

EMERALD CITY

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

Introduction

Not much to report this time, I think. I'm still in the UK. Nothing much is happening, but at least I seem to have avoided the snow. Sorry I didn't make the February Tun. Hopefully I'll manage March. And now, without any further ado, on with the show.

Swords' Play

...And so, dear heart, there we all were, delicately arranged around Countess D__'s parlour, looking our elegant best, and anticipating eagerly whatever entertainment we were about to be offered. Well, you can imagine the consternation when the Countess informed us that young Mr. Arden would be telling us a story. I mean, the last one was a little, and I'm afraid one has to say it, coarse, in places. All that stuff about the crippled boy and his invalid mother and the horrible, filthy Vagas. And as for that awful fat woman who so fancied herself as a person of quality but hadn't the faintest idea of how to behave except when ordering the servants about: we were, it has to be said, a little taken aback.

So it was with great relief, O bosom friend, that we discovered that the dear boy has found it in his heart this time to write of more gentle and civilised affairs. We were told of young Jemany and Cata experiencing the joys of taking the spa at Varby, of attending the exquisite soirées at Lady Cham-Charing's and even, oh joy of joys, of being admitted to the splendour of the Royal Court. There was also much dastardly villainy perpetrated by members of the less fair sex whom I shall not flatter with the description of 'gentlemen', most of whom, I am pleased to say, received their due comeuppance. Towards the end there was rather too much talk of battles and sorcery that we all found a bit dull, but one has to forgive the occasional lapse, don't you think?

I must admit that some of what happened in the tale left me a little confused, and this led to a most unusual exchange between Mr. Arden and Lady V__, who, as you know, thinks rather too much of herself. It went something like this:

Lady V__, "Why Mr. Arden, there are times when one might almost that you are poking fun at us".

Mr. Arden, "My dear lady, how could one possibly poke fun at a gathering of such elegant and delectable ladies".

Lady V___, "Young man, sahosm does not become you".

At least that is what I think she said. I didn't understand what she was on about, dearest. Sometimes I think she makes up words just to confuse the rest of us.

All of which is part and parcel of saying that I have read the second part of Tom Arden's Orokon series and a very fine thing it is too. In *The King and Queen of Swords* Jem and Cata are given a basic grounding in the horrors and hypocrisies of life amongst the quality folk of Agondon and then set off for far Zenzau in search of the second crystal. Along the way we are entertained by many pages of cultured prose set to the service of passion, horror and whimsy.

The title, by the way, refers to a couple of playing cards which turn out to have a significant place in Zenzau mythology and thus in Jem's quest. They may also refer in some way to the mysterious Lord Empster and The Remarkable Vlada Flay, two highly manipulative characters who drift through the book, bending characters to their wills, and giving off an unmistakable impression of being Not What They Seem. There is a lot of that about. Indeed the only thing that seems entirely beyond doubt is that the bad guy is thoroughly bad indeed. What can one say about a mad wizard who has been around for so long that the only ambition he has left is to become a god? Probably that he will turn out to have been horribly misunderstood.

I'm told that a review in *Vector* described the book as "intensely mannered" and "monumentally camp", both of which were probably meant as negatives but are in fact highly appropriate and complimentary. If the reviewer had added "screamingly funny" and "bitingly satirical" he would have summed the book up pretty well.

Oh, there are things in there that are ghastly beyond belief, but they are deliberately and delightfully so. Arden's writing has improved noticeably, from very good but raw in places to very good all round. And I'm told that the third volume, currently with the editor, is better still. Given the amount of boring, unimaginative crap that is sold as fantasy these days, this really is a series that deserves to sell in huge volumes.

Therein, of course, lies the rub, for to sell in volume a book has to break into the US market. As yet I have seen no sign of US publication and this, I suspect, may be due to the fear that the Americans simply won't understand. They might, horror of horrors, take it all at face value. I prefer to think that there are enough folks Over There who do appreciate the likes of sarcasm and satire and who will enjoy these books as much as I have.

