

# EMERALD CITY

Issue 37

September 1998

An occasional 'zine produced by Cheryl Morgan and available from her at [cmorgan@ceres.wallis.com](mailto:cmorgan@ceres.wallis.com) or on line at <http://www.emcit.com>

## Introduction

Well, here I am again. This, in stark contrast to last time, is going to be a fairly short issue. This is partly because I'm rushing it out in order to have something available for Albacon, and partly because I have had one of those months.

As you may recall, last issue I was very worried about my finances. Fortunately a few small jobs came through just in time. That was the good news. The bad news is that the largest of those, and one of the primary reasons for my coming back to the UK, fell through shortly after I got here. One of the others has been delayed, possibly until next year. The net result is that I am stuck in the UK with not a lot of work, not a lot of income, not being able to go back to California for a while for visa reasons, and not having a base. Not to mention £300 out of pocket on a job that won't happen.

Accommodation in the UK is ridiculously expensive, as you might expect from such an overcrowded place. In particular, short term business accommodation other than hotels is almost unknown. There is no such thing as a long stay hotel like you get in the US. There are a few serviced apartments in London, but you'll pay upwards of £1000 a week for them. Ordinary lets are available, but only for 6 months at a time and only if you are in full time employment. The moment I mentioned I was self-employed, no one wanted to know.

Having checked through my bank accounts, it would seem that I'm OK for a month or two, provided that I don't have to fork out too much in that period. Believe it or not, I am going to two conventions, in the coming weeks, because the discount rate they have negotiated for hotel rooms is well within the range of prices I am facing for accommodation costs.

Anyway, profuse thanks to Steve & Giulia, and to Andy Adams, for putting me up (and putting up with me) for a few weeks. And if there is anyone else in the UK who can offer me either work or a spare bed for a few days, please let me know.

On the plus side, I am getting to travel a lot by train, which means I have a lot to tell Kevin. Also I can get a lot of reading done, which is good for this 'zine.

## Trots in Space

Let's face it, folks, only in Scotland would you find someone writing a science fiction novel about Trotskyists.

Well, maybe quite not only, but it seems the most likely location. Furthermore, it is probably the case that only in Scotland would you find an SF author who writes about Trots and is a protégé of the ever so wonderful Mr. Iain (M.) Banks. Ken MacLeod has an excellent tutor, and presumably an exceptional capacity for beer.

But I digress. Steve Davies is the initiator of this little tale. He and I were chatting about books one evening. He asked me if I had read any MacLeod because he was really good. I said no but while I'm here I should promote good new British authors, so I'll give him a try. Then I got a progress report for Albacon. Sadly, it announced that Diana Wynne Jones had been in hospital and would not be fit in time to travel to the convention. They had recruited one Ken MacLeod to replace her. OK, so I'm going to get to meet the guy. I'd better read some of his stuff. Also I'd better get back into the habit of serious drinking.

---

Steve had offered to lend me copies of the books, but I have this awful habit of wanting to own the darn things, so I picked up a copy of *The Star Fraction* in Reading on Saturday. I started it Sunday morning and by Monday evening I had finished it. Banksie is right, this guy is going to be a star. What is more, most of you, especially if you are not British, will never have read anything like it. It is just possible that it will mean a lot less if you were not at a British university in the 70's. Certainly you will wonder what all these strange political groups are, and whether MacLeod has made them up. He hasn't. MacLeod knows his stuff and he has the likes of the IMG and SWP off pat, not to mention the amazing tendency for schisms amongst extremist politicians of all flavours.

The book starts with standard future noir stuff: a research scientist specialising in memory-enhancing drugs, a mercenary with a very smart gun. This, however, is not *Neuromancer*, or even *Shadowrun*. It is British and left wing through and through. Our hero and heroine are soon on the run from evil American secret police (who happen to wear black suits and fly black helicopters). Soon they find themselves caught up in a revolution as the armies of the former Socialist government, exiled to Scotland, seeks to throw out the Royalists who were restored on the back of an American invasion after the end of WWII.

The centrepiece of the story, however, is Norlonto, an anarchist free state established in North London after the war and granted autonomy by the Royalist government. Here various political subgroups are able to establish their own communities and experiment with social organisation. There are gays, there are fundamentalist Christians, there are communists. Inside the gay community there is even a small enclave of feminists (read it carefully, not feminists) who wear frilly dresses, high heels and loads of make-up, and preach knitting and embroidery as a cure for global violence.

Oh, did I forget to tell you that MacLeod has a wonderful sense of humour. There are some really, really awful puns as well. Be warned.

It is hard at times to work out exactly what political line MacLeod is pushing. This is at least in part due to the fact that he has taken to heart the inevitability of market forces. Towards the

end of *The Star Fraction* the hero comments that if communism is to survive it must be able to do so within a free market for political ideas. That isn't a line you would have heard in the 70's.

What is clear is that MacLeod is pro-technology and hates the Greens with a vengeance. Generally he portrays them as Luddite fanatics who live in filth and squalor in the countryside, launching occasional raids to destroy as much of civilisation as they can. This isn't exactly a fair depiction of environmentalist policy, but it is becoming more typical of the Animal Liberation extremists.

Somehow, however, I get the impression that a lot of what MacLeod is doing is playing with ideas rather than proselytising. After all, a lot of SF has been devoted to exploring alternative societies. Very few of them, however (Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* being a classic exception) deal with Socialist or Communist ideas. It is good to see someone having a go at this, and managing to avoid the usual over-serious nature of left wing extremists. I'm sure MacLeod is serious in parts, but it is probably with tongue firmly in cheek that he transforms Trotsky's programme for revolution into a computer program. As for where that program is stored, Mao's ghost will be killing himself laughing. Boy this was a good start.

---

The second novel, *The Stone Canal*, is set in the same universe but many years in the future. There is very little re-use of characters, although the hero did have a bit-part in the first book and turns out to be one of the founders of Norlonto. The action takes place on a colony world called New Mars which is at the far end of a wormhole constructed at Jupiter by the "fast folk", people who have uploaded their personalities into computers and now live and think at computer speeds. New Mars itself is a human colony, although many robots and bio-machines also live wild on the planet. There's a lot more to the plot than this, but it is far too complex to explain in a review.

The subject of the book is basically racism, as embodied by the example of robot rights. The heroine, Dee, is a sex toy, a human body with a computer brain programmed only to look pretty and please her owner. Someone has uploaded a lot of additional software into her brain, and she has become self-aware (or at least she thinks she has). Unsurprisingly, she runs away, and is taken in by a bunch of anarchists who regard the ownership of robots as slavery.

As we might expect, there is also a standard political argument going on. The society of New Mars is supposedly anarcho-capitalist but in practice is dominated by one or two major corporations, and in particular by one Dave Reid, an ex-IMG man (which should be enough to strike fear into the hearts of those of us familiar with the IMG). What MacLeod is attempting to do is portray the fight for the heart of the anti-statist movement. On the right wing we have the Libertarians, most of whom, at least from what I've seen in America, sum up their philosophy in the slogan "I have the right to do whatever I want and to hell with the rest of you". Their part is taken by Reid.

In the red corner we have the Anarchists who generally take a more socially responsible attitude. They are championed by the hero, Jon Wilde, an old drinking buddy of Reid's, and whose wife's DNA Reid just happened to have used to create a certain sex toy. Wilde has the additional problem that he is dead, and whilst his brain patterns were preserved, it is not exactly certain whether the newly cloned body they have been put into classes as human, or even if it is the only copy of him that is in existence.

