

# EMERALD CITY

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## Introduction

Hello Eastercon! Gosh, a gap of 14 years and then I make two on the trot. This is becoming a habit. Anyway, should you happen to pick up a copy of this fanzine whilst you are at the convention, welcome. This is *Emerald City*, it is full of my own doubtless highly eccentric views on speculative fiction, and with any luck a few people will find it entertaining. If you are one of them, come and look for me in the bar and buy me a drink to prove the point.

And whilst we are on the greetings, hello Kevin, and welcome to the UK. Actually folks he is not entirely a stranger to these isles. We did, after all, first meet at the Worldcon in Glasgow. But he's given me some great holidays in the US, so now it is my turn to repay the debt by showing him round the UK (and later in the year Australia). If you happen to see a large Californian looking lost and confused somewhere around the convention, be nice to him please. After all, I'll be asking him to write up his experiences for the next issue.

Which I guess brings us to the perennial question of "where to now"? As far as I can see, I'll be in the UK until the end of April. After that, availability of cheap air tickets willing, I'll be back in California for May and probably June. The plan is to take in Wiscon and Westercon whilst I am there, not to mention plenty of baseball. How long that plan lasts is another matter. Knowing the way my life goes, it will probably be defunct by the time you read this.

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## The King that Never Was

Inspired by an extended stay in my native Somerset<sup>1</sup>, I have finally got round to reading my way through Bernard Cornwell's Arthurian trilogy, *The Warlord Chronicles*. As most of you will know, Cornwell is the author of the highly acclaimed series about the Napoleonic Wars featuring Sharpe's Rifles. The series has been successfully adapted for television starring the delectable Sean Bean, so Mr. Cornwell is well able to indulge himself and write - shock, horror - fantasy novels, should he so wish. He even gets good reviews for it. "Stunningly realistic", gushed the Sunday Times, as if they would know what was realistic for Dark Age Britain. Papers owned by Murdoch have only a slight grasp of reality at the best of times. But that, of course, is not what they meant. It is a sad reflection on our times that a book whose characters are amoral and are thoroughly unpleasant to each other is described as "realistic" whereas one

in which characters are nice to each other and even, heaven forbid, has a happy ending, is called a "fantasy".

Cornwell's books are certainly realistic in that sense. But then he is primarily a writer of war novels, and Arthur's story is undeniably one of war. As to the traditional meaning of the word, it is often hard to say what "realistic" means for late fifth and early sixth century Britain. We know less about that period of our history than any time since the coming of the Romans, and the layers of accretion of legend have made the story of Arthur impossible to tell without mythic elements. Cornwell says in his notes that at first he tried to dispense with all of the legendary material, but found himself without a story. So, just like everyone else who has interpreted the tale, he has written about the Arthur he believes in. As such, the important question is "what has he brought to the legend". Certainly there is clear competence from the military angle, but the most notable innovation is that Cornwell is one of the few writers, possibly the only one, who has tackled the Arthurian tale from a point of view that is clearly pro-Saxon.

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### **The setting**

Before we get into politics, however, a few words about the general setting are in order. In the modern tradition, Cornwell has chosen to set his tale fairly and squarely in the historical context of post-Roman Britain, rather than the pseudo-mediaeval environment we know from Malory and De Troyes. The story is told from a single viewpoint, that of Derfel, a minor character from Welsh legend who is said to have survived Camlann. Although most of the action is described as it happens, there is a wrapper story in which Derfel, late in life and living in a monastery, is writing a history of Arthur at the bequest of his queen.

It is a debatable point as to whether this approach is the best way to tackle Arthur. By choosing a minor, unknown character (or inventing one), the author is free to examine each one of the major characters impartially, but it is hard to avoid making your chosen hero into a major character in his own right, thus adding to the legend. Writing from the viewpoint of one of the leading players avoids this problem and can get you closer to the heart of the action, but does mean that your take on events is skewed by the nature of the character you have chosen. In all probability Marion Bradley intended to write a pro-women, pro-pagan story before choosing Morgan as her heroine, but had she chosen the character first she would have been left with little choice.

Cornwell's choice works pretty well. He does a creditable job of working Derfel into the legend, and indeed of working much of the legend into a supposedly historical narrative. Clearly he is a competent writer, though with a little reflection it is surprising how many of his characters are little more than ciphers. The books (*The Winter King*, *Enemy of God* and *Excalibur*) are definitely worth reading if you have any interest in Arthur, Dark Age history or war novels. But interpreting the Arthur legend is like writing a critique of Shakespeare. So much as gone before that your work has to be viewed in a vast context.

