

EMERALD CITY

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Introduction

Here we go again. BA, Heathrow, England, rain, crowds, soccer, Tony Blair, Eastenders. Is this depressing or what?

Still, there are good bits, even if Marks & Spencers are clearly going through a bad patch business-wise. Hopefully this issue will make it to the February Tun. If not, don't worry guys, I'm probably going to be here until Eastercon and I will most definitely make the April event because I'll be picking Kevin up from Gatwick that very day. I will, of course, be pressing him to write up his experiences of the dear old Adelphi. California farm boy meets faded Victorian opulence. Should be interesting.

Not a lot except books in this issue, but some fine books they are. We have new novels from Neil Gaiman, George R.R. Martin and Connie Willis, plus an old one from my current favourite discovery, Martha Wells. Not content with that we have David Brin pontificating on political philosophy. With all that good stuff on offer, why am I bothering with an introduction?

Neil does Faerie

"It is a true story, as these things go, in every way that matters." - Neil Gaiman from his introduction to the latest reissue of Lord Dunsany's *The King of Elfland's Daughter*.

One of the nostrums you will hear, if you hang around writers long enough, is that there are no new stories, only old ones told in new ways. This is particularly true of fantasy because a good fantasy story should be True in the sense that it conforms to the patterns laid down by the Jungian archetypes of our cultural history. I fully expect to see a lot of reviews of Neil Gaiman's new novel that complain that there is nothing new in it, which is to miss the point entirely.

Human logic: take an event, examine the possible causes, and by deduction, hypothesis and testing, determine the true cause.

The plot is standard enough. An involvement of humans and faeries results in a requirement for a young man to travel into Faerie and perform an heroic deed. It is just another fairy story, people will say. Well so what? Why would changing the name of Faerie to 'Ookanawa' and calling the faeries 'Bondinks' make any difference? Of course if you have put a lot of effort into creating the Ookanawa world and describing the Bondink society there may be some merit in the change, but your story may well be veering off into SF as a result, and it is also likely to become less True.

Faerie logic: take an event, examine the possible outcomes, look into your heart, and determine the True outcome.

What Neil has tried to do with *Stardust* is to take the basic fairy story and re-tell it as best he can. It is, if you like, a bit like those chefs who bang on about taking simple, quality ingredients and cooking them well. In addition, as I hope you are beginning to realise, it is not an easy task to set yourself.

So how did he manage? That depends a little on your expectations. Whilst I am incarcerated in wintry Britain, Neil is doing a signing tour of the US, including a stop at a bookshop just up the road from my office. The flier that Keplers produced for the event likens Neil to William Burroughs and Thomas Pynchon. Goodness knows where they got that idea. Neil is a very lovely bloke, but even I have to admit that he has a little way to go before reaching those exulted heights.

Nevertheless, *Stardust* bubbles along with the same wry humour and deft touch for mythology that has marked Neil's work down the years. It also has a healthy dollop of rural British charm that is sure to appeal strongly to the American audience. My suspicion is that Neil's fans will rave about it and everyone else will ask what all the fuss is about. That is a shame. I do not think that *Stardust* is a book that will mark Neil out as a major mainstream novelist. But I do think that it is a breath of fresh air to have someone around who is happy to write a simple, elegant fantasy story rather than feel obliged to produce a five-volume doorstop.

Good luck to you, Neil, mate. I enjoyed it.

Stardust - Neil Gaiman - Spike - trade advance reading copy

Kingdoms Come (and go)

From the 235, loosely set pages of *Stardust* we come to the 708 rather more tightly packed pages making up volume 2 of George R.R. Martin's *Song of Ice and Fire* series, *A Clash of Kings*. And let's face it, folks, if you are going to read a massive fantasy 'trilogy', you might as well read the very best in the business. OK, so it isn't Tolkien but, despite all those 'comparable to' blurbs, no one is. And I'll grant that Tad Williams' Orsinard books have a breath of originality

and feel for myth that George's work lacks. But if your requirement is for a quasi-mediaeval setting with a bit of magic, some dragons and a damn good story, well told, no one does it better than George. Indeed, I find it hard to imagine how anyone could.

As with the first book, the plot crawls along at a glacial pace, but you never notice because there is so much good story and so many different threads that you keep on turning the pages compulsively. I finished it in two days. And what a plot it is too. The title is apt, because at the start of this book there are no less than five claimants to the Iron Throne. One is a potential queen and well away from the action, but the other four spend the book battling amongst themselves, oblivious to the dire portents being discovered beyond The Wall by the Night Watch. What is more George has now brought in expanded roles for the cult of the Red Priests and some interesting oriental spies who seem to know far more about what is going on than the would-be royal protagonists. He has promised to resolve everything in another three books. Goodness knows how he is going to do it.

I'm steering clear of specific details of the plot for the benefit of US readers who have another few weeks to wait before publication. Here's hoping that the US publishers get their act together this time. They bungled the previous volume by dressing it up to look like a Danielle Steele rather than a Robert Jordan, thus depriving many American readers of a chance to see how the genre really should be done. That is criminal, because this is brilliant stuff.

One of the reasons it is so good is because, as the cover blurb says, it contains a healthy dose of realpolitik. Certainly there are some utterly rotten people in the story, but much of the message of this volume concerns just how hard it is to be good in the middle of a war. There are times when George even manages to make you feel sorry for Queen Cersei. I particularly liked the beautiful little vignette story of Ser Davos, an honest, competent and loyal man who goes down fighting for a royal claimant to whom he owes everything but who has obviously succumbed to the Dark Side.

Of course Neil would have written a single novel concentrating on Davos. He would have paid little attention to the wider political context, and would have shown how events transpired to produce a good outcome for the loyal knight and a bad one for his corrupted master. Neil is taking one fine strand and holding it up for inspection, George is taking a whole bunch of them and using them to weave a complex tapestry. I don't yet know how George will handle Davos's story. The battle in which he appears to die comes right at the end of the book. My guess is that Davos will live, will go back to being a smuggler, and be happier for it. That's the way it should be, anyway.

Meanwhile we are also awaiting appropriate outcomes for the rest of the massive cast that George has paraded before us. So when do we get the next one, George?

A Clash of Kings - George R.R. Martin - Voyager - softcover

Positively Spiffing

I have come to the conclusion that Connie Willis is an Englishman.

Well, maybe she was one in a previous life. Certainly she has done a fine job, not only of writing a book set primarily in Victorian England, but also writing it from the viewpoint of a male character. I'd not read any of Connie's work prior to *To Say Nothing of the Dog*, but I had seen her perform at various conventions so I had some idea of what to expect. Even so I was quite bowled over. Haven't laughed so much since reading Kim Newman's *Back in the USSA*.

Briefly, the plot is something like this. Lady Schrappnel, a ghastly American woman who happened to marry into the aristocracy and is filthy rich, is determined to build an exact replica of Coventry Cathedral (the original, not the awful modern thing). She has managed to commandeer the whole of Oxford University's History Department, and their time travel machine, to research this project. The poor historians are being worked like slaves and are starting to suffer serious time lag effects such as Difficulty Distinguishing Sounds and Tendency Towards Maudlin Sentimentality.

The worst affected researcher, Ned Henry, has been detailed to get a full description of the Bishop's Bird Stump, a truly awful piece of Victorian "art" that was supposedly lost in the Nazi air raid that destroyed the cathedral. Ned has been trying to get to the site just before or after the raid, but the space time continuum has been 'slipping' destinations around that period, a sure sign that something of great historical significance happened then/there.

Ned is badly in need of rest, so his boss sends him somewhere peaceful, quiet, and perfect for someone suffering from Tendency Towards Maudlin Sentimentality. Also it is somewhere where Lady Schrappnel is unlikely to find him: Victorian England, for a boating holiday on the Thames.

Not that the location was picked entirely with Ned's benefit in mind. The time lab urgently needed to return something to that era. Something that should never have come forward in time and may cause a space-time incongruity that will lead to the collapse of the entire continuum. If only Ned could remember what it was. He was having Difficulty Distinguishing Sounds at the time and all of his instructions went in one ear and out the other.

Did I say briefly? Oh dear, it gets far more complicated than that. I haven't even got to Terrence St. Trewes and his undying love for Tossie Merring. Not to mention Tossie's mother who has a passion for spiritualism, Tossie's father and Professor Peddick who have a passion for fish, Cyril the bulldog who lists to port, and Princess Arjumand the cat, who has an entirely different type of passion for fish.

The book is at times serious SF, a country house mystery and a complex farce that even Jeeves would have trouble sorting out, especially with the entire fabric of space-time at stake. By the end, Ned will not only have saved the universe, but will also have discovered what happened to the Bishop's Bird Stump during the air raid, and why seeing it made such an impression on Lady Schrappnel's great great great grandmother. *Quod Erat Demonstrandum*, old bean.

I'd like to go on for pages about the various complications of the plot, but that would spoil the whole thing for you. Instead I'll just point out a few of the nice touches that I appreciated whilst reading the book. For example:

- The argument between Professor Peddick and his rival, Professor Overforce, which appears at first to be a joke, turns out to be central to the philosophical problems that Ned is facing;

- The wonderful way in which Connie conveys the disorienting effects of time lag on the characters;
- Connie's obvious love of history, an absolute boon to any time travel story;
- The delightful characterisation (OK, they are a bit stereotyped, but the book is a farce), even down to minor roles like Miss Sharpe and the ARP man; and
- That despite having lived most of my life in England I was only able to spot three errors in the background.

What were they? Well, I hate nit-picking, and I'm sure someone will want to pick the science in the book to pieces, but in the interests of educating rebellious colonials, here goes.

The first mistake is very minor. When Ned is running the treasure hunt at Mrs. Merring's jumble sale the price is 2d for one go or 5d for three. Delphinium Chattisbourne pays 5d for three goes, uses two and then asks for 2d in return. Ned gets out of this by claiming that he has no change. But this is l.s.d. currency we are dealing with (pounds, shillings and pence). There are twelve pence to the shilling. The available coin denominations are 1d, 3d and 6d. If Delphinium gave Ned 5d he must have had 2d in change.

Number two is a little more obscure, but is more obvious in the book. Connie describes how the tube (that is the London Underground Railway) has been extended to Oxford and mentions a fuss about building the new station. She seems to think that the tube is some flash new sort of train, like BART perhaps, that needs special lines. Not really. The tube is an electric system requiring a third, powered rail alongside the regular track. Other than that it is a perfectly normal railway. For example, the Metropolitan line runs all the way out to Amersham. From about Harrow onwards the tube trains share the track with Chiltern Line's normal, overground trains.

Hammersmith line trains currently run through Paddington station and it would probably be easy to route them onto the track for Oxford. What is more likely, assuming the tunnels are big enough, is that Thames Trains would run their normal, diesel-powered commuter service from Oxford over onto the tube lines and take it through Baker Street and Kings Cross. This sort of cross-London running has become quite popular since deregulation.

The only reason I can think of for needing to extend the tube to Oxford is a desire to route the line underground. I know we've done a tunnel under the Channel, but it cost an absolute fortune. No one is going to do that just to preserve the countryside when a perfectly good line already exists.

And the third mistake? Kedgerree is absolutely delicious.

To Say Nothing of the Dog - Connie Willis - Bantam Spectra - hardcover

Secret Wars

Once upon a time, George Orwell imagined a world in which everything you did was observed, monitored, checked. Big Brother was watching you, and there was not a thing you

could do about it. Fourteen years on from the date by which Orwell's nightmare society was supposed to have come to pass, David Brin has imagined a very similar society. In this case, however, there are three important differences:

1. Brin claims that much of the technology required already exists and is being implemented;
2. He says that rather than recoil in horror we should welcome this new trend; and
3. He is not writing fiction.

The Transparent Society is Brin's first foray into overt political philosophy. It isn't going to be an earthshaking book in the same league as *The Wealth of Nations* or *The Communist Manifesto*. But then one of the reasons it will not achieve such fame is that it is far too well balanced and pragmatic. Brin might be opinionated, but he is no demagogue, and he is quite happy to admit where he is making assumptions or, shock, horror, where he might be wrong. He'll never make a political leader at that rate, but he may just be someone we should be listening to.

The subtitle of the book is, *Will Technology Force Us to Choose Between Privacy and Freedom?* and as a summary of the book's argument it is both concise and accurate. Of course it is not exactly obvious, so here goes with a slightly more wordy summary.

One of the most talked about aspects of modern life is privacy. From the need to protect ourselves from snooping paparazzi to the requirement for secure encryption of electronic commercial transactions, we are becoming privacy-obsessed. David, as I have said, is not an extremist. He is, after all, a minor public personality, and I doubt that he would be any more pleased about having intimate details of his life displayed on the Web than would, say, Madonna, or Prince Charles. Nevertheless, he claims that privacy is a luxury that we may have to forego if we wish to avoid substantial erosion of our democracy and freedom.

Still not clear? Let's try one or two of the central themes.

It should be obvious that you cannot have privacy if you are not free. Much of the apparent freedom that men and women have had in the past is a result of their overlords having neither the will nor the resources to watch over them all of the time. Now that those resources are available, the will will surely follow.

Many cryptography advocates now claim that the opposite is also true: that we cannot have freedom unless we have privacy. This is by no means clear. It might, on the surface, seem desirable, especially to the sort of Libertarian fanatic who wants to be free to do absolutely anything he wants. Brin demolishes that argument very easily. In a society where the ability to achieve privacy is dependent on possession of the latest technological gimmickry (hardware and software), the rich will have privacy and the rest of us will be stuffed. No matter how good your security, someone with more money will be able to hack it.

A particular beef that Brin has with the Cypherpunks, as the new breed of Internet cryptographers call themselves, is that they see government as their only enemy. This is not unusual in America. Elsewhere (and remember that William Gibson is a Canadian), multinational corporations and crime bosses are the bogeymen. Brin says that all such groups are equally likely to seek control of our lives if it is offered to them. The only way, he says, to control them, is to forbid them from acting in secret. And we will not persuade them to agree to that unless we too are prepared to surrender our privacy.

He has a point. For democracy to work it is essential that everyone: politicians, citizens, companies and civil servants, be accountable for their actions. No one can be accountable if they are able to hide their actions behind a veil of secrecy, whether that veil be called "national security", "commercial interest" or "the right to personal privacy". Therefore, for democracy to continue, there must be limits to privacy.

Now of course there will be problems. For example, just how are we going to be able to conduct secure business transactions over the Internet without effective encryption? Before I go into Brin's answer to that, just consider for a moment that much of what is done in today's business world in the name of security is neither effective nor designed with the consumer's safety in mind.

Take those security checks at airports, for example. Why do they want to see your passport when you check in? Everyone knows that a competent terrorist or drug smuggler could obtain a false one easily. The primary reason for the check is that it allows the airlines to enforce business practices under which tickets are not re-saleable, which nets them a tidy sum.

Or how about all this nonsense with banks over dates of birth, mothers' maiden names and the silly address check I had with my credit card purchase of an air ticket last month? Are these "passwords" secure? No way. There are enough public records around for the competent thief to get the information he needs. The check is there so that, if the card is used fraudulently, the bank can claim that the thief had the password and that therefore they were not at fault. Even if it is provable that the rightful owner was nowhere near the point where the card was used.

Brin readily admits that he does not have a perfect solution, but he does have some ideas, one of which I would love to see implemented. The whole point of electronic commerce is swift exchange of information. Just suppose that your credit card company was prepared to take your email address and post a confirmation note to you each time your card was used. The cost to them would be trivial. How much better would that be than having to wait for a monthly statement to find out if there was a problem?

The other downside of openness is much more personal. Sometimes you just need a little secrecy. Whether you are a whistleblower trying to find a journalist to expose your company's wrong-doing, a teenager needing help with a drug problem and afraid to go to your parents, or someone with unconventional but harmless sexual habits who fears ridicule and ostracism, sometimes you need to conceal your identity.

Once again Brin has an interesting and unusual practical suggestion to offer. Sure everyone has to carry an identity card, but it should be possible to buy additional identities. The organisations handling card registration would compete on the basis of their reputation for keeping buyers' names safe. The police would be able to request a check, but only under strictly controlled and publicly documented conditions.

More importantly, Brin suggests that an open and honest society is one in which the need for secrecy will be greatly diminished. It will be one in which whistleblowers are public heroes. If your father beats you up for taking drugs, you ask the police to review the video record from your home at that time. And if your boss laughs at you for being a transvestite, remind him what goes on in those hour long meetings he has with his personal secretary each morning.

I'm not going to claim that David is right in everything he says. After all, he himself admits that he might be wrong. The book is more an attempt to encourage discussion than a

prescription for how the future should be. What I will ask you to do is think about the points I have raised. Then read the whole book and think some more. I haven't covered anywhere near the breadth of topics that Brin touches upon, and you will probably find that your own complaints are considered thoughtfully in the book.

Our society is changing faster than current governments are able to keep pace with it. Optimistic Libertarians say this is a good thing because it will allow us to do away with government. Realists like Brin say that in that case we'd better think hard about what is happening before someone else moves in and takes the place of government.

Brin's solution isn't perfect: no solution ever is. If we aim for the type of society he proposes, a lot of people will get hurt along the way. Any revolution will have casualties. But the price we have to pay might just be preferable to living in a world in which governments, corporations and criminals can watch us, but we can't watch them.

The Transparent Society - David Brin - Addison Wesley - hardcover

Tales of a Sand Man

Last issue I explained that I was so impressed by Martha Wells' *The Death of the Necromancer* that I tried to buy all of the other books she had written. *The Element of Fire* is sadly out of print, but I picked up a copy of *City of Bones* from Tom Whitmore. I was not disappointed.

Frank Herbert's *Dune* casts such an impressive shadow over the science fiction universe that it is amazing to find anyone prepared to risk setting a novel in a desert world. That Martha Wells chose to do so is a credit to her bravery, a delight for readers, and an excuse for an awful Neil Gaiman reference in the title of this review. The world of *City of Bones*, however, has little in common with *Dune* save for the sandy setting. For a start, as the title implies, there are cities. Few people live on out in the sand, and most of those are either outlaws or the inhuman kris, genetically engineered beings designed by the Ancients to be capable of surviving the waterless world that they knew was coming.

Booklist described the story as a post-holocaust fantasy. It certainly has that air to it, with much of the action centred on fathoming the mysteries of the strange devices left behind by the Ancients. On the other hand, it is by no means certain that the planet where it is set is Earth. Nor is it obvious that the disaster which laid waste the land, boiled away the seas, and left the inhabitants scratching a living on the dried-up ocean beds was the result of a nuclear war. A scientific accident, perhaps, a war, quite possibly, but not as we know it, Jim. Not as we know it at all.

The central characters of the novel are Khat (pronounced 'cat'), a former burglar, trader in ancient relics and one of the despised kris, and Elen, a young sorceress. Most of the action takes place in the city of Charisat, the centre of a large empire thanks to its strategic position on the trade routes leading to the last major body of water on the planet. The city is heavily stratified, both physically and socially, with the top-most tiers housing the Elector and Patrician families and having access to the best water. Elen lives on the top-most tier, as befits a

student of the powerful Master Warder. Khat scrapes a living down on the sixth, selling his knowledge of ancient artifacts for a pittance because as a kris he cannot become a citizen, let alone a scholar.

Where the paths of hero and heroine cross, is in the heart of a tangled web of deceit spun by various players in Charisat's ruling classes. The goal is a collection of artifacts which just might, according to an old grimoire, allow the owner to tap into the powers of the Ancients. Should any of the power-crazed plotters succeed, they may acquire the ability, not just to topple the Elector, but to destroy the entire planet.

Wells' writing is as good as I have come to expect, though it is clear that she is progressing her craft. This older book has rather too many points in the plot where things happen conveniently to get characters to the right location. That is a common fault in plotting, but it is not one that I noticed in *The Death of the Necromancer*. Nor, indeed, is it one which should mar the enjoyment of the book for most readers. I romped through it in just over a day whilst recovering from jet lag. It is full of imagination, quality writing and excitement. Why Martha Wells is not famous is a mystery to me.

City of Bones - Martha Wells - Tor - softcover

Footnote

In the firing line for next issue are new novels from Tom Arden and Paul McAuley. As usual, whilst I am in the UK, I will be doing my best to round up news on all that is best in British SF&F. If any of my British readers have any suggestions of people I should read, please let me know.

Ciao,

Love 'n' hugs,

Cheryl