The structure of the book is very Banksian. Interwoven with the happenings on New Mars is a background story detailing Wilde's life, the rivalry between himself and Reid for the flirtatious Annette (later to be the pattern for Dee), and the origins of Norlonto and New Mars. It even has a delicious twist at the end that would have graced any Culture novel. It is great to see someone else doing this sort of thing.

As usual, MacLeod's sense of humour is in top gear. There are also a lot of side references to the SF community. Indeed, Norlonto's founders are a pro-space anarchist group with historical links to fandom. At one point in the historical section Reid asks Wilde whether he attended the big SF convention in Glasgow in 1995. He did, he had a dealer's stand selling space memorabilia.

In the end, of course, Dee wins her freedom and Wilde wins major changes to the social structure of New Mars. For now, MacLeod seems to have come down on the side of the angels. As Wilde says: "*In any half-decent society you're far better off respecting the law and property and so on*". OK, he wants them people to be able to do that of their own free will rather than being forced to do it, but they have to accept the consequences if they upset their neighbours. This is a far cry from being able to do whatever you want.

---

MacLeod's latest novel, *The Cassini Division*, follows more or less directly on from *The Stone Canal*. Wilde (well, one of him) has made it back through the wormhole to the solar system and finds Earth dominated by the anarcho-communist Solar Union. The book's title refers to the only remaining military force, a crack unit of space fighters dedicated to protecting earth from the "fast folk" who have taken refuge on Jupiter.

Although Wilde makes a brief appearance at the start of the book, he is not involved in the main plot. This centres mainly around one of the leading members of the *Cassini Division*. It is a brave move on MacLeod's part as it quickly becomes obvious that his heroine is a militarist fanatic with a deep loathing of machine life. Ellen is convinced that the computer-based life forms on Jupiter are dangerous monsters who have to be destroyed before they destroy us. The trouble is, she might be right.

The social structure of the Solar Union is something that Proudhon would be delighted with. There is no money, and no property. Nobody is employed, but everyone knows that they should work and that they should not take too much of the communal resources. MacLeod isn't exactly clear on why the system works. In part it is definitely because everyone who wishes to be a citizen has to believe in the society's social philosophy, the True Knowledge. Those who refuse to believe are exiled to Earth as "non-co-operatives". In addition I suspect that, like the Culture, the system is helped by having enough resources to keep all but the most covetous happy.

For once it is quite clear where MacLeod's sympathies lie. He does a good job of showing how mindless adherence to a creed, even a beneficent one, creates a nation of unimaginative sheep. Ellen describes the culture of New Mars as a collection of petty tyrannies. Wilde, had he been given the opportunity to respond, would probably have retorted that if you were not prepared to be your own boss you were shirking your social responsibility. Towards the end, MacLeod does the obvious thing and throws the two societies together to see which one will survive. We don't get to see the final outcome, but I suspect that the answer is coded in the closing events of the book.

---

---

To sum up, MacLeod is a fine writer with a wonderful sense of humour. His take on the future of human society is unlike anything you'll find elsewhere in SF at the moment. He also has some interesting things to say about artificial intelligence. If I have one major criticism it is that his revolutionaries are all far too nice. Even Dave Reid gets rehabilitated in the end. I see no reason why socialists should not have the same proportion of utter bastards amongst them as the rest of society. (The person who said "if they were bastards they would not be real socialists" can go and stand at the back of the class and see me afterwards.)

There are parts of Britain today where the rule of law has more or less broken down. In these places, you do not find friendly Trotskyist militias upholding the safety of the community, you find criminal gangs selling drugs and running prostitution and extortion rackets. If he really wants us to believe that his societies can work, he should show more of how they function under pressure.

*The Star Fraction* - Ken MacLeod - Legend - softcover

*The Stone Canal* - Ken MacLeod - Legend - hardcover

*The Cassini Division* - Ken MacLeod - Orbit - hardcover

---

---

## Romans in Cyberspace

When I was in Australia earlier this year, Sean McMullen was telling me how he had heard that his new novel, *Centurion's Empire*, was out in America. Friends had emailed him to say that they had seen it, but nothing had yet found its way Down Under. It was his first book to be published outside Australia, and he was very excited about it. Available in the US it may well have been, but I didn't find a copy until I walked into Forbidden Planet in London. Needless to say, I grabbed a copy.