At this point I should confess to being an Arthur junkie. I've read an awful lot of Arthur books, both fictional and non-fictional, and *Pendragon* is one of my favourite role-playing games. I'm going to get seriously stuck in here. Hopefully the results will be entertaining and informative, but it will be long, and you can't do this sort of in depth review without spoilers. If you want to stop reading now I'll understand.

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## Those awful women

Still with me? Good.

The first thing that struck me reading through the books is how misogynistic they were. OK, so it is true that the Dark Ages were not exactly a boom time for women's liberation, but that is no excuse for having the word rape on just about every other page. Cornwell is clearly enjoying putting women in what he sees as their proper place: somewhere between pigs and horses in the hierarchy of animal species.

The impression is further reinforced by the female characters in the novels. They stink, all of them. Morgan is hideously disfigured and pathetically lonely; Nimue is obsessive and cruel, Guinevere a bizarre cross between Marie Antoinette and Alexis Carrington. The only female character who is at all pleasant is Ceinwyn, Derfel's wife, and she is just plain unbelievable. The most beautiful woman in Britain, she is loyal and modest to a fault. Brave enough to go on the Grail Quest, she is afraid to kill a chicken. A princess of the most powerful kingdom in Wales, she wants nothing more than a staid, middle class existence in which she can do the housework herself. This is a fantasy character if ever I saw one.

But the proof of the pudding is in the history. It became very clear to me in reading the books that Cornwell had done his research well. He had read all the same books as I had, and probably a lot more besides. So when he puts something in the books which is in clear contradiction to what we know about the period, we know there is something up. Here are two examples.

During the second book Arthur tries to have Morgan placed on the King's Council of Dumnonia. He is voted down by the other councillors, who are horrified at the suggestion that a woman should have political power. These people are supposed to be Celts, the people who produced queens such as Boudicca, Cartimandua and (albeit mythologically) Maeve. Something fishy here, I think.

Elsewhere in the books, Cornwell explains that men caught in adultery are not punished, but a woman so caught must be burned. It is the law, he says. Whose law? The Romans were not exactly paragons of feminism, but they were not that barbaric. So he must be implying it is Celtic law. Wrong. Welsh law of the time states that if either partner is caught in adultery the appropriate punishment is a fine for loss of face (*wyneb-werth*). The only difference between the sexes is that if it is the wife who sins her lover must pay as well, but if the husband sins his lover is let off, presumably on the assumption that she may not have been a willing party to the crime.<sup>2</sup>

The strange thing is that in the final book Guinevere experiences a complete change of character. The woman who previously could not bear to have anything ugly in her presence is suddenly itching to don armour and join her men folk in the shield wall. She also displays rather more common sense and political acumen than any of the men, and is the only one of Arthur's advisors not taken in by the Saxon war strategy. The only way that she could be the same character as the one in the first two books is if what we've been told about her (she hardly gets to speak for herself before book three) is all filtered through the jealousies of others.

I'm told that this is not unusual for Cornwell. Apparently Sharpe's wife has a completely different character in the Waterloo novel to those set during the Peninsula War. Maybe he doesn't understand women at all. Or maybe he just can't do consistent characterisation.

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### **Those vile Welsh**

If Cornwell doesn't like women very much, he positively detests the Welsh. Powys, in central Wales, is treated reasonably well, though its first king is one of the major villains of the series. But every time the action moves to Siluria (south Wales) or Gwynedd (north Wales), Cornwell takes time out to say how ugly and depressing the landscape is and how surly and untrustworthy the inhabitants. Siluria, for those of you who don't know, is the kingdom which produced Caractacus, the chief who was chosen to lead the Britons against Caesar. And that hellish landscape he describes in Gwynedd? It is the Snowdonia National Park.

An excellent example of just how far Cornwell is prepared to go in order to run down the Welsh is given by the story of Saint Cadoc. The tale he uses is a genuine legend. In the Saint's biography it states that he and Arthur came into conflict over a traitor called Ligessac who had taken refuge with the Christians. This is how Cornwell describes Cadoc's settlement in Siluria:

*"It was indeed a squalid place; a sea of mud in which a dozen round stone huts surrounded a small square stone church. There were some ragged vegetable gardens, a small dark lake, some stone pens for the community's goats, but no palisade."*<sup>3</sup>

Now here is what has come to us from history:

*"The son of a local king, schooled by an Irish teacher in Caerwent, Cadoc sought ample estates with numerous rent-paying tenants, and kept his own labourers; unlike any other recorded British saint, he also retained a hundred men-at-arms in the hill fort above his monastery. He inherited his father's secular kingdom and ruled it without renouncing his abbacy."*<sup>4</sup>

What makes things worse, is that the story in the book, which has Arthur sent to Cadoc by his enemies in the hope that the saint's men will kill him, would make far more sense if the historical Cadoc had been used. Clearly Cornwell felt the need to rubbish the Welsh very strongly indeed.

