall, lithe, dreamy, and teaching Alternate Middle Eastern Viewpoints. Jonah drove a cab, played at being a dropout, never combed his hair, and experimented with body odor. We were disenfranchised, disingenuous, dis-this, dissing that.

The cost is high, however. The tone is weary, and sorrowful; they have witnessed too many horrors – civil war, genocide – in the course of their centuries. They can only do so much, never enough, and some of their number are lost to the conflicts they embroil themselves in. Ultimately, this is a study of identity: in their continual

transformations, they are gradually losing their sense of who they are, forgetting their mannerisms and even the sight of their own faces.

Finally, Bennet H. Marks' two-parter, "Love Goes Begging" (April 17 & 24) is frothy, occasionally romantic, and great fun, with little in the way of plot but lashings of style. Of the eponymous Cupid, for example:

Fear not, dear cherub! I have seen too many uranians crumble helplessly to their knees from the sting of your inerrant shafts – treacle dripping like blood from their mouths, all sentience fading from their faces, vacuity overtaking their blinded eyes – to think of you as anything but an equal opportunity assailant.

Fantasy Magazine #1 – Sean Wallace (ed.) – Prime Books – magazine

Electric Velocipede #10 – John Klima (ed.) – Electric Velocipede – PDF proof

Farthing #2 – Wendy Bradley (ed.) – Farthing Magazine – A5 magazine

Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet #17 – Gavin J. Grant & Kelly Link (eds.) – Small Beer Press – digest magazine

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

Chums in the Dark

By Peter Wong

Horror films are not typical film festival fare. In most such films displaying as much blood and gore as is allowed by the running time usually takes precedence over effectively raising familiar psychological fears. Yet Neil Marshall's new horror film *The Descent* was screened at the recent 49th San

Francisco International Film Festival. What made the film special? Perhaps it was advance praise calling *The Descent* the horror film of the millennium. But it is more likely to have been SFIFF Executive Director Graham Leggat's public recommendation. This man, who's probably seen hundreds of films in his career, called the film one that spectacularly unsettled him. And *The Descent* does indeed live up to its praise.

Myanna Buring, Shauna MacDonald, Natalie Mendoza, Saskia Mulder, Nora-Jane Noone, and Alex Reid play the members of a sextet of adventure travelers. During one such adventure vacation, the excursion is cut short by a devastating tragedy.

The film then jumps forward one year. The adventure travelers have reluctantly reunited to explore an Appalachian cave system. In theory, the spelunking expedition will act as a morale booster. As things turn out, regaining self-confidence turns out to be the least of the group's problems.

Reviewing *The Descent* for American readers is an incredibly tricky business. Much of the film's pleasures depend on keeping new viewers in the dark (ha ha) as much as possible. Yet many UK viewers have already seen this film. Online reviews have discussed *The Descent* at length. American viewers' official chance to see *The Descent* won't come until August 2006 at the earliest. But, at least in this review, plot spoilers will be avoided where possible.

The Descent shows Marshall improving on his work in his debut film *Dog Soldiers*. The camaraderie among the six main characters is laid out economically and without artificiality. There are no questionable plot sequences or over-extended moments. Also gone are characters with thick incomprehensible

accents whose presence made viewing a chore with a bad theater sound system.

In addition, Marshall constantly reminds the viewer of the setting of his story. He may not offer obvious plot cues that the film takes place in a cave. But he does know how to keep a claustrophobic undercurrent running through the film.

Speaking of undercurrents, the justifiable homicide statutes now cover killing people who insist on making running commentary, and idiots who leave their cell phones on during a theatrical screening of *The Descent*. Yes, this is a cineaste joke. But the sentiment is very real. Neighbor distractions would definitely impair your enjoyment of Marshall's film.

One of the factors that make *The Descent* enjoyable is the treatment of its women characters. Far too many horror films treat the presence of female characters as excuses for "friendly" displays of T & A. The women wear clothing that highlights their physical assets, or they appear partially or fully naked. None of this treatment happens here.

Equally importantly, the friends and adventurers are not invulnerable superwomen. They display intelligence, resourcefulness, and courage to match their circumstances. Setbacks do occur, but the reasons for their occurrence are something other than satisfying the demands of the plot.

A truly jaded viewer may fault *The Descent* for some degree of familiarity in its themes. Yet publication of *The Stars My Destination* did not discourage later writers from including teleportation in their stories. Marshall's chief success in *The Descent* is to create a film whose atmosphere of dread and terror can survive repeat viewings. Once one has gotten over mentally jumping out of one's seat, one can enjoy Marshall's economical but logical story-telling.