And if that wasn't enough I have discovered that Tom was born in South Australia and has a Ph.D. in 18th Century English Literature (Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* to be precise) from Adelaide University. How he came to choose something so un-Australian to study, and why he was mad enough to leave Australia for the frozen wastes of the UK, is a mystery to me. Perhaps, she says with tongue firmly in cheek, he had to come here to find the inspiration he needed for his characters.

But enough of this: the message is simple. Just buy it, will you? And don't forget the Campbell nomination.

*Everything's hidden, but all in plain sight,
For even the truth can't be found without light.
Forget your stale posturing, Ladies and Lords,
And dance with the King and Queen of Swords.*

The King and Queen of Swords - Tom Arden - Golancz - hardcover

Child's Play

It isn't often that I end up reading young adult fiction. But, as we have seen before, books written for kids are by no means always simplistic. Sometimes they contain a wealth of imagination. Besides, Philip Pullman came to me with two excellent recommendations. Firstly, Tad Williams mentioned him as one of the better fantasy writers around. That's serious praise. The other recommendation came via the Mythopoeic Society's APA. One of the members, who is a very devout Christian, described *The Subtle Knife* as the most evil book she had ever read. How could I not try it?

But we must start at the beginning of the series with *The Golden Compass*. Much of the plot takes place in a fairly recognisable version of Britain (primarily Oxford and London), but this is a world in which physics is known as "experimental theology", characters can hail from the country of Texas in the lands of New Denmark, and the arctic is inhabited by races of witches and intelligent warrior polar bears. Pullman has clearly been having a lot of fun here. Magic aside, most of his deviations from our world are highly plausible from an alternate history point of view. Britain is still an empire, the Catholic Church is still all-powerful (though the Curia has done away with the inconvenience of popes) and there are countries called Muscovy and Nippon. In *The Subtle Knife* he introduces a third world, one of whose major cities is Benin. All of this stuff must be fabulously educational for the inquisitive kid.

The most significant difference, however, between this world and ours, is that every human in it has a daemon, an animal familiar which is born with them, dies with them, and cannot move too far away from its owner without causing intense pain to both. When children are born, their daemons are shape-shifters, but at puberty they settle down into a form which best reflects the personality of their owner. At first it seems that the daemons are simply totem animals, but when the story brings in characters from our world whose daemons are inside them it becomes clear that something more subtle is intended. The daemons are a physical embodiment of their owners' souls. Remember that I mentioned physics being called "experimental theology"? Can you see some enormous concepts being played with here? Oh yes!

"That's the duty of the old", said the Librarian, "to be anxious on behalf of the young. And the duty of the young is to scorn the anxiety of the old".

They sat for a while longer, and then parted, for it was late, and they were old and anxious.

Of course this is a kids' book so it has to have children as heroes. In *The Golden Compass* this role is taken by Lyra Belacqua, an orphan left by her uncle in the care of the professors of an Oxford college and educated street-wise by the kids of the college servants. She is devious, determined, and completely lacking in social graces. Quite a kid, in other words. The careless uncle, Lord Asriel, turns out to be deeply interested in certain theological phenomena found only in the arctic. It transpires that there may be a means of creating a bridge to other worlds, not to mention finding solutions to certain thorny theological problems. He is, it seems, rather ruthless in his pursuit of his goals.

Lord Asriel is opposed by the Church's agent, the monumentally ambitious and cruel Mrs. Coulter, a woman who makes Cruella de Ville look positively innocuous. Lyra, of course, gets caught up in the battle between these two adults, and with the help of a band of canal barge gypsies (sorry, gyptians), a renegade polar bear, a Texan balloonist and the fortune telling device of the book's title, manages to get herself into all sorts of trouble.

The second book brings our own world into the plot and introduces a second lead character, Will Parry. Poor Will is one of those kids who might wish he were an orphan. His father has gone missing in the arctic (care to guess how?) and his mother is suffering from such extreme paranoia that Will pretty much has to run the household. When mysterious ruffians take an extreme interest in the fate of Will's father, and the boy kills one of them by accident, he is forced to try to find out what is going on by himself. Much more is learnt about theological issues, a third world is discovered, Will teams up with Lyra, and things go from bad to absolutely horrific.

She had asked: What is he? A friend or an enemy?

The alethiometer answered: He is a murderer.

When she saw the answer, she relaxed at once... A murderer was a worthy companion.

Now to be sure these are books for children, and thus there are several apparent weaknesses that should not appear in an adult story. The plotting is sometimes a bit simplistic and convenient, and some of the science is a little far fetched. But none of that should take away from the enormity of the issues being discussed, nor the depth of the emotional traumas that the poor kids are put through. Did I mention that Will accidentally killed a man? That is rather tame compared to some of the other things he and Lyra experience. And at the end of *The Subtle Knife*, in comparatively few words, Pullman plunges Will into a state of despair the depths of which Thomas Covenant could only fantasise about. This is heavy stuff.

So what about this evil thing then? Is it simply that the themes are a little too horrific for kids? Oh no, there is more to it than that. Not a lot more: I wouldn't say, for example, that Pullman is any more blasphemous than Storm Constantine is in her Shemyaza trilogy. But then maybe devout Christians know not to read Storm, or maybe it counts for more when the target audience is kids. Anyway, Pullman does not like organised religion. True, it is mainly the bureaucratic church of Lyra's world that is doing most of the bad stuff, but he leaves us in no

doubt that they are only symptomatic. In *The Subtle Knife* one of the witch queens makes this rousing declaration:

"That is what the Church does, and every church is the same: control, destroy, obliterate every good feeling. So if a war comes, and the Church is on one side of it, we must be on the other."

What I don't know as yet, is whether Pullman's theology (the theoretical stuff, not the experimental) makes sense. So far it all seems a little confused, but I think this is merely because Pullman is allowing us to see bits of the story from different viewpoints. We will have to wait for the final volume for a clear explanation. I'm looking forward to it.

So much looking forward, in fact, that I went looking for it. Along the way I discovered a potential bit of confusion. It appears that the UK publication of *The Golden Compass* went under the name of *The Northern Lights*. I wish they would stop doing that. As for the third volume, according to Amazon it is called *His Dark Material* and will be published in hardback on August 1st. If anyone knows how I can get hold of a proof copy sooner than that I'd be very grateful.

The Golden Compass - Philip Pullman - Del Rey - softcover

The Subtle Knife - Philip Pullman - Del Rey - softcover

Power Play

Well, I read the second volume of Paul McAuley's *Confluence* series, and it went past pleasantly enough, but I had difficulty in finding anything interesting to say about it. I keep coming up with words like "competent" and "workmanlike" rather than "entertaining" or "enthraling". It is a shame really, there's nothing particularly bad about the book, it just doesn't quite work. So I set myself to try to work out why.

First let's have a quick recap of the plot. *Confluence* is a gigantic artificial world people by vast numbers of intelligent races, all of which seem to have been genetically engineered from types of animal. Into this world comes a mysterious baby, Yama, who appears to be human. Clearly there is some vast and mysterious reason for this. When the boy grows up, he sets off in search of other people like himself, and everyone else seeks to use him to their own advantage. The first book, *Child of the River*, tells of his boyhood and journey to the capital city, Ys. The *Ancients of Days* picks him up there, continues his quest, and tells us a lot more about his world.

Those of you who are on the ball (or who read my review of *Child of the River*), will have noticed that this is a Gene Wolfe clone. It contains most of the essential elements of both the *New Sun* and *Long Sun* series: the post technological world with machines that seem like magic, the impending doom of that world, the young man with a mysterious past and a vital role to play in averting that doom, the intense political machinations. This is both good and bad. If you are going to imitate someone, you might as well pick the very best in your field. On the other hand, the chances are that you will appear a pale shadow in comparison.

Furthermore, by looking at how Wolfe works, we can start to see things about McAuley's books that are different and, perhaps, not quite right. The first of these is that he gives away far

too much information far too quickly. Wolfe is devious and miserly. Some of us got all the way to the end of the *New Sun* series and still didn't understand everything that was going on. McAuley, on the other hand, seems to have revealed most of what is going on already, some of it by straightforward exposition. As a result, the reader is less intrigued.

Second, although both Severian and Silk had more going for them than it first appeared, they were both portrayed as essentially powerless, struggling against forces beyond their imagining. Yama, on the other hand, is phenomenally powerful when it is convenient for the plot for him to be so, and beset by moral qualms over the use of his power when it is not. It is never a good sign when things start happening in a book for no other obvious reason than to advance the plot in a particular direction.

Finally, Wolfe is a master of subtle machinations. When his characters get cunning, they are seriously so. McAuley doesn't seem to have quite the same evil quality to his mind, and consequently what happens seems much more straightforward. Even when he does come up with a nice little rats nest, such as the internal politics of the Department of Vaccination, he doesn't seem to make terribly good use of it. The intricacies are revealed, but appear to have had very little impact on events.

There are things that McAuley does very well. His descriptions of the labyrinthine bureaucracy that run Ys are both amusing and insightful. Also you can't fault him for ambition: the future history he constructs to explain the background of *Confluence* involves the life and death of whole galaxies. I suspect he has his astrophysics down fairly much pat as well. Sadly, however, this doesn't make up for the fact that he is singing a well known tune slightly off key. I wish he'd go back to innovative ideas of his own such as *Fairyland*.

The Ancients of Days - Paul McAuley - Golancz - hardcover

Playing the Horn

A long time ago in a far-off, magical land known as the Sixties, a young man in California had a vision. The man's name was Peter S. Beagle, and his vision became an absolute classic of the fantasy genre. To coincide with the 30th anniversary of the original publication, ROC have re-issued the book, and with World Fantasy Con taking place in California, it seemed only obvious to give copies of the book away.

Getting free books at conventions is always a bit of a lottery. For the most part you get given books that you would never buy (and might not even read). You get a lot of books at a WFC, and most of them were in that category. And being that complaining is what fans do best, some people even whinged that the one book they might have wanted was one they had already. But not everyone had a copy. OK, I admit it, I was one of them. And so, at last, thanks to the generosity of ROC and WFC, I came to know the story of *The Last Unicorn*.

It is not a complex story to tell. Alone in her enchanted forest, a unicorn hears two hunters discussing how no one ever sees unicorns any more. One doubts that they ever existed. Worried that she may be the last of her race, she goes off in search of her fellows. Along the

way she meets some strange companions, included a magician cursed by his tutor never to grow old until he manages to cast a spell correctly. Eventually she ends up at the gloomy castle of King Haggard, a man who has discovered that when you can have anything you want, nothing makes you happy. Well, nothing perhaps, except the most beautiful creatures in all the world, and then only if you alone have all of them.

And so? Yes, it is deservedly a classic. Certainly the Red Bull, King Haggard's pet monster, is one of the best fantasy baddies ever created. Beagle never gives him his true name, but when you finally work out what he is you cannot help but smile at the cleverness of it.

There are parts of the book where Beagle becomes very tongue in cheek with the genre, particularly with the inept outlaws and Prince Lir's career as a Hero. It reminded me a lot of John Barth's *Chimaera*, and given that that is also one of my favourite books, we are doing pretty well here.

Most of all, however, I was reminded of *Stardust*. *The Last Unicorn* is exactly the sort of book that Neil was trying to write. I hope he will forgive me for saying that Beagle has done it somewhat better. It isn't easy to write a story so simple and elegant. Nor it is easy to take all those fantasy tropes and make something new and uniquely your own. It is, however, a noble thing for a writer to aim for. Neil, I am sure, will write better books. As for Beagle, he has written a lot of stuff since. Maybe I had better go read some of them. After all, he is GoH at this year's Eastercon.

If I have one small complaint it is with the publishers. It appears that for the new edition they decided to commission some illustrations. With a couple of exceptions they are really dreadful. What a shame.

The Last Unicorn - Peter S. Beagle - ROC - softcover

Trench Warfare

One of the definite pleasures of being back in the UK is that I can catch up on one of my all time favourite TV shows. No, not one of those ghastly sitcoms that leave foreigners thinking Britain is a nation of mental defectives. Not a soap either. I would have hoped you'd know me better than that by now. I am talking of course, about Tony Robinson's excellent *Time Team* programmes.

At this point most non-British readers are saying to themselves, "Tony Robinson, where have I heard that name before?" I shall put you out of your misery, for he is Baldrick, the turnip-loving sidekick of Rowan Atkinson's *Blackadder*. A fine comic actor, is Mr. Robinson, but *Time Team* sees him in another light entirely.

As the name suggests, *Time Team* is about history and archaeology. The concept is simple. Robinson has at his disposal a team of expert archaeologists. Each week they are sent to a different part of these history-drenched islands and are given precisely three days to discover as much as they can about the history of the site.

Now wait a minute, isn't archaeology all about careful, deliberate sifting of evidence? Shouldn't they be taking three years, not three days? Not any more it isn't. Britain has been one of the pioneers of so-called "rescue archaeology", which is what happens when the guys on a building site discover something suspicious but are not prepared to wait more than a few weeks whilst it is investigated, and probably only then because of a court order.

The *Time Team* staff are not exactly thorough. They skim the surface of the site as quickly as possible so as to get a broad overview of what is going on. Often they use mechanical diggers to start trenches, especially when they have a good idea of the depth of the potential find. But they are professional. Once they are into something ancient they take due care, and presumably a more thorough follow-up takes place later if anyone has the money to fund it.

Besides, the time limit is important. It imparts an air of drama to the show. Indeed, the whole thing is put together with a view to entertainment as well as education. The regular crew are as bizarre a bunch as you could wish for. There is jolly Mick Aston, the site director, with his amazing collection of multi-coloured, home-made knitware, none of which seems to fit. His west country colleague, Phil Harding, looks as if he would be more at home with a straw in his mouth mashing mangel-wurzels and knocking back pints of scrumpy, but this seeming maniac is an expert in delicate excavation work. Carezza Lewis, with her Barbour jackets and cut-glass accent, should probably be found chasing foxy rather than foundations, but she is quite happy getting her hands dirty, and is a whiz at finding the right place to dig by just looking at a map or aerial photo. And then there is roly-poly Robin Bush, a man who looks like he wouldn't get out of his leather arm chair for less than a bottle of vintage claret, but is never so happy as when poring over some musty manuscript in Middle English or Anglo Saxon.

In contrast to this engaging collection of lunatics we have the often faceless scientists of the geophysical survey team. The archaeologists are forever making fun of people who dig with computers rather than trowels, but often have to swallow their words when the painstaking survey work produces a clear picture of buried foundations. And finally there is Robinson himself, devoid of expert training, but keen, and possessed of a boundless enthusiasm for each project. The dynamics of the cast are superb, and with the promise of interesting historical discoveries each week, the programmes keep you on the edge of your seat.

Now *Time Team* is on Channel 4, where much of the really innovative broadcasting in Britain comes from these days. The BBC have not had a regular archaeology programme since the hideous *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral*, a quiz show about ancient artefacts with historians as the contestants. It was probably the inspiration for Newman and Baddiel's "Two Professors" sketch. Now, after having left the field to the competition for several years, they have decided to re-enter the fray.

Meet the Ancestors is everything that *Time Team* is not. To start with, it is about people rather than places. Someone obviously thought this was a good idea. People are more interesting than buildings, yes? Well, no, actually. Archaeology can tell you an awful lot about a site and what, in general, went on there, but unless you are very lucky it can tell you very little about specific people. The result is that the programme seems to rely far too much on contrivance for a story. In the last episode they were working on a skeleton found in a mediaeval chapel. They had a historical reference that a particular lord was buried there, and did a good job of actually finding the man's living ancestors. But the radio carbon dating put the skeleton at over 100

years younger than the man in question. Tellingly, when they learnt that all members of the family had abnormally large hands, the programme pointedly avoided any further examination of the skeleton.

The presenter, Julian Richards, is an archaeologist, not an entertainer. He tries hard to copy Robinson's enthusiastic demeanour, but is found severely wanting in the personality department. There does not appear to be a regular back-up team, and most of the experts Richards does consult are no more cut out for starring roles than he is.

Crucially, however, there is no tension in the programme. In *Time Team* Robinson is forever rushing around his colleagues asking for updates. "We only have a day and a half left", he will wail, "and we've got no results". "Well we won't get any unless you get out of my trench", Phil will reply. In the end they nearly always get something: sometimes something spectacular (which is normally left for the last programme of the season). Richards, in contrast, seems to have all the time in the world, and does very little with it. He is most often seen driving around in his 4x4, going to consult with someone or other at the far end of the country, or making dreary monologues to the camera.

I don't often review TV programmes for *Emerald City*. I made an exception here for two reasons. Firstly, as far as I know, *Time Team* has not been sold to the US or Australia. Goodness only knows why, because it is fascinating. I'm taping a few episodes and will bring them back to California with me. Obviously they will be in Pal format, but hopefully someone in BASFA has a twin-format deck so we can convert to NTSC. Then we can start nagging PBS.

The other reason is that I am quite frankly appalled at the level to which creativity has sunk within the BBC. They have had a few successes, Teletubbies being the obvious one, but most of their current output is either dull re-hashing of old and tired ideas, or repeats. BBC2, once the proud refuge of television for people with brains, now barely manages one programme worth watching a day. Dear old Auntie is suffering from senile dementia and should be put out of her misery fast.

More information about *Time Team* can be found at: www.channel4.com/knowning/timeteam

Footnote

I was thinking of putting in a section on Hugo recommendations this issue, but there seems to be very little to say. Most of the best books over the past year seem to have been parts of series, which makes them hard to nominate. *Signs of Life* by M. John Harrison is, I think, by far the best of the crop. To that I'm adding *Inversions* (Iain Banks), *Irrational Fears* (William Browning Spencer), *Six Moon Dance* (Sheri Tepper) and *To Say Nothing of the Dog* (Connie Willis). Somehow I don't expect any of them except Connie to make the ballot.

There are, of course, two obvious candidates in other categories. Ian Gunn for Best Fan Artist should be unquestioned. I'm also nominating Kerri Valkova and Sue Mason in the hope of getting more Americans to notice them. Tom Arden for the Campbell, please. And of course if anyone sees fit to nominate me or *Emerald City* I shall be pathetically grateful.

Anyone remember the problems I had trying to buy plane tickets with my UK credit card whilst in the US? You think it might be easier in the UK? Wrong. I've just tried to order a new modem from a mail order company. It appears that these days you cannot buy anything over the phone using a credit card unless a) the card is drawn on a UK bank, b) it is registered at a UK address, and c) the address to which the goods are to be sent is identical to that at which the card is registered. Travellers beware. If you are visiting the UK, make sure you buy things in person. Your credit cards will not be accepted over the phone.

Is it any wonder that I detest this country?

Next issue, to celebrate an extended stay in the wilds of Somerset, Bernard Cornwell's Arthur trilogy. There's a new Elizabeth Hand novel due out soon as well, but I don't know whether I'll get it in time. And of course Kevin and I will be handing the issue out at the Eastercon. I hope to see many of you there.

Ciao,

Love 'n' hugs,

Cheryl