Sean, as I think I've said before, is a fount of good ideas. This particular story is about a group of Romans who invent a means of preserving life whilst a body is frozen - a sort of herbal cryogenics. The book follows the fortunes of a centurion, Vitellus, as he travels forward in time with successive awakenings. Along the way he takes in the Viking invasion of Britain, the Hundred Years War, and the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The second half of the book is good, fast-paced stuff. It has most of the classic cyberpunk ingredients: fast transport, big guns, stunning biotech, and more twists and deceptions than anyone could ask for. On its own it would have made a pretty good novella. Unfortunately, you have to get there first.

Part of the problem is that Sean doesn't seem to have much of a feel for historical periods. You read his descriptions of Imperial Rome, Saxon England and Mediaeval France and somehow it all sounds like modern people in an historical setting. The real problem, however, can be summed up in one word: exposition.

There is a lot of background information to be got across before the main action, the cyberpunk story, starts. Much of this is done way too quickly and factually or, even worse, by the sorry method of having characters suddenly, and for no apparent reason, launch into a tale of things past. There was a lot of story to be told here. Two of the three pivotal events of the book, Vitellus's first freezing and his unfortunate love affair, are skipped over. The first we are left to assume, the other is told third hand by minor characters. The Hundred Years War story is a good one, but in the end is turned into a flimsy pretext for introducing another plot element for the main event. There were two or three good novels wasted here. Goodness only knows why.

I found it all very sad, firstly because Sean is a good mate and I wanted to be able to rave about the book, and second because, as he shows later on in the book, he can write very well. I think some of the blame must lie with the editors, Jack Dann and Patrick Nielsen-Hayden. If an editor sees a manuscript with such obvious potential that is desperately in need of some re-writing in places, he should do something about it. This was a big opportunity for Sean, and his cause has been unnecessarily harmed, either because of a rushed production schedule, or because someone was too nice to point out the obvious flaws. Here's hoping he gets a chance to redeem himself.

*Centurion's Empire* - Sean McMullen - Tor - hardcover

---

## Sad Song

So there I was, looking for a book to read on the train. Unfortunately I was stuck in darkest Somerset and the nearest decent bookshop was 10 miles away. What could I find that might be worth reading? Ah, an Iain Banks mainstream novel.

*Song of Stone* is the latest Banks book without the middle M., that secret code that indicates that it is serious writing rather than genre crap and can safely be sold to people other than geeks. Unlike his SF, it gets pride of place in every bookshop and newsagent, it gets reviewed in respectable newspapers, and it sells in vast quantities, being currently number 3 on the UK best sellers list. Which just goes to show how little taste your average mainstream reader has, because this book is nowhere near the standard I have come to expect from its author.

Well, OK, it has the usual fabulous Banks prose. These days when you read Banks you can almost feel the words flowing elegantly onto the page in ink of purest liquid gold. This is what the critics rave about, and he is justifiably famous for it. But a novel with poor prose can still provide excellent entertainment, whereas a novel with beautiful prose and nothing else tends to be a crashing bore.

The plot, such as it is, concerns a country ravaged by militia groups after a devastating war. The feel is of the Balkans, but it is probably nearer Scotland. Where else would you find the nobility still living in castles? One such couple are fleeing their home in a column of refugees when they are stopped by a militia group. Discovering, from the other unfortunates, that the couple own a nearby castle, the commander of the militia determines to requisition it as her HQ, and takes the former owners back as guides.

It is a nice set-up, and could have been interesting if Banks had provided anything in the way of complexity of plot. We know he can do it, the Culture novels are fine examples. However, he chooses simply to demonstrate to us what horrible people the noble couple and their captor are. There is lots of cruelty and depravity. Most of the cast die. End of book.

Members of the Mythopoeic Society APA reading this review will no doubt be swift to remind me that they made very similar complaints about Elizabeth Hand's *Glimmering*, a book I very much like. It is true that all of her characters are thoroughly unsympathetic, but she was trying to create an atmosphere of end of the millennium hopelessness and ennui. Banks does not appear to have any such excuse.

I suppose that there is some sort of attempt to contrast the cruelty of the nobility towards their social inferiors with the cruelty of the militia towards the less well armed. You don't need a war to have brutality. But I don't think that this was a point that desperately needed making, nor would I have made it in such an awful book. My guess is that this is simply a cheap piece of pornography written for people who enjoy reading about bizarre sexual activities and bloody murders. Then again, maybe that is what these mainstream readers want.

*Song of Stone* - Iain Banks - Abacus - softcover

---

## Ghastly beyond belief

As many of you will know, I am a big fan of loathsome, slimy tentacled horrors from beyond the stars. As a result, faced by a book called *The Annotated H.P. Lovecraft* which purports to shine a torchlight on some of the murkier, cobwebbed corners of the master's purple prose, I have little choice but to buy it. The book, by S.T. Joshi, contains four of HPL's most famous stories: *The Rats in the Walls*, *The Colour Out of Space*, *The Dunwich Horror* and *At the Mountains of Madness*. Each one is liberally sprinkled with helpful footnotes to explain to the reader where Lovecraft got some of his ideas and what some of those strange words actually mean. There is also a brief biography of Lovecraft, and two appendices; one details his literary philosophy and the other on TV and film versions of his work.

There are two main camps amongst fans of Lovecraft's work. One group thinks that the Cthulhu Mythos is the best background setting for horror fiction ever designed. The others claim that Lovecraft never intended to create a mythos and that most of the fiction using it which has been written since his death would appal him. Joshi is firmly in the latter camp, placing most of the blame for the perversion, as he sees it, of the stories on the "rabid enthusiasm" of August Derleth.

I suspect that he may be right. Certainly Lovecraft did not intend us to take the existence of Cthulhu and his pustulating pals seriously. He would have been deeply disturbed by the thought of people actually trying to use the spells that he created. Nevertheless, the Mythos is a splendid setting for horror stories. The trick, I think, is to remember that most of these creatures are supposed to be as powerful in relation to humans as we are in relation to ants. Blowing away an Elder God with a pump action shotgun, as happens all too often in games of *Call of Cthulhu*, is not the way things should go.

Er, that was commentary on the introduction, which is actually very informative. The appendices are also pretty good. The actual annotations are another matter. There are some interesting tit-bits in there, I must admit. This is one of my favourites.

At the end of *The Rats in the Walls*, Lovecraft has the lead character babble in a succession of languages used in Britain, each successively more archaic. The Celtic phrase is in Gaelic, but from the location of the story it should perhaps more properly be in one of the Brythonic group of Celtic languages. In a letter to Frank Belknap Long, Lovecraft acknowledges the error but says "...details don't count. Nobody will ever stop to note the difference". Of course somebody did, and the publishers duly passed on to Lovecraft a letter from a young Texan named Robert E. Howard. This led to a six-year long correspondence between the two writers.

Of course they could have met at a convention, or through a fanzine. Don't believe me? It is true. At the beginning of the century there were clubs for amateur journalists. They called themselves Amateur Press Associations (sound familiar?). Lovecraft himself published thirteen issues of a fanzine, aptly titled *The Conservative*, between 1915 and 1923. He even met his wife, Sonia, at an APA convention. Plus ça change.