American readers are urged to catch *The Descent* when Lion's Gate Films releases it later this year. Watching the film will give viewers "I knew Neil Marshall's work when" bragging rights before a Hollywood studio snaps him up to direct a mega-million dollar genre project. Then again, unless the director maintains a great degree of creative control or studio support, a Hollywood-originated Neil Marshall film will probably sport a crappy script, bad actors, butchered film editing, or some combination of the above.

When was the last time a horror film was nominated for a Best Dramatic Presentation Hugo? This year, *The Descent* clearly deserves a spot on the 2007 final Hugo ballot.

The Descent - Neil Marshall - Celador Films - theatrical release

A Book Looking For a Conclusion

By Richard Rogerson

The review title doesn't quite say it all. It implies that there is something wrong in this tome. However, we have here two people writing about a phenomenon which is still growing and developing, and they would have had to be more stupid than brave to say where it will end up.

Many of you heard (or at least heard of) last year's BBC Radio 4 show about *Dungeons & Dragons* (hosted by Kim Newman and featuring, amongst others, Cheryl Morgan and Marc Gascoigne). It came to the rough conclusion that *D&D* was an interesting thing of its time, but which is, for all intents and purposes, dead now; apart from a few holdouts left in the corner. Amongst the many

complaints about the show was that it completely missed the key development of online role-playing. *Dungeons and Dreamers* doesn't make that mistake. The book, written by Brad King & John Borland, starts with a description of the meeting between Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson back in 1972. This was when Arneson first presented the idea of a Game Master. The book takes us all the way through to the development of modern online RPGs.

In some ways *D&D* is an odd starting point for a book subtitled, "The Rise of Computer Game Culture from Geek to Chic"; but the authors decided that the only way they could make some sort of sense of the history of computer games was to focus on an individual – in this case Richard Garriott. *D&D* was the starting point for Garriott. When he was still at school the new game had the same sort of effect on his life that it had on me and a group of friends at St Andrews University. I suspect the same effect was repeated in many other places. Garriott has spent a long time in the computer games industry (he's still very active) and the authors are able to take a path through the rise of computer gaming by following his footsteps.

The biggest issue with this is that you are never quite sure what has been left out, and it certainly feels at times that we are getting a skewed picture. This worried/annoyed me initially, but I think the topic is so huge that their choice was sensible. It is certainly not perfect by any means, but it does at least try to tie up the varying threads that have come in and out of the history of gaming. In addition, it gives some sort of structure to a book that is trying to cover a huge field and gives the authors a central thread to head back to from their many diversions.

For Garriott, the idea of melding *D&D* and computers was both obvious and

natural. He was one of the driving forces behind *Ultima*, one of the first RPG-type games. It evolved through several versions, including *Ultima On-Line* and many versions of the simple PC game, before finally being overtaken by a new breed. The most cohesive section of the book works its way from the original text based Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs) to Garriott's *Ultima* and ends with *Everquest* and *Dark Age of Camelot* growing, and the *Star Wars* gaming universe just in the wings. It's a sign of how fast things change (the book was written in 2003) that *Star Wars* is already old hat and we have the massive *World of Warcraft*, along with enough other variations on the theme (like *City of Heroes*) available to satisfy most tastes. Indeed, *D&D On-line* is now with us...

The book does not focus too much on the games, but rather on what makes people want to play. For most of us that's an easy one: it is a social activity. The authors pick up on that theme and explore online gaming as the ideal follow-up to the pretty static version of FRP that I still play. Online you will eventually find your match: people who you like who also want to play at the speed and times that you want to. Of course the human psyche still wants the physical contact, so you get the apparent conundrum that members of virtual communities will often spend large amounts of money getting together for conventions. Just two months ago, we had a sixty-year-old American grandmother visit us for a couple of days as she toured the UK visiting her friends from the Rhyzom universe. Last month, on holiday in France, a French girl we'd never met in person drove an hour from Toulouse to spend a day with us. Community is everything.

Because it is looking at community, the book doesn't dwell for too long on the PS2 or X-box games. Until recently (past

King and Borland's publication date) neither had much in the way of online presence. Where the book does go is into the world of the First Person Shooter (FPS) from *Doom*, *Quake* and *Counterstrike* on through to where Jonathan Wendell became an international star. You may not have heard of Jonathan Wendell, but as Fatal1ty he became the world's best player of FPS games and earns well from it. Interestingly Wendell is still around and, at the moment, still number one. Here the FPS community is following in the footsteps of Wizards of The Coast's *Magic: The Gathering* tournaments and leagues. (WoTC, of course, now own *D&D* as part of Hasbro, the money from *Magic* enabling them to swallow up Gygax's TSR!)

But I'm falling into the same problem that the book exhibits. In attempting to cover a lot of gaming it starts to flounder around. Mind you, it gives me some measure of admiration for the authors as the simple task of a cohesive review seems to be beyond me.

Heck, the book even gets to the postal gaming hobby. Richard Bartle and his postal *Diplomacy* 'zine, *Sauce of the Nile*, get a mention, bringing in yet another influence, another form of community that loved to run conventions (and for all I know, still does).

The book is interesting and makes the point that, while community is what keeps a game running, it has to be a decent game in the first place. *The Sims* online is a classic failure. *The Sims* is a great solo PC game and one of the biggest selling ever. My son, Tom, played it for a long time. So *The Sims* online must be a success, right? Well, no. In *The Sims*, you have god-like control over your many Sims and get the fun of managing their lives and relationships for them. But online you are just one of many and you control, well, yourself.

The idea was that the community aspect would generate interest, but about what? Actually I'd rather go into *Everquest* and be a hero with my mates, killing the bad guys, than go down to the gym as a virtual ordinary person. *The Sims* online was boring. It failed. (That is a simplification as there were a number of mechanics related issues as well. But at base it was just no fun, so people stopped playing and went to find their communities elsewhere.) The next generation of Sims-type games is likely to be the sex games: *Naughty America* and the like. I'm not sure whether they will make it or not – after an initial surge (sorry) I think that will settle down to a niche group.

The book ends with Garriott working on his next idea: a new game where the language is king and you can mix the immersion of a single player game with the community of the big online games. Since then, it has already happened, at least in part, with the rise of instanced games. Most of the newer MMORPGs (Massive Multi-player Online RPGs) take this approach. In these games you have a central hub where you can meet and greet people, form your adventuring party, then head off into the wilderness. But when you enter a mission or a dungeon you enter it in your own instance of the game. Each adventuring group plays on its own. In effect, we are back to the small group of players doing a dungeon or wilderness adventure around the kitchen table.

Of course, an instanced game has its own problems. In the older MMORPGs like *Everquest* you could actually get trips organized with several tens of players. Some of the biggest and best *Everquest* trips I have seen were where my partner, Philly, and her friends would get together groups of about 60-70 players to take out a dragon. It would take at least 4 hours plus to get ready, then the attack

would be over (one way or another) in about a minute. You can't do that in an instance as it would need several groups and the whole point of the instance is that it is only your group in there. (*D&D Online* has this philosophy)

Perhaps the next big idea is owning the game. Supposedly the best example of this is Neverax's *The Ring*. Neverax are the developers of *Saga of Rhyzom*, the game which Philly event manages (amongst other things). *The Ring* takes us a step on from a trend that stretches back to some of the early FPS games. In these the game design tools were made available and people started developing their own scenarios (*Doom* being a good example). A similar approach was followed by *NeverWinter Nights*. The NWN toolset let you build everything you needed for a game – world tile, scenery, encounters... I have played a few of these games on "auto", where the GM just makes his game available and you play it as you would a book-delivered scenario. More interesting, and innovative, was a game developed by Tim Barnard called *Nepi* campaign. It used the NWN engine but was played with Tim in the game as an active GM, which meant that the encounters, rather than being simply scripted, had the subtlety that a "live" GM could interject.

Basic tools have been a feature in several other online games, including *Star Wars* where you can build your own houses. But *The Ring* is supposed to be a next stage with players having almost total control of the environment allowing, new levels of ownership and creation.

Well, I suppose I ought to say sub-creation really, if you will allow me a nod at Tolkien. You can see where it might all end up. All we need is a bit more control over the game mechanisms and we are back where we were thirty years ago when people wrote their own

games systems rather than use commercial ones.

As you can see this has morphed from a review into a discussion about online gaming, and has missed several areas that King & Borland look at. Mind you, my discussion has ignored the rise of the online market through first X-Box and X-Box 360 and the soon-to-arrive other Next Generation consoles. I think Nintendo will be the best, but will (as ever) lose out to the marketing machines of Sony and Microsoft. But I'm off again – if you like games then King & Borland's book is well worth a read; out of print, but not too expensive on Amazon.

Dungeons and Dreamers - Brad King and John Borland - McGraw-Hill - hardcover

End of the Beginning

By Cheryl Morgan

And so we come to book three. As is the way with trilogies (a law that Storm Constantine still respects though most people in the multi-volume fantasy industry seem to have abandoned it) there must be a conclusion. We must, at last, discover how the Wraeththu came to be. That, after all, was the point of the series.

But we can't just have that. *Ghosts of Blood and Innocence* is, after all, a work of fiction, a story book. The author needs to tell a tale. Fortunately there are plenty of hooks left over from the previous books in the series for her to hang her plot upon. And indeed, as we would expect of a writer of Constantine's experience, they were set up deliberately long ago.

There are a number of themes running through the Histories of the Wraeththu series, but perhaps the overriding one is

the matter of generations. The first generation of Wraeththu (except perhaps Thiede, whose origins are central to the entire mystery) were all incepted. They began life as humans and changed. The second generation, on the other hand, are born. Whatever taint of humanity they bear, it is in their genes, not in attitudes learned and held over from childhood. These are perhaps the true Wraeththu, a new race of beings, as they were intended to be.

Or were they intended? Constantine has given us plenty of potential culprits. Indeed, she's given us an entire War in Heaven as a background. Earth, it seems, has been the plaything of Higher Beings for millennia. The *sedmin* are by no means the loyal friends they first seemed, but they are also merely agents of a more remote, more mysterious race. Part of growing up for the Wraeththu (and here they show a very human side to their nature) is to learn not to be pawns, to take responsibility for their own destiny. Not just as individuals, but as a race, they need to grow up.

Ponclast considered her question. 'Savagery, in itself, can be a belief system. Youthful male humans are, or were, capable of terrible things. I did terrible things and at the time it seemed right. There was a heady euphoria to doing the unspeakable, like being a god. I believed that Varrs should control Megalithica – I wouldn't go so far as to say I planned world domination. Uigenna were a mess, and the other tribes weak and fragmented. I could see that Wraeththu needed order.'

Ponclast, you may remember, is the number one big bad villain of the entire Wraeththu saga. And yet, even he can learn. *In Ghosts of Blood and Innocence* he has at last come to terms with what he has done with his life, and found peace.

This doesn't tell you anything about what happens in the story, but it hopefully tells you everything about what happens in the book. It is, perhaps, a shame that it takes an external threat for the Wraeththu to put aside their differences and stand together, but that is also very human of them.

Of course they are not human. Indeed, that is the entire point of their existence. Another theme of the book is that we should ask, not just about the 'how' of the Wraeththu, but the 'why'. Was it necessary that humanity be superseded? Are the Wraeththu better people? If so, how? And was that what their creator(s) intended? The reason the book succeeds, rather than just being some pulp-style power trip of mankind being replaced by big-brained science fiction fans, is that Constantine recognizes that philosophy alone does not make a superior being. I'm not totally convinced that the world would be a better place if we were all Wraeththu rather than human, but I am absolutely convinced that Constantine thought deeply about what would make for better people in writing the books. That I'm always happy to admire.

There's a shiny new Tor hardcover of *Ghosts of Blood and Innocence* available in US shops any day now (if not already). But as usual I'll take time out to remind you, especially UK readers, that you can buy trade paperback versions of the same book from Constantine's own publishing company. You probably won't find the books in UK shops, but the nice Mr. Emsley at The Aust Gate can get copies for you. And Storm will be happy if you buy direct from her.

Ghosts of Blood and Innocence - Storm Constantine - Immanion Press - trade paperback

Ghosts of Blood and Innocence - Storm Constantine - Tor - hardcover

A Warm Un-Cozy Place

By Cheryl Morgan

New small presses seem to be starting up every day. Some of them will undoubtedly be very good, others you can quickly see are just a self-published author with one of his family masquerading as the "editor" or "public relations executive". How does one tell the difference? Generally the web site is a good give-away. It also helps if someone reputable is behind the book you are being offered. In the case of *Steel Sky* by Andrew C. Murphy I picked up on the backgrounds of the people running per Aspera <<http://www.perasperapress.com/>>, and on a rave blurb for the book from David Brin. I'm very glad I did, because if *Steel Sky* is an indicator of the sort of books we'll be seeing from per Aspera you'll be hearing a lot more about these folks here.

There's a certain well known fantasy book in which the hairy-footed heroes live in holes in the ground. This has always struck me as a little unpleasant. Murphy clearly agrees. His characters also live in a hole in the ground, and it isn't a nice place at all. The Hypogeum is a very deep hole in the ground that people fled to hundreds of years ago when life on the surface became unviable. Not that they remember this. They've been through a revolution or two since then, and now have a new religion that doesn't countenance a view of a world outside of the rock in which they are buried. A city like this has all sorts of resource constraints, and its government is necessarily harsh, including mandatory termination for non-productive citizens.

The boys lean over Moseley. In turn, they kiss his forehead and murmur their love for him. Beneath his mask the Deathsman smiles

sourly. At every terminus he attends there are tears and kisses and heartfelt words, but the sentiments are so often the same. Even the words and phrases the mourners use tend to be identical from one group to another, as if they all drew their thoughts from a single liturgy of grief. The Deathsman yearns for a spark of originality, a hint of transcendence.

Part of the maintenance of such a society involves giving the general population hope. This is why the government officially adopted the myth of The Winnower, a shadowy demon-figure who supposedly haunts the tunnels and punishes wrongdoers. But what if someone were to try to make The Winnower a reality? What is some self-appointed vigilante turned himself into a superhero and went round murdering villains?

Fortunately such a man should be caught very easily. The Hypogeum is a surveillance society. Cameras are everywhere, and although The Culminant is supposedly the ruler of the city, the real power lies with Orcus, the Chief Scrutator, the man who controls the surveillance network. Orcus is watching you. Or at least he thinks he is. But his network is hundreds of years old, he has problems with his incompetent heir and overly-ambitious daughter, and he's not sure that he can trust the city's AI.

If this sounds a bit like a comic book, don't worry, it isn't. Murphy is much more interested in his characters than in the fact of a superhero lead character. Indeed, in many ways The Winnower is not the lead character. Much attention is focused on Orcus and his fractious family; on Dr. Penn, a physician who can't bear to give up his patients to the Deathsman; on Amarantha and Cadell, a young couple trying to reconcile their principles with their social ambitions; and on Orel and Bernie, two lowly

engineers in the city's waterworks. Murphy has a complex, multi-viewpoint structure to his novel, and he carries it off very well. He hasn't just created a neat setting for a tale of derring-do, he has created a society.

They walk in silence for a while. They pass a shabby-looking man slumped against a wall. Around his neck he wears a sign that says "FAULTY CYBERNETICS. PLEASE GIVE." As they pass him, a bright bolt of electricity arcs down his robotic arm, making his shoulders jump.

It is also noticeable that the characters undergo significant development during the book. None of them, not even The Winnower, are particularly sympathetic. Orcus would not look out of place in the upper echelons of the Republican Party. Amarantha is horribly self-centered until it is too late. Cadell is caring but dim. Dr. Penn is always looking over his shoulder for the ghost of his dead mother, who he is sure will disapprove of his efforts, no matter how hard he tries to do good. They all learn lessons, but the only character who makes a significant improvement to his life is Orcus's fat, cowardly heir, known as Second Son, who grows from being a blubbering wreck, bullied by his sister, to being a fully-fledged megalomaniac.

"How about this, Father. Total vision means more than just seeing the present. More even than seeing the past. Total vision means seeing the future, the whole of eternity laid out before you. Do you know why that's possible, Father? It's because people aren't really people. They're robots, programmed by habit and personality. A man with total vision will always be able to foresee what the people around him will do next because they're really nothing more than cheap little puppets. They follow the same scripts over

and over, endlessly repeating themselves with little variations, until they just wear out, run down, and fall over."

Which brings me to ponder why *Steel Sky* was not picked up by a major publisher. There's no doubt that Murphy can write, and write well. The two things I think his book is missing, from a big publisher viewpoint, are a sympathetic character and impetus to the plot. There isn't quite enough to keep you turning the pages, so while someone like me can admire Murphy's world-building and philosophical speculations, a more casual reader might not find quite enough in the book to want to keep reading. *Steel Sky* is one of those books where I expect to see reviews complaining about "bad characterization", meaning that the reviewer didn't like any of the characters.

Thankfully I don't see this as a problem for Murphy. He can do the hard stuff — that is, write powerful prose and structure a complex novel — the rest ought to come easily. And indeed there should be a reasonable market for his work without it. I liked *Steel Sky* enough to have waved it at Gary Wolfe and Rick Kleffel while I was at World Horror Con. I hope the rest of per Aspera's output is as good.

Steel Sky - Andrew C. Murphy - per Aspera
- publisher's proof

Ideas Out of Time

By Cheryl Morgan

Having visited John Clute on several occasions I am well used to one of his favorite complaints about books — lack of clarity (and even accuracy) in

references. Not being an encyclopedist, I worry less about such things, but I am about to embark on an extended Clute rant.

The book in question is *On SF*, by Thomas M. Disch. It is full of interesting ideas about the not-a-genre, and some entertaining reviews, but it is badly in need of some framing and context.

There clearly has been some attempt to organize the material in the book, because it is divided into six sections. The material in each section appears to have some commonality, but it would have been useful to have had an introduction that talked about how and why the material was so organized.

Much more importantly, however, there is no attempt to set the material in temporal context. The material in the book ranges in date at least from 1976 to 1995. And I say at least because, while all of the origins of the articles are listed, many of them are not dated. Articles are simply described as having appeared in *Foundation*, or in the *New York Times Book Review*, or wherever.

Why is this important? Because without this dating the book presents itself as a single, supposedly coherent view of SF presented by Disch today, whereas actually it represents an evolution of his views over twenty years, during which time SF has changed considerably.

Take the opening article, for example. It is titled "The Embarrassments of Science Fiction", and it was first published in 1976. The core argument of the article is that SF is a literature for children, and it contains quotes like this:

No less an authority than Kingsley Amis has pronounced sex and love as being outside the sphere of interest proper to science fiction. Other subjects commonly dealt with by mainstream writers are also presumed not to

be of interest to sf readers, such as the nature of the class system and the real exercise of power within that system. Although there is no intrinsic reason (except difficulty) that sf should not venture into such areas, sf writers have characteristically preferred imaginary worlds in which, to quote Sprague de Camp, "all men are mighty, all women beautiful, all problems simple, and all life adventuresome."

Someone coming to that quote today is liable to find her jaw dropping and assuming that Disch knows nothing whatsoever about SF. But of course it was written in or before 1976, when no one had heard of Ken MacLeod or China Miéville. SF has come a long way since then.

Another good example is presented by the (undated) Foundation article, "Science Fiction as a Church". Disch describes his realization that the behavior of science fiction fans was a lot like that of Pentecostal Christians whose worship he had witnessed.

That is the parallel that I observed [at a convention] in Minneapolis. Blessed was the text they preached; blessed are those who read sf for they shall inherit the future. There were also hints of powers that some few people possess, and hints that these secret mental powers of various sorts are observably related to one's reading of science fiction. Such powers are not uncommonly associated with religious experience. There is also the promise made to Noah. Like Noah, many sf writers and their fans feel they have the inside track on the approaching catastrophe, whatever it may be, and they're counting on being among the happy few who survive it. Need I cite chapter and verse?

Again, if you attend a convention today, you are unlikely to see anything like

what Disch describes. If you see worship of any sort, it will probably be adulation of celebrities, especially at media conventions. But Disch's description is spot on if applied to the "fans are slans" attitude that prevailed in fandom 30 years ago.

Reading Disch's article made it clear to me why long-time fans hate the New Wave so much. What it represented for them was a betrayal of the slannish ideal, a shameful abandoning of the idea of the SF community as the coming master race, and a hateful concentration on the wholly irrelevant idea of trying to create literature. It would have been like a church turning its back on religion and concentrating instead on selling music recorded by the choir and organist. It may also explain the whole Trufen nonsense. Fans abandoned science fiction and became "fans of fandom", not because they had lost interest in the ideas and stories, but because they felt that science fiction had abandoned them. If their god had retired, they'd just have to carry on the church without him.

Meanwhile, back with the book.

Disch's criticism is interesting, incisive and, as good criticism probably should be, occasionally annoying. Disch doesn't go in for the same flights of language as Clute: his prose is elegant but always clear. On the other hand, while Clute always sounds as if he knows more than anyone else, he rarely sounds like he is talking down to people. Disch, unfortunately, often cannot hide his contempt for some of his fellow authors, and for the more daft enthusiasms of fandom. There are times when this is very valuable. Disch's excoriation of Jerry Pournelle and the campaign to sell Ronald Reagan's Star Wars program to SF readers is a joy to behold. But the average SF fan, reading what Disch has to say, may well come away with a feeling of, "this man thinks I'm an idiot

and despises me." That may indeed be how Disch feels, but it won't earn him many friends.

Of course it is much more acceptable to vent your ire on individual works of fiction rather than on the industry in general. Disch is a master of the destructive review, and many of his targets probably deserve the opprobrium he heaps upon them. Here he is on Stephen Donaldson.

What I object to in White Gold Wielder is rather that neither in its moment-to-moment depiction of psychological experience nor in the broader operation of the plot at an allegorical level does it offer effective insights into the miserablisme it celebrates. Simply put, it wallows in self-pity, and the diffuse fogginess of language provides a kind of smoke-screen that allows naïve readers to wallow along without the discomfort of self-awareness.

There are mistakes, of course. No one can write reviews on a regular basis without coming a cropper, mainly because you don't have time to read the book as deeply as you might like. And of course we are all prone to the odd fannish enthusiasm. I'm sure that in years to come people will point to my enjoyment of Naomi Novik's *Temeraire* books as evidence that I am completely lacking in literary taste and that therefore nothing else I have written is of any value.

The only real howler I spotted is that, like many other people, Disch assumes that the bridge on which the squatters live in William Gibson's *Virtual Light* is the Golden Gate. It is a bit like the way that Americans always assume that "London Bridge" is the thing with turrets and the lift-up bed — it is the only bridge in the city that they know. Besides, Disch may have been working

from a copy of the book that some idiot publisher had adorned with a picture of the Golden Gate. In addition, Disch, unaccountably, thinks that Robert A. Heinlein's *Friday* is a wonderful novel. I won't complain, because he knows really good SF when he sees it. Here he is on *The Book of the New Sun*.

Rarely has there been a work of genre fiction in which the import of the story is so elusive, to say nothing of the bare facts. Such was its appeal to the literary detective in me that halfway through the last volume I could resist no longer and phoned up my old friend and fellow Wolfe-enthusiast, John Clute, to suggest that we not wait a dozen or so years that even a masterpiece is supposed to age in the cask but set about at once to edit a volume of interpretive essays, supplemented with a glossary and other suitable rites of scholarship.

Little did Disch know that, after *Citadel of the Autarch*, there were another eight books to come before the series would be finished.

As an enthusiastic devourer of works of science fiction criticism I would certainly recommend *On SF* to like-minded folks. As I said earlier, Disch will annoy you occasionally, but he will also give you plenty to think about. The most important thing is to remember to read the book in context. Think about when the articles were written, and you'll discover a lot about the development of SF. Treat the book as a single chunk of thought dating from 2005, which is how it is presented, and you will reach a whole lot of very wrong conclusions.

On SF - Thomas M. Disch - University of Michigan Press - trade paperback

Out of Synch

By Cheryl Morgan

The most significant British book appearing for the first time in the US around now is *Pushing Ice* by Alastair Reynolds. I'm a little surprised that American editions of Reynolds' books still lag behind UK publication, but then so do Ken MacLeod's. I guess the publishers have good reasons.

This column is generally about books that I have previously reviewed. Jonathan Strahan's Best Short Novels 2006 doesn't quite qualify, because it is brand new, but I have already reviewed many of the stories it contains. While anthologies of short stories are often very hit and miss because of the vast size of the field and variation in quality/taste, best novellas are much easier to pin down. Strahan has included a bunch of Hugo nominees in Ian McDonald's "The Little Goddess", Kelly Link's "Magic for Beginners" and Connie Willis' "Inside Job". He has also picked two of my favorites from the consistently excellent PS Publishing output: *Fishin' with Grandma Matchie*, by Steve Erikson, and *The Cosmology of the Wider World* by Jeffrey Ford. US readers should pick up the book for the latter two alone.

Talking of Hugo nominees, UK publishers are conveniently getting some of the novel nominees out in paperback just in time for people to vote. Orbit have a mass market edition of Charlie Stross's *Accelerando*, and HarperCollins have a trade paperback version of George R.R. Martin's *A Feast for Crows*. They are both excellent books.

Pushing Ice - Alastair Reynolds - Ace - hardcover

Best Short Novels: 2006 - Jonathan Strahan (ed.) - SFBC - hardcover

Accelerando - Charles Stross - Orbit - mass market paperback

A Feast for Crows - George R.R. Martin - Voyager - trade paperback

Miscellany

By Cheryl Morgan

Nebula Awards

The winners are:

Novel: *Camouflage* - Joe Haldeman (Ace).

Novella: "Magic for Beginners" - Kelly Link (*Magic for Beginners*, Small Beer Press).

Novellette: "The Faery Handbag" - Kelly Link (*The Faery Reel*, Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling, Eds., Viking Press).

Short Story: "I Live With You" - Carol Emshwiller (*F&SF*).

Script: *Serenity* - Joss Whedon (Universal Pictures, Sept. 2005).

Andre Norton Award: *Valiant: A Modern Tale of Faerie* - Holly Black (Simon & Schuster)

Considering this is the Nebulas, this is actually a very good set of results. I'm a little disappointed that Geoff Ryman's *Air* did not walk off with Best Novel, but it has won four other major awards so I guess I shouldn't complain. Considering some of the other nominees, I'm relieved that Joe Haldeman won.

Carl Brandon Awards

The winners of these awards have recently been announced (so no excitement at the ceremony at Wiscon). They are:

Carl Brandon Parallax Award (for works created by people of color): Walter Mosley for *47*.

Carl Brandon Kindred Award (for works highlighting issues of race and ethnicity): Susan Vaught for *Stormwitch*.

Interestingly both winners are YA novels.

Full short and long lists, Tiptree style, are promised to appear soon on the Carl Brandon Society web site <<http://www.carlbrandon.org/>>.

Neffy Awards

The nominees for this year's Neffy Awards have been announced. Apparently I'm up for Best Fan Writer (along with Frank Wu!) and *Emerald City* is up for Best Electronic Fanzine (sigh). The results are due to be announced at BayCon.

Edgar Awards

Mystery novels are not a field that *Emerald City* normally covers, but I'm pleased to report that Jeffrey Ford's *The Girl in the Glass* has won an Edgar in the Best Paperback Original category. It is an excellent book and I'm very sorry that the mere homeopathic quantities of the fantastic that it contained prevented it from gaining wider recognition in the F&SF field.

Best Professional Editor Split

It has come to my attention that there is some confusion in the industry as to how the proposed split in the Best Professional Editor Hugo is going to work. The confusion appears to have arisen because the original proposal got significantly modified during the

Business Meeting in Glasgow. Some people are still working off the original proposal, and not what was actually passed.

The official text of what was passed in Glasgow is printed on page 12 of L.A.Con IV's Progress Report IV (available online at <http://www.laconiv.org/2006/pdf/laconiv-pr4.pdf>). As that's a big PDF, I'm reproducing the new category definitions here:

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

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

Please note that this does NOT require anthology and collection editors to produce four books every year. The requirement is a minimum of four books lifetime, of which one must be in the year to which the awards apply.

Hopefully a more easily accessible version of this will appear on the L.A.Con IV web site soon, when poor Chaz Baden has a spare moment in his undoubtedly busy life.

BDPs Online

There have been a few complaints around US fandom about two of Interaction's major events having been short-listed for the Best Dramatic Presentation: Short Form Hugo. Apparently there were even suggestions that works not easily available to US fans should be banned from the Hugos. The phrase "now they know how the rest of

the world feels” comes to mind, but of course such a motion would have no chance of getting through the Business Meeting.

But the Interaction Committee (and the Events team in particular) are keen that more people should get to see those works. As I think I have explained before, copyright restrictions on the music used prevent us from publishing a video of *Lucas Back in Anger*, but Ian Sorensen does have a web site <<http://www.soren.demon.co.uk/lbia/Introduction.html>> with clips and photos.

In addition a video of Kim Newman and Paul McAuley’s Prix Victor Hugo speech is now available online <<http://www.interaction.worldcon.org.uk/hugo.htm>>. Do take a look, it downloads very quickly over broadband and only takes around 20 minutes to play. It is very funny.

I’d also encourage you to take a look at when I think will be a leading contender for BDP: Short Form for next year. It is a film of Terry Bisson’s wonderful short story, “They’re Made Out Of Meat”. It has already won the Science Fiction Museum’s Short Film Festival, and it is a fine example of what can be done on film with a very literary short story. You can find it here: <[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V-](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V-NAvPzdjj0&search=made%20out%20of%20meat)

[NAvPzdjj0&search=made%20out%20of%20meat](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V-NAvPzdjj0&search=made%20out%20of%20meat)>

Rainbow Opera

Elizabeth Knox has contacted me to let me know that the book sold in the UK as *The Rainbow Opera* is in fact a re-named version of *Dreamhunter* and not the second volume in the series. My apologies for the confusion. It is occasionally hard to work out what is

going on when Amazon UK lists two works with different titles. Unless you are sharp and notice that one is a US import it can lead to all sorts of mistakes.

Editorial Matters

By Cheryl Morgan

This issue is being produced just in time for the great rush of Memorial Day Weekend conventions in the US. In particular paper copies will be available at both BayCon and Wiscon. Kevin will be at the former, I’ll be at the latter. If you pick up a copy of *Emerald City* at either convention, welcome, and I hope you enjoy the magazine.

There isn’t a lot to say about World Horror Con that I didn’t say in the blog, which is basically that we had a great time despite the convention. It looked like a con, it felt like a con, but it was full of people I didn’t know talking about films and books that had no interest for me. Thankfully a whole bunch of people, including Peter Straub, Kim Newman, Gary Wolfe, Rick Kleffel, Chris Roberson, John Picacio, the folks from Tachyon, Night Shade and Locus, and many others I have probably forgotten, conspired to make it a fun weekend.

Immediately after getting back from Wiscon I will be turning round and going back to UK. This is hideously inconvenient for all sorts of reasons, but I have to abide by the INS rules or I’ll be banned from the US for the rest of my life, so I’m going. I expect to be back briefly for Worldcon, and for a much more extended stay towards the end of the year.

As with last issue, the presence of actual fee-paying work has made a major dent in my reading schedule. There are at

least five books that I wanted to read but have not got around to. Apologies are due in particular to Ken MacLeod and Greg Keyes, because I had promised reviews of *Giant Lizards from Another Star* and *The Blood Knight* for this issue. They will be top priority for next time. Also coming up in #130 will be *Infoquake* by David Louis Edelman and *Snake Moon* by Ray Manzarek. I'm not making any more promises than that, partly because I'm likely to be very busy again, and partly because I have no idea what will be waiting for me when I get back to Somerset. I'm hoping to pick up *Rainbow Bridge* by Gwyneth Jones and *Keeping It Real* by Justina Robson, but I don't know when I'll see them. In July, of course, we get to the books the publishers have been saving up to launch at Worldcon, and my world goes crazy.

Best wishes,

Cheryl

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