

EMERALD CITY #S3

The Bay Area Collection

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Introduction

Yes, this is another special issue of *Emerald City*. In celebration of ConJosé I am publishing an entire issue of review of SF&F books set in the San Francisco Bay Area. And a damn good collection it is too.

As this issue is designed mainly for distribution at the con, hopefully to people not familiar with the 'zine, I have included a number of reviews from back issues, but there are also several new reviews in here, so regular readers should not feel hard done by.

And if you do pick up this 'zine at the Worldcon, hello and welcome. I'm Cheryl, and I'm responsible for all this stuff. For reasons too complicated to go into here, I probably won't be able to attend the convention, so I'm afraid I can't say hello in person. However, this issue should give you an excellent idea of what *Emerald City* is all about, and you can go to the web site (<http://www.emcit.com/>) and see lots more like this. Hope you like it.

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The History Man

One of my main regrets about *Emerald City* to date is that it has not featured any works by the world's greatest science fiction writer. And no, I don't mean Asimov or Clarke, though both of them are also sadly absent from these pages. I mean, of course, Philip K. Dick. Thankfully this special issue has given me an excuse to remedy that dreadful oversight, and cover another past Hugo winner to boot.

Ostensibly *The Man in the High Castle* is a human interest story about life in a world where Germany and Japan won the Second World War. It is an "alternate now", rather than an alternate history, in Harry Turtledove style, or a Jon Courtenay Grimwood alternate future. Dick sets the story at the time he was writing it and tries to show how the world of the book might be different from the one he knew.

The story follows a small cast of disparate characters with minor connections to each other. Nobusuke Tagomi is the head of an important trade mission based in San Francisco in the Japanese-occupied West Coast. He is worried about an impending visit from a mysterious Mr. Baynes, who claims to be a Swedish businessman, but whom Tagomi suspects to be a German spy.

Frank Frink has changed his nose and his surname, and fled to San Francisco, but somewhere in the records is the evidence that he is really Frank Fink, New York Jew and therefore enemy of the Reich. Frank lives in fear of being found out, and of being returned to the German-occupied East Coast for extermination.

Robert Childan is the owner of American Artistic Handicrafts, Inc., an exclusive San Francisco shop catering primarily to Japanese businessmen, most of whom have a passion for authentic American

memorabilia from before the War. The market in such artifacts is, of course, drowned in fakes; after all, the Japanese can't tell the difference and bilking them gives the Americans a small taste of revenge. Childan connects the other two, as Tagomi is a customer and Frink works for a company that manufactures fake antiques.

Meanwhile, Frink's ex-wife, Juliana, has fled to Denver in the neutral Rocky Mountain States in search of, well, something better to do with her life than put up with Frank. She is linked to the others, partially by her relationship with Frink, but mainly through a book that touches all of their lives. *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy*, by Hawthorne Abendsen, is a famous novel, recently published and immediately banned by the Germans, which depicts a fictional world in which Germany and Japan lost the Second World War.

I'm sure that you all see the beautiful conceit here, and quite probably the reason for it. Dick makes it all the more special by not falling for the easy trap of having Abendsen's book reflect our own world. Instead he has Abendsen create all sorts of new twists in the history of the War that produce the same result, but create a much different world. In Abendsen's world, for example, all of Europe lies under the rule of the British Empire and Churchill is still in power in 1962, growing more and more unreasonable by the day. This horrifies many of the book's readers, who cannot imagine a world run by the sort of bloodthirsty maniacs who would commit dreadful war crimes such as the fire-bombing of German cities. Yes, Dick doesn't miss a trick.

He told us about our own world, she thought as she unlocked the door of her motel room. This, what's around us now. In the room she

again switched on the radio. He wants us to see it for what it is.

Hmm, well maybe that was laying it on a bit thick. Presumably Dick wanted to make sure that the message got through. And by and large it does. Humans are, after all, humans, and we can learn from their behavior no matter how strange the environment we find them in.

Along the way, of course, we get entertained too. Frank and a colleague set up their own business and suffer triumph and disaster. The saga of Mr. Baynes is played out in dramatic detail. Childan discovers pride in America. And Juliana does something important with her life. But above all the book has that particular Dick magic of always keeping the reader slightly on edge. You never quite know, in a Phil Dick book, whether you are really sure what is going on, quite what is going to happen next, and whether that something might not be something truly awful that has just been hinted at. Maybe it does take a paranoid to write truly paranoid books, but whatever the reason, Phil Dick has left us a wonderful treasury of fascinating and disturbing books, and *The Man in the High Castle* is one of his finest.

The Man in the High Castle - Philip K. Dick - Vintage - softcover

Art in the War Zone

Most of the novels reviewed here concentrate on the dark side of San Francisco. They center on the Tenderloin, on crime and street life. Pat Murphy's contribution, *The City, Not Long After*, on the other hand, looks at the bright side of The City. San Francisco is, after all, the capital of Flower Power,

the city of free love, of gay emancipation, of anti-war protests and experimental art of all kinds. It is SF, the city of science fiction.

And so, not long after the Plague, the few survivors amongst the people of San Francisco are playing in the ruins. They want for little. There are shops, offices and homes full of stuff that the dead no longer need. There are parks in which they can grow food, and a market where they can trade salvaged goods with the people of the more extensive farmlands of the Central Valley. And having nothing else to do, they make art.

And she found things, though not what she was looking for. Under the reception desk in the lobby of a downtown office building, she found a tiny village built of mud bricks and pebbles. The huts were thatched with eucalyptus leaves that had long since lost their pungent smell. In an alley off Mission Street, she found a red brick wall decorated with running buffalo and deer. In a vacant lot south of Market, she found a tower constructed of crystal doorknobs, clear glass bottles, window panes, wine glasses, and crystal tableware of all varieties. The ground surrounding the tower was littered with rainbows, broken shards of colored light that shifted with the movement of the sun.

Jax, the heroine of the story, is the daughter of a famous San Franciscan peace campaigner. The full import of her history does not become clear until much later in the book, and I'm not going to spoil the story for you. However, for reasons that you will discover, Jax's mother flees the City and ends up on a small farm near Sacramento. For many years she is able to raise her daughter in peace and safety. But then The General arrives.

General Miles, nicknamed "Fourstar", is determined to rebuild America. To do

so, naturally, he must restore order. There must be government, and because of the desperate state of the country it must be a military government. Everyone must work together in the rebuilding effort, and so ensure that they do all forms of dissent must be stamped out. People should not be allowed to read subversive books from before the Plague that talk about freedom and civil rights and other dangerous concepts. And above all, that annoying cadre of lunatics, layabouts and malcontents that has taken over San Francisco must be destroyed.

After her mother's death, following detention and torture by Fourstar's men, Jax heads into The City to warn the artist community of the impending invasion. There she meets various colorful personalities: Mrs Migsdale who edits the local newspaper and every day throws cryptic messages in bottles into the ocean; The Machine, who builds robots and thinks of them as his children; Lily, who collects skulls and displays them in department store windows; and Danny-boy, whose ambition is to paint the Golden Gate Bridge blue.

The message of Fourstar's impending invasion is not new. The artists have heard it often enough from traders, although the news that he might actually be on the march is of some interest. Some, like Snake, the former gang leader turned graffiti artist, recognize that a little planning might be in order. Much to Jax's horror, however, the San Franciscans decide to fight their war, not with guns, but with art.

CERTIFICATE OF DEATH

*Please consider yourself removed from
combat.*

*Look at it this way - we could have killed
you.*

*If you don't stop fighting, we really will kill
you next time.*

Signed,

The People of San Francisco

Armed with vastly superior knowledge of the terrain, and the surprise that comes from their unconventional tactics, the artists hold out for a long time against the invaders. Many of the troops do defect, as they are encouraged to do. But while this book might be a fantasy (ghosts of San Francisco's past play a small but vital role in the resistance), it is no naïve Disney fairy tale. Murphy is far too honest to resolve the story without bloodshed.

Overall this is a beautiful, delicate and, as I have come to expect from Pat Murphy, highly amusing tale of the rightness of resistance to violence, and of the inevitable futility of that course of action. Peace is something that we can only achieve at a cost. The question is whether the cost we choose to pay is temporary sadness, or permanent subjugation to the whims of General Miles and his ilk. Furthermore, the more Peace we want, the higher the cost, and sometimes that price is never worth paying.

The irony is, of course, that the people of San Francisco have, in recent months, along with the population of the rest of America, fallen solidly in line with General Miles' message. Faced with a dangerous threat from Outside, the people of America have freely given away some of their civil rights (and more significantly most of the civil rights of visitors to their country) and have invited armed men into their lives that they might have Peace without any danger to themselves. These days, few publishers would dare run with a book in which the heroes resist the resurrection of America and describe the

American flag as ugly. Perhaps we are in need of a heavy dose of art.

The City, Not Long After - Pat Murphy - Bantam - softcover

The Universal Maze

*As I was going up the stairs
I met a man who wasn't there
He wasn't there again today
I wish, I wish, he'd go away*

Like *The City Not Long After*, *Vanishing Point* also deals with a world in which most of the people have disappeared. However, Michaela Roessner isn't satisfied with anything simple like a plague. No, in *Vanishing Point* people have done just that, vanished. One day they were there, the next day the world woke up and most of mankind was gone, as if they had never been, except that their works were left behind them. (There's a small wrinkle to do with time zones here, but let's not nit pick.)

The Vanishing, as the people of the Bay Area come to call it, has a traumatic effect on the few survivors. Some cling to their old homes in the hope that their loved ones will re-appear as suddenly as they went; others join cults; and yet others settle down to building a new world from the wreckage of the old. The book focuses on one such community that, for reasons not entirely explained, chooses to base itself in the Winchester Mystery House in San José.

Much of the book is given over to the various problems, both practical and psychological, suffered by the survivors. The book is set 30 years from the Vanishing, and many children have been born since, but even they are scarred by

the event because their parents are so crazy. A substantial chunk of the book is also a none-too-subtle dig at fundamentalist Christians, specifically the Rapture crowd. The Vanishing is, after all, exactly what they have been expecting, and the book shows what nasty and dangerous people those who did not get Taken Up will become. It also has a wonderfully apposite fate in store for this group.

The main interest in the book, however, is in unraveling what caused the Vanishing, and in discovering what effects it has had on the world. One of the leading characters is an elderly woman physicist who helps resolve the issue. Some of the explanation is a little fuzzy - I'm still not sure why whole organisms should be affected rather than just clumps of matter dropping out, other than that it is necessary for the plot - but there is a genuine attempt to make the book serious SF and not just a convenient fantasy.

All of which is well and good, but Roessner has gone the extra mile and wrapped the quantum uncertainty deeper into the novel. Which is why, of course, it is set in the Winchester Mystery House, one of the few places in the world where it really does seem like you could turn a corner and end up in a different universe. It is why the book quotes surreal nursery rhymes and nonsense poems like the one at the head of this review. And it is why Roessner had me leaping out of bed in the middle of the night (I couldn't stop reading to sleep) to find my copy of Borges' *Collected Fictions* to find out what *The Garden of Forking Paths* had to do with all this. In short, it is a very clever book indeed.

Michaela Roessner won the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer in 1989, presumably for short fiction. *Vanishing Point*, her second novel, was

published in 1993. Her recent output has been primarily her series of Italian Renaissance fantasies (currently comprising *The Stars Dispose* and *The Stars Compel*). They are clever books, and I enjoyed them. I also like the fact that they give sympathetic treatment to a relationship that was fairly normal for the times, but would now be excoriated as gay pedophilia. But having read *Vanishing Point* I am left wondering why she is wasting her time writing merely good books when she can produce wonderful stuff like this? I hope she comes back to this sort of work when the Stars series is finished.

Vanishing Point - Michaela Roessner - Tor - hardcover

Angel of Death

Tanner watched the children playing among the methane fires of the neighborhood dump. Overhead, a sick green and orange haze muted the late afternoon sun.

Cyberpunk is one of those sub-genres that seem to have come and gone having failed to fulfill its promise. It has left a few shining beacons in its wake, William Gibson's *Neuromancer* and the movie, *Blade Runner*, but apparently little else of note. Quite possibly it is because the whole thing is just too depressing, and consequently no one wants to read it, or even to write it the way it should be done. But every so often you come across a little gem. Just recently I discovered Pat Cadigan's amazingly predictive novel, *Synners*, and for this special issue of *Emerald City* I found something that reproduces the gloom and despair of *Blade Runner* on paper.

Richard Paul Russo's *Destroying Angel* is the first of a series of three novels featuring the San Francisco homicide detective, Frank Carlucci. In this book, however, Carlucci is merely a support character. The majority of narrative is carried by Louis Tanner, an ex-cop who quit the SFPD when his partner was killed in a bungled raid. Tanner, having much experience in the drugs business, now spends his time as a smuggler, shipping contraband such as high quality birds nests to the New Hong Kong orbital in return for pharmaceuticals, most of which he donates to the free clinics in the city.

Years ago, when Tanner was a cop, a series of unexplained and brutal murders rocked the city. The victims were always found in water, normally in pairs chained together, the manacles fused to their flesh. A pair of angel wings was always tattooed on the inside of their nostrils. Clearly this was the work of a serious lunatic, but the killer was never found. After a while his activities ceased. Now, several years later, he is back.

Back when the whole affair started, one of Tanner's prime targets, the drug lord Rattan, had dropped a hint that he knew who the Chain Killer was. But Tanner wasn't sure that his bosses would pay such a notorious criminal the massive reward he was asking for the information. Then Tanner quit the Force, and the Chain Killer vanished. Now the case is live again, but Rattan has since killed two cops and is in hiding deep in the Tenderloin. No cop is likely to be able to get anywhere near him. Except Tanner is no longer a cop. In fact he's sort of in the same business as Rattan, and he knows the drug lord better than anyone currently on the Force. Carlucci, of course, would never ask for Tanner's help in such a dangerous enterprise, but as the killings mount up Tanner realizes

that he is the city's only hope. Someone has to go into the Tenderloin, find Rattan, and get the information that he has for sale.

Russo's Tenderloin is, of course, a massive exaggeration of the area that San Franciscans like to scare tourists with. In the past it probably was dangerous for the police to enter those streets. These days? Well, I have walked through the area and I'm not dead and wasn't raped. But Russo does a wonderful job of creating a section of the city run wild with crazed street gangs in which the alleyways are death traps and the only safe ways in are via seedy casinos in the back of mysterious Chinatown emporiums, or via tunnels under the city. There's a little bit of tongue-in-cheek *Man from U.N.C.L.E.* style in there somewhere, but it never detracts from the general air of gloom and imminent death.

What I liked best about the book is that Russo pulls no punches whatsoever. Many of the criminals that Tanner encounters are quite mad (including, of course, the Destroying Angel himself). There are elements here of the very best of Batman. But unlike in comic books, the bad guys are utterly ruthless. There are no staged, balletic fights, no last minute rescues, and no inevitable triumph of super powers over numbers. There is just hard, gritty police work, and brutal, terrifying murders.

Tanner and Carlucci do, of course, catch the villain in the end. But Russo does an absolutely brilliant job of deflating every possible expectation of the end of an adventure novel. This is cyberpunk: it is grimy and dark and depressing and there is no escape.

Tanner just shook his head. [...] "You know, this is one fucked-up world we live in."

Carlucci gave him a long, hard laugh. "Big surprise, Tanner. Look, I won't argue that. But there's something you ought to keep in mind."

"Yeah, what's that?"

"This is the only world we've got."

Perfect.

Russo has written two more books featuring Carlucci. All three are out of print, but I managed to find *Destroying Angel* in a second hand shop, and miraculously found the other two brand new on the shelves of Murder One in London. I'm very much looking forward to reading them.

Destroying Angel - Richard Paul Russo - Ace - softcover

City Life

Most of the books reviewed here are set in the Bay Area with human characters. But in *Our Lady of Darkness*, by Fritz Leiber, the city of San Francisco itself becomes one of the more important characters. The book is a dark fantasy (and a World Fantasy Award winner) that deals with the mysterious (and tongue twisting) science of megapolisomancy.

No, really, it does. You see, there was this guy called Thibaut de Castries, who lived in The City at the turn of the century and who fancied himself as a bit of a magician. He was well in with all the major local literary figures of the time - Jack London, Dashiell Hammett, Ambrose Bierce, Clark Ashton-Smith - and he had this theory about how big cities, especially skyscrapers, were kind of demonic.

OK, so he was a bit of a nut. But years later, Franz Westen, a struggling writer of dark fantasies who makes most of his money doing novelizations of the famously spooky TV series, *Weird Underground*, finds a copy of de Castries' book in a dingy second-hand shop in the Haight. Sold with it is a strange diary that Westen, being in the same profession, recognizes as being the work of Ashton-Smith. Now writers of scary fiction have to be, I guess, a little on edge, but they don't have to believe in what they write. So if Ashton-Smith did believe that there was something to old de Castries' theories, well, perhaps there was. I mean, anything can happen in a city whose most famous building is called a pyramid and looks like a Japanese fighting robot, right?

As you can see, the book is delightfully precious. All sorts of local literary characters drift in and out of it. Why, there is even a mention of some guy called Leiber who has apparently written one or two good things. Not to mention the fact that Fritz is writing about a character called Franz who lives in the same part of San Francisco as he does and has the same favorite haunts.

The best part of the book, however, is the way that the city is such an integral part of it. Leiber is forever describing routes, landmarks and views out over the rooftops. He works out a basic theory for De Castries' megapolisomancy and uses a map of the city to get details of the curse in the story right. The city's history, especially the great earthquake of 1906, is integral to the plot. And of course Leiber draws parallels between De Castries' frightened premonitions about big cities and our modern concerns about pollution. This is urban fantasy in its own right, with not a single punk elf in sight.

I'd not read a lot of Leiber before this, and was delighted at how good it was. If

you like Lovecraft, and you like books full of sneaky and elegant references to reality, check this out. You will enjoy it as much as I did.

Our Lady of Darkness - Fritz Leiber - Orb - softcover (published together with *Conjure Wife* as *Dark Ladies*)

Reverse Darwinism

Well, well, yet another book in which disaster strikes mankind and the world is depopulated. In *Earth Abides*, George R. Stewart goes much further than either Pat Murphy or Michaela Roessner. His great catastrophe, like Murphy's, is a plague, but he postulates that it is so virulent that there are only a few hundred survivors, maybe less, in the whole of the USA.

Stewart's hero, Isherwood Williams ("Ish"), is a graduate student in geography at UC Berkeley. While away on a field trip he is bitten by a rattler and spends several days holed up in a woodland cabin fighting off the venom. When he emerges, there are almost no humans left alive. Everything else is pretty much as it was, save for the occasional evidence of looting, but there are no people. They are all dead.

Eventually Ish manages to find a few other people alive in the Bay Area who have not been driven mad by the disaster. He sets up a small community based around his parents' home and starts to plan for the future. But alas, most of his plans come to naught, for he is opposed by that most implacable and terrible of foes, the author.

Stewart's thesis, which drives all of the plot, is that civilization is an aberration that arises thanks to a peculiar set of circumstances. It needs a strong leader,

and probably some sort of smart subordinate, to make it happen. (Arthur's Britain, for example, could not have happened without both Arthur and Merlin.) Once started, however, it has a life of its own. To succeed in civilization you have to copy the drive and initiative of its founders. But Stewart claims that, left to their own devices, human beings are essentially lazy and will not want to be civilized. Indeed, he adds, they will be much happier that way.

The final point is a matter of conjecture and is not provable either way. The rest of the argument, however, is debatable. Having spent the last 3 years watching a Worldcon committee develop, I have a certain amount of sympathy with the idea that drive, initiative and willingness to take responsibility are not common human traits. However, I'm not convinced by Stewart's arguments. In this my lack of suspension of disbelief is seriously hampered by the fact that the book was published in 1949, and consequently has a very different view of the world to that which many people have now.

The age of the book is obvious to begin with from the style. The writing is much more pedestrian and didactic than most books published today. Stewart also clearly comes from an intellectual environment that believes human beings can be easily categorized. The book is full of references to how people's reactions to the plague can be understood and predicted once you know whether they are black or white, male or female, intellectual or laborer. Thankfully this sort of sociology has been well and truly debunked in the 50+ years since *Earth Abides* was written.

More pertinently, however, Stewart believes that most of the benefits of civilization can only be achieved through government planning. Whether this is a result of 1940s attitudes, or

simply a product of the People's Republic of Berkeley, I'm not sure, but it heavily colors his argument. For example, should I find myself in a similar position to Stewart's hero, amongst the first things I would do would be to secure a supply of water and to look for a small wind generator. Ish does neither. When power and water fail, he and his community simply accept the fact. Ish wants to do something about it, but feels that this is impossible without Government. For the most part they don't even bother to farm, relying on scavenging from grocery stores to begin with, and then on hunting. Even agriculture is too much work for them.

(As an aside here, Stewart seems to have little idea how public utilities work. While electricity fails very quickly, the water supply keeps working for years. Stewart doesn't seem to realize that in order to provide water pressure in homes you need to pump water upwards, and that is normally done using electricity. I guess if he had that little interest in the process it is reasonable for him to assume that others would be similarly ignorant.)

I should say that, stylistic issues aside, the book is well-written and full of beautiful pathos. It won something called the International Fantasy Award (now defunct, but it is an honor that the book shares with *Lord of the Rings*), and probably deservedly so. It was also made into a popular film. However, science fiction is a genre littered with tales of triumph over adversity. For the SF fan, it is hard not to develop a dying urge to slap Stewart's characters around the face and remind them that they are human beings, not sheep.

Earth Abides - George R. Stewart - Fawcett - softcover

Thursday's Rags Become Her

The last time an author got this up close and personal with me it was Elizabeth Hand. She, of course, has a very good case for claiming synchronicity: there was no way she could have known in advance that I would end up reading *Glimmering* in Logan Airport. William Gibson's case is not so watertight. Were I sufficiently paranoid I could make a case that he could have found out all these things about me. Fortunately for you, dear readers, I have no intention of doing that, but all the same the connections are startling.

Gibson's new novel is named after my favourite song by the exceptionally wonderful Velvet Underground. It is set in San Francisco, and surely it cannot be a coincidence that the cover designer, in looking for a cute way to mangle his spelling, should have decided to replace "to", not with "2", but with "02". Very Bay Area. Much of the action takes place in just the part of the city where I would live if I could afford it. There are executive apartments now, clustered along Embarcadero at the City end of the Bridge. The stunning view at night is complemented by the convenient access to the business district, just about every form of transport, the Gordon Biersch brewery and, of course, Pac Bell Park. In the future, Gibson tells us, there will be a bar on the bridge that serves wonderful hot wings, and Redback beer all the way from Australia. Of course there's no way I would go there to listen to a country music singer, no matter how good his guitarist, but it sounds like a pretty cool place to me.

The Bridge, by the way, is the Oakland one, with the stop half way at Treasure Island. That's another advantage of

Embarcadero living: you are in easy mortar range should King Willie ever succeed in his wish to establish a Mayoral Palace in the middle of the Bay. Gibson never names the Bridge, and I suspect he is relishing the prospect of counting the number of reviewers who automatically assume he is talking about the Other One, the one with the orange paint.

The setting isn't quite perfect, however, and I suspect that Gibson hasn't been to San Francisco in a while. He seems fairly unaware just how pervasive the gentrification of the SoMa district has become. And I find it hard to believe that such a dominant feature of the local landscape as Pac Bell Park would not feature at all in the story unless the author were unaware that it was being built. And by the way, Mr. Gibson, the name of that stretch of water is San Francisco Bay. Oakland is just a city that happens to have been built on the eastern shore.

There is, of course, a story here somewhere, though not necessarily much of one. I'll return to that point shortly, but first I should reiterate that you don't necessarily have to read a Gibson book for the plot. Reading Gibson is like listening to Van Morrison. A truly great artist can take a pile of words or notes, throw them up and reassemble them in a totally unexpected order and yet still make it sound as if there is no other way that they could possibly have been put together. I have little doubt that one or two of his similes will end up in Thog's Masterclass in *Ansible*, but unless you have a very literal approach to reading you won't notice these slightly off tones as the images flow elegantly past.

The plot of *All Tomorrow's Parties* is about history. Gibson has taken the character of Colin Laney from *Idoru* and built around him the concept that

patterns in data flow can be used to determine patterns in social and economic development. The story is based around the concept (which, as an SF meme, goes at least as far back as *Foundation*) that there are nodal points in history which, if pushed one way or another, can have a substantial effect on the outcome of future timelines. From an academic historian's standpoint this is a highly contentious view, but it is the basis on which most alternative history novels are built. For the want of a nail, and so on.

In Asimov's version of the story, understanding of the equations of psychohistory enables the protagonists to predict the occurrence of cusp points and determine what new factors could be introduced to change the balance of outcomes. Gibson, perhaps aware of the fact that psychohistory can only work on a galactic level, takes a more holistic approach. Laney's drug-enhanced brain allows him to see patterns in data flows that are invisible to the ordinary mind. He can see the threads drawing together, but all he can do is introduce new factors and hope that things turn out differently.

Gibson's previous two books, *Virtual Light* and *Idoru*, have been rather disappointing. Aw heck, let's face it, everything he has done since *Neuromancer* has been disappointing, though it is hard to see how it could not have been. *All Tomorrow's Parties*, I think, is a better book. The plot is still pretty thin, though it doesn't look emasculated in the way that *Idoru* did. More importantly, it has inherited depth. Gibson doesn't write sequels: the presence of Molly in *Mona Lisa Overdrive* is as much re-use of a convenient and popular character as a continuation of her story. In the same way the presence of Laney and Rei Toei, plus Berry Rydell and Chevette Washington from *Virtual Light*, does not imply that the new book

is somehow a conclusion of those tales, even though the effects of the plot on Laney and Rei are substantial. But by using characters that he has already spent much time developing, Gibson manages to create a depth to this book that seems to have been lacking in its predecessors.

The plot itself, however, as I have said, is another matter. In a recent feature on the book in *The Independent* (Gibson being one of the very few SF authors whose works are considered worthy of consideration by the literary establishment here) the reviewer complained that nothing much happened in the book. It is a fair charge on a brief and uninformed read through. Compared to the complexity and ingenuity of plots developed by many SF authors, Gibson's work in that area of novel writing is poor. But here are a few defences.

Point one: nothing much should happen. Remember that Laney is dealing in nodal points of history. A slight nudge is all it needs: a gunman sneezes, a bullet goes awry, an Archduke is not assassinated, and the world is not plunged into war. It is appropriate that the actual event should seem insignificant.

Point two: the subtlety is there if you look for it. Although Gibson is purportedly talking about nanotech, the book can actually be seen as an allegory of the challenges currently facing the Internet. Will the technology become the private fiefdom of someone like Bill Gates or Rupert Murdoch, or will it remain the property of the people and a powerful force for change? That is the battle that Laney is fighting. Gibson just never puts it in quite such bald terms.

And finally, whatever pigeonholes the critics might choose to use, *All Tomorrow's Parties* is out and out SF, and needs to be read in that context. The

cover jacket clearly labels the book as science fiction. Not withstanding this instruction, my local Borders placed it among the mainstream fiction shelves because Gibson is a big name writer. Class consciousness in Britain is far more pervasive than most people imagine. The trouble is that no one but an SF addict would understand the end. Laney talks glibly of the end of the world as we know it. And yes, it happens. The final chapter proves that it has. But unless you have read visionary nanotech novels such as *The Diamond Age* and *Evolution's Shore* you are highly unlikely to understand the magnitude of the changes that brief couple of pages describe.

To summarise, then, absolutely wonderful use of words, as we have come to expect. There is more depth, both in the world building and characterisation, than we have seen from Gibson in a while (and I think that will apply even if you haven't read *Virtual Light* or *Idoru*). Also some interesting ideas to chew upon, though you have to go looking for them. This isn't a book that will set the SF community on fire because it is so understated. I don't expect it to be a Hugo contender, but it is a great read none the less. Recommended.

(*Editor's Note:* since this review was written, the book has been re-printed several times. Most of the versions have had a bridge on the cover. Nearly all of them have shown the wrong bridge, though the one I've used on the web site is an honorable exception.)

All Tomorrow's Parties - William Gibson - Viking - hardcover

Reprinted from *Emerald City* #50

Mistletoe and Wine

I saw a review of *Earthquake Weather* in the pre-Worldcon issue of *Locus* and, despite not having enjoyed *Last Call* and *Expiration Date* overmuch, resolved to buy it in San Antonio. In the dealers' hall I drew a blank and, running into Tim Powers (who remembered me from a panel I'd made a nuisance myself at during LACon!), learned that the publishers had failed to get it out it time. Other books then somehow took priority until the last Potlatch when, inspired by a flier for the Mythopoeic Society APA, I went straightway to Tom Whitmore and placed an order. It was January 17th, Dionysus's Death Day, the day around which the story in *Earthquake Weather* is built.

Four days later, we had just had dinner. Kevin turned on the evening news and moved my copy of *Earthquake Weather* from the space on the couch where he usually sits. I started to pick up the book and place it out of the way. The TV announcer was describing a phone-in on mortgages. "You will be speaking to Tim Powers", he said. With most authors, you'd dismiss this as coincidence. With Powers you know that synchronicity is at work.

Ghost Fish Soup à la Rennes - Take one copy of *The White Goddess*, a couple of Elvis records, some poker chips and a Raiders cap. Shred finely. Place in a large Grail cup with a chopped monkfish tail. Add two cups of red zinfandel, a can of Coors and a cup of royal blood. Stir thoroughly.

Tim's books are not just weird; they are painstakingly, exquisitely and, in their own way, maddeningly consistently weird. That, I love. His writing, I love.

His quality research, I love. I just don't understand the why of his books.

Earthquake Weather worked a lot better for me than the previous two books, primarily I guess because I now have a reasonable degree of familiarity with the setting. That leads me to a generalization. Fantasy, I suspect, needs to be grounded in geography. Stuff like Tolkien, Arthurian and Faerie works for me because the landscape is familiar. Heck, I was born less than 10 miles from Glastonbury. One of the better aspects of *The Wood Wife* was, I thought, the way that Wilding managed to make the existence of Brian Froud faeries in Arizona believable. But Powers writes fantasies for a world that is still alien to me. It doesn't resonate.

The book is a great read, of course, and full of stuff about Bay Area history that has got me wanting to know more about the area. The wine stuff was especially neat (but then us Brits always appreciate a story in which the French are the bad guys). What I didn't understand was, is there supposed to be anything more to it? Surely Tim can't be expecting us to take all this King of the West stuff seriously?

Yes, you've got it, the story continues from the Grail Quest style material of *Last Call*, tacks on a bit of *The Waste Land* and ends up saving California from something or other through the good person of poor old Scott Crane (of *Last Call*) who seems to have a pretty rough life for a king. Along the way we meet a whole load of characters from both previous books: Koot Hoomie, the Sullivans and Archimedes Mavranos being the principal players. There are also several new, and significantly more crazy, people involved, not to mention good old Dionysus and the ever so wonderful Zinfandel grape.

So, is Tim a pagan? Does he believe that California needs a Sacred King in order to stay healthy? The books hardly read like a religious platform. They are far too much fun. And, whilst the characters wrestle with problems of personal morality, no message seems to be extended to a wider stage. Arky is trying to save his friend from death. Janis Plumtree, the schizophrenic, is driven by guilt. Pete and Angie are trying to protect their kid and Sid Cochran, the hero of the book, is trying to help Plumtree. Kootie understands the wider threat, but is scared stiff, poor kid. Only Crane himself really sees the big picture, or seems to care much about it.

The only conclusion I can come to is that Tim is seeking to give America a myth it can call its own. Something that takes in the source myths of the immigrants, wraps them in a new cultural context and adds any new mythic elements (The Frontier, Elvis, etc.) that have arisen since settlement. Is this Mythopoesis?

Maybe. Somewhere in the back of my mind a nagging voice is asking "what use is it?" Sure it is based around an original religious theme, but is this seasonal renewal stuff of any use to Californians? If not, isn't it just a good story?

Earthquake Weather - Tim Powers - Tor - hardcover

Reprinted from *Emerald City* #33

Swapping Bodies, Swapping Cultures

Many of you will have had the pleasure of meeting Stephen Dedman at Aussiecon Three. Not that he doesn't travel - I first met him in Glasgow at the

1995 Worldcon - but as one of the foremost young Australian writers he will have been a bit more visible on his home turf.

That is, if he considers that he has home turf. As I said, he does travel. Indeed, he does so a lot. He does it very capably on the cheap. So the fact that the hero of his new novel is an Australian who has done a lot of travelling and now puts his experience to good use running a travel agency in San Francisco is probably significant.

Not that we actually see much of Mike Galloway. For most of *Foreign Bodies* he is trapped inside the physical presence of a young Asian girl. Given that the novel is about the take-over of San Francisco by a bunch of neo-Fascist, racist lunatics, this is not exactly convenient. Galloway gets that way because a time traveller from the future who has sent his mind back to try to prevent the rise of the Aryan Nation ended up in the girl by mistake and decided that Galloway's body was a preferable alternative. Confused? Don't worry, you won't be.

Of course the irony is that here is a book about body swapping which is set in America but written by an Australian. The first question all my friends in the Bay Area want to ask is, "does he know what he is talking about?" Once again, I think you can rest easy. Stephen seems to know rather more about San Francisco than I do. (Remember that Kevin and I live some 30 miles south of the city in Silicon Valley.) I suspect that much of the material about living rough in The City comes from personal experience. Well, from back-packing around the US anyway. Stephen's previous book, *The Art of Arrow Cutting*, displayed an intimate knowledge of Greyhound buses for similar reasons.

The local colour is good too. Anyone can get their geography right from maps. Although, as I noted, William Gibson seems to have written *All Tomorrow's Parties* from experiences that are a few years old and things do change. However, you can only toss in casual references to Rush Limbaugh or the Folsom Street Fair if you have actually spent a bit of time in San Francisco and have drunk in the ambience of the place. Galloway says that San Francisco is his favourite city in the whole world, and this just might be the author speaking.

On the subject of local knowledge, the book also relies heavily on Stephen's knowledge of SF. I suspect that some readers may be offended at the idea that Aryan Nation nutters can be found at science fiction conventions, but they are there if you know where to look. And yes, they are all rabid Heinlein fans.

The SF aspect of the book, however, is something of a side feature. Really the novel is a thriller with some SF elements tacked on as useful plot devices. The body-swapping thing is not the focus of the book. Stephen does try to sort out Galloway's feelings about having a female body, but this is one area that I'm fairly sure the author has no actual experience of and he is careful not to let it get in the way of the action. Conveniently his new body turns out to be rather good at martial arts. It also provides an excuse for some more hot lesbian sex. Reading this book immediately after Severna Park's *Hand of Prophecy* was an interesting experience for me.

To sum up, then, an entertaining, fast-paced San Francisco thriller with far more local colour than we have any right to expect of someone whose normal abode is the splendid isolation of Perth, Australia. There's not a lot of philosophy to it, though for those of us who like to call San Francisco home the politics are

very sound. It didn't quite make my Hugo shortlist, but it was very enjoyable and I'm already looking forward to Stephen's next book. I think you should too.

Foreign Bodies - Stephen Dedman - Tor - hardcover

Reprinted from *Emerald City* #54

End of the Line

The Day Sarah Kendall's life changed began like any other. She dressed, put on make-up, kissed her husband Michael goodbye, and walked from their house to the Glen Park BART station. As the train pulled into the station she noticed for the first time how the silver cars tapered inwards at the tops, making them look like a string of little coffins.

If you ever happen to catch Kevin or I in transport geek mode you will know that in the realms of Evil Empires there is none more evil than BART, the Bay Area Rapid Transit System. Operationally, BART provides a useful commuter service around parts of the Bay Area. But as public policy it is a disaster.

BART is a completely non-standard railway system. Even the tracks are a different width, ensuring that every part of it, every piece of rolling stock, has to be custom made. This makes it much more expensive than conventional rail, let alone the newly fashionable light rail systems that us Melbourne folk still call trams. In fact I suspect that, mile-for-mile, BART may be more expensive than high speed rail systems such as the French TGV.

But BART has excellent political lobbyists. They are superb at getting

money out of city, state and even federal authorities. If you see an article about public transport in the San Francisco Chronicle there's a good bet it was written by a BART PR person. And they have a firm policy of non-cooperation with all other forms of public transport. As far as they are concerned, it is BART Uber Alles or nothing. Which, given their cost structure, is probably their only possible strategy.

Given this situation, it is with little surprise that we discover, from Lisa Goldstein's *Dark Cities Underground*, that BART is actually in the pay of a secret mystical society bent on world domination. The current End of the Line, Bay Area locals will remember, is at Colma, a city noted primarily for its cemeteries...

Jeremy Jerome Gerontius Jones hates his mother. And with good reason too. It isn't just the name that she blessed him with. She also stole his stories. When Jerry was very small he discovered a doorway in a tree in his back garden. Through that doorway was the magical and rather scary land of NeverWas. Visiting it gave Jerry some pretty unpleasant nightmares. But when he related them to his mother she just wrote them all down and turned them into best-selling children's books.

Ruth Berry, a struggling Bay Area journalist and single mother, has been asked to write a book about the origins of the Jeremy stories. That shouldn't be too hard. Jerry and his mother both still live in Oakland. But they are not exactly speaking. Indeed Jerry won't talk about his mother at all. Then there is this strange little man who is obsessed with the Jeremy stories and seems to think that they might have been based on fact. Furthermore, a bit of library work shows Ruth that the stories don't belong to

Jerry or his mother at all, they are a clever re-telling of a tale that is very much older indeed.

Dark Cities Underground is a wonderful romp through underground railways and subconscious archetypes. It has echoes of all sorts of wonderful stuff. *Neverwhere*, I suspect, must have been an influence. But so are many famous children's books, *Mythago Wood*, and of course the myths on which it is based. It reminds me too of Tim Powers and, in particular, Jim Blaylock's steampunk novels. In the sections dealing with the building of the London Underground I kept expecting Ignatio Narbondo to make a guest appearance.

There's not much in the way of political subtext, but the book is feminist in a way. Its heroine is a struggling single mother and it focuses on mother-child relationships. Most importantly, however, it is a book I found impossible to put down. I can't say anything better than that. Recommended.

Dark Cities Underground - Lisa Goldstein - Tor - hardcover

Reprinted from *Emerald City* #55

Bay City Brawlers

Richard Morgan (no relation) is the latest in the long line of authors riding the wave of the British SF Renaissance. He teaches English at Strathclyde University, and thus will doubtless find himself compared to Banks and Macleod, but Morgan is not another writer of political space opera. His first novel, *Altered Carbon*, is pure cyberpunk, and about as hard edged as it comes.

The first thing that caught my attention about the book is that it is set in San

Francisco. Hey, there's the TransAmerica Pyramid right there on the cover! So how is a Brit going to cope writing about my adopted back yard? Fine. He knows which bridge is which, he seems to know the streets (at least he knows the main ones well enough for me to not bother getting a map to check the others), and he knows the weather. If he didn't come here to check the place out he's done a fine job of research.

I have only three (very small) complaints. For starters you'd be unlikely to find a hotel called the Hendrix here. That would be in Seattle. San Francisco would have a hotel called the Garcia (or perhaps just The Dead) and its AI probably wouldn't be able to hold an intelligent conversation, being stoned most of the time. Also the local councils of the Bay Area would rather see the whole conurbation disappear in a nuclear fireball than combine to form a single jurisdiction called Bay City, no matter how sensible such a move might be. And finally, given the amount of sex in the book, how come nearly all of it is straight? In San Francisco? Come on!

The next thing to catch my eye was that this was yet another book about mind transfer and immortality. As with the Brin book (*Kiln People*, reviewed in the same issue of *Emerald City* as this piece appeared in) Morgan postulates that some means has been found of copying the human mind, but whereas Brin moves his minds into artificial copies, Morgan moves them into other people. Minds can be saved and stored after death (provided that your head is in good condition) and bodies can be stored too. A standard means of punishing criminals is to put their minds in storage. It is much cheaper than keeping them in jail, and there is the possibility of someone taking a fancy to the vacant bodies and buying them

while the owner is elsewhere. It is all good money for the prison service.

For the rich, or course, there is cloning. You can make copies of your body at any age, back up your mind to silicon on a regular basis, and simply move from one clone to the next as the fancy takes you, or as your existing "sleeve" wears out. It is also easier to travel by having clones of yourself posted at different points around the world and having your mind digitally transmitted from one to another. No more aircraft, and no more jet lag.

The hero of *Altered Carbon*, Takeshi Kovacs, has another use for the technology. He is a highly trained mercenary, a former member of the UN's elite Envoy Corps. In Kovacs' line of business, bodies get lost on a regular basis, generally very messily. And sometimes you need the right body for the job. Solid bruiser, or elegant ninja? It depends on the mission.

The novel starts with Kovacs being hired by Laurens Bancroft, a "meth" (short for Methuselah), one of those people rich and powerful enough to have lived hundreds of years in a sequence of clones. Bancroft recently killed himself – fried his head to pieces destroying all possibility of resurrection. But of course he has back-ups and clones aplenty in a secret, secure store on Alcatraz. Bancroft knows he isn't stupid. Why bother shooting yourself when you know you will be brought back? So despite the compelling evidence to the contrary, and the unwillingness of the local police to tackle a seemingly obvious case, he's convinced he must have been murdered. He hires Kovacs to find out who did it, and why.

Before long our hero is embroiled in the labyrinthine plots and jealousies of the very rich, and the seedy street life of the Bay Area. This is Dark Future with a

vengeance. There are big guns, mind-twisting cocktails of drugs, vicious gangsters, pretty and oppressed whores (most of whom end up getting brutally murdered), blood and gore by the bucket load, and language so tasty I'm worried it might affect the book's marketability in the US. Still, China Miéville gets away with it, so hopefully Morgan will too.

There isn't a lot of politics in the book (not much room for it with all that blood and gore and sex). Morgan has a bit of a thing about Catholics and their refusal to make use of medical advances. In the book they have taken a stance against mind transfer, which of course makes them ideal murder victims, as they won't be brought back to testify. But the main political edge is simply that of the underdog against the rich and powerful. American SF, particularly Heinlein, has a tendency to promote wealth and immortality as being the provenance of the good guys. Indeed, the American Dream is often to become rich and immortal. But Morgan, probably quite rightly, holds that the only people to get the goodies will be the people nasty and ruthless enough to fight their way to the top.

Human life has no value. Haven't you learned that yet, Takeshi, with all you have seen? It has no value, intrinsic to itself. Machines cost money to build. Raw materials cost money to extract. But people? They reproduce like cancer cells, whether you want them or not.

See what I mean? That was the villain of the novel holding forth on the place of humans in the world economy. Morgan knows that the little guy can never win, not without becoming as bad as the big guys, but his message is that you should never stop trying to make a difference. Sometimes justice can be done.

All in all, I was very impressed. As first novels go, this was very competent indeed. I have a few worries about the amount of sex in the book. It was hard to sort out whether the plethora of dead whores was a device to demonstrate the nastiness of the bad guys, a piece of gritty realism, or just there because Morgan likes writing about killing pretty girls. I wasn't impressed that the only time the hero got downloaded into a female body it was for the purpose of being tortured, and there is no doubt that Morgan has an obsession with breasts. But all of that will probably go down very well with adolescent boys who will hopefully buy the book in large quantities. You should buy it too. It is very good.

Altered Carbon - Richard Morgan - Gollancz - softcover

Reprinted from *Emerald City* #79

Footnote

Congratulations, you have made it to the end. *Emerald City* is not always quite this long, but hopefully it is always of similar quality. If you are still at ConJosé you may be able to find a copy of the more typical #84, the current issue, floating round the fanzine lounge. Failing that, all of the back issues are available on the web site for download. *Emerald City* is free, and will hopefully always remain that way. Knowing that I may have encouraged you to read some wonderful books, and thereby helped keep some superb authors in business, is reward enough.

Ciao,

Love 'n' hugs,

Cheryl