So far, so good. Unfortunately much of the annotation is so poor that it leads you to start doubting the better parts of the book. Some of this is purely because Joshi is poorly informed. For example, he derides Lovecraft for having given the Old Ones from *At the Mountains of Madness* wings with which they fly through the ether. These days, of course, we know that there is no such thing as ether (the stuff in space, not the chemical). On the other hand, most readers of speculative fiction are familiar with the concept of a light-sail, a device which would have performed just the same function. Heck, the latest Sheri Tepper novel contains creatures that fly through space in just that way.

Other annoying things are where Joshi stretches the credulity way too far. For example, he postulates that the name Nyarlathotep was in part derived from a character called Alhireth-Hotep in a story by Lord Dunsany. Anyone with a smattering of Egyptology, and that most certainly includes Lovecraft, would also know of "hotep" from the names of real Egyptians. Elsewhere Joshi describes the Druids as a group of Celtic priests responsible for the building of Stonehenge.

There are also cases where, in attempting to elucidate the text, Joshi simply quotes definitions from dictionaries without any evidence that he understood what he was quoting. What really made me despair, however, were simple factual errors. The year 1261 is not in the twelfth century, and ammonia is not an example of an acid. If you are going to write a book which purports to explain something to those less well informed, it is incumbent upon you to get your facts right. Incompetence on this level shouldn't be allowed to see print.

*The Annotated H.P. Lovecraft* - S.T. Joshi - Dell - softcover

---

---

## Britwatching



With the anniversary of the Beatification of Diana passed, the British press has had little to talk about this month. Most of their attention has been focussed on a shockingly bad new American soap opera called *White House* in which a simple office romance between slimy old Bill, the company boss, and his starry-eyed young assistant, Monica, is blown up into an event of apparent national importance. The script is more unbelievable than anything in Dallas, and it is rumoured that the actress who plays Bill's wife, Hilary, is already looking for a new role. Perhaps she should transfer to the rival series, *Kremlin*, as old Boris looks like he might die of liver failure at any minute. A capable young wife to take over the reins of the company when he dies is just what the story needs.

The only other news story of note has been the attempts of Prince Rupert of Mel-ni-bourne to solidify his position as the Most Hated Man in Britain by buying top soccer club, Manchester United. Why he should want to do so when his ownership of the Los Angeles Dodgers already qualifies him for the title of Most Hated Man in the Universe is a mystery to me. It must be important though, because he is rumoured to be paying more than three times what he paid for the Dodgers. I always knew they were a bunch of worthless no-hopers.

Meanwhile I have been attempting to discern the origins of a new phenomenon in British society. Most of the up-market pubs and wine bars I have seen since I came back have notices on the door saying "no baseball caps". Why is this? Has this innocent form of headgear suddenly developed a habit of drinking fourteen pints a night and throwing up in the bar? Are under-age drinkers so stupidly fashion conscious these days that they would rather stay sober than bare their heads? No, after an exhaustive investigation, *Emerald City* can finally reveal the real reason.

The sad truth is that British rap fans, keen to prove that they are just as brave and macho as fans of punk and grunge, have taken to their own form of body piercing: they have their baseball caps surgically attached to their heads. This has the definite advantage that the cap will not fall off when you are bopping around at a rave, out of your skull on Ecstasy. On the other hand, it does lead to problems sleeping. The backward-facing peak of the baseball cap makes it impossible to sleep in any position other than face down. Many of these kids have suffocated themselves on their pillows as a result, and the European Commission is considering introducing a new law to ban the sales of pillows to teenagers.

Well, no, that's rubbish. The real truth is that the majority of people in Britain who wear baseball caps are black.

---

## Footnote

Next issue, two conventions: Albacon in Glasgow, starring Kim Newman, Ray Harryhausen and Ken MacLeod, followed by Masque, the UK Costume Convention, starring the irrepressible Teddy.

If I can get a decently priced flight, I'm going to head back to California at the end of October. At least there I don't have to pay an absolute fortune for a roof over my head.

Ciao,  
Love 'n' hugs,  
Cheryl