Yet even the Welsh are not the lowest people in Cornwell's estimation. That honour is reserved for the Irish. There are two Irish kingdoms mentioned in the books, one in the far south west of Wales, and the other around Angelsey. Both are described as inhabited by bloodthirsty barbarians somewhere below orcs on the evolutionary ladder. I suppose it is just as well that Scotland doesn't get a look in. Goodness only knows what Cornwell would have said about it.

In contrast, the Saxons are described as comparative paragons of civilisation. They have a few eccentricities (they drink too much and their wizards use dung to style their hair into punkish spikes), but really they are quite decent chaps. Derfel, who happens to be a Saxon himself, only visits the occupied lands once. When he does, Cornwell makes a point of describing how prosperous and civilised they are compared to British territory.

But the big clue lies once again in the history. One of the most noble characters in the book is Alle, one of the two Saxon chiefs. The real Alle was king of the small kingdom of Sussex. The Saxon Chronicles describe him as Bretwalda - leader of Britain - and commander of the Saxon armies at the time the battle of Badon, if it happened, would have taken place. The probable

reasons for his elevation were firstly that he was older than the other Saxon leaders and that he was too weak to exploit the position. Cornwell makes him chief of the huge, powerful Aengle clans. Why? So he can claim that this noble character is the founder of the Aenglish nation.

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### **The evils of religion**

The one area where Cornwell does not seem to show significant cultural bias is religion - he hates it all, regardless of who practices it. His disapproval starts with the Druids.

Cornwell describes the Druids as charlatans, tricksters and bloodthirsty in the extreme. There seems little doubt, despite what modern apologists say, that in Roman times they practised human sacrifice. One particular ceremony, reported by Strabo and Caesar, involved constructing a large wickerwork figure, putting captives inside, and setting light to it. This is presumably where Cornwell got the idea for Merlin's giant balefire at Mai Dun. (It is also probably the origin for Nevada's Burning Man festival.)

The Romans also tell us that the Druids were highly learned. This does not come across in Cornwell's books, except in the case of Merlin, but his explanation is believable. The Romans did try to stamp out Druidism (Augustus and Claudius both issued proclamations against it) and Seutonius Paulinus did destroy the Druid stronghold on Anglesey. Given that the Druids were not given to writing, it is quite likely that much of their learning had been lost by Arthur's time.

The question, then, is not whether the Druids were barbarous at the time of the conquest but whether, 400 years later, British attempts to revive the religion would have shown equal barbarity. You could, I think, make a case for Wales, as the Romans left the Welsh pretty much alone. But to suggest that the noble families of Dumnonia, one of the richest parts of Roman Britain, would have reverted to barbarity in a mere 50 years is perhaps stretching things a bit.

Whilst we know little about the Druids, we know quite a lot about Christians. Certainly Christianity was the official religion of Roman Britain (as it was for the rest of the Empire). It was also largely monastic in character, and was a haven of learning in troubled times. Cornwell, by contrast, paints the early Christians and evangelical fanatics more reminiscent of the millenarian movements of the Middle Ages. That, I think, is where he got the idea of Christian missionaries always being accompanied by a coterie of whores keen to seduce men to the worship of God. Goodness only knows what Patrick or Columba would think of that.

Where the early Christians could sometimes be fanatical was in their love of poverty. There was much conflict in the church between the more worldly leaders such as Cadoc (or Cornwell's Bishop Bedwin) and the "*meliores*" ("better ones") who espoused strict poverty. Saint Samson, on whom Cornwell's Sansum is presumably based, was a moderate meliore who spent much of his time living as a hermit. The worst of the fanatics was Saint David whom Cornwell mysteriously ignored. He insisted that his followers pull their own ploughs rather than use oxen as they were only entitled to food they had worked for.

My overall impression is that Cornwell has painted a reasonable picture of Christianity as it was around the year 1000, and has used the excuse of the half-millennium at 500 for this. His explanation of the animosity between Arthur and the Church over money is a good reason why Arthur is often reviled in the lives of saints.

Where Cornwell does score is in his use of other religions. The late Roman Empire was a hot bed of cults of all kinds, and that of Mithras was particularly strong amongst the army. Worship of Isis is also highly believable. What is a shame is that having created this fine background of religious conflict, Cornwell makes little effort to represent the theological debate. His assumption appears to be that all priests are cynical politicians at heart and that the beliefs of their religions are unimportant.

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### **The script**

When we get away from the social setting and onto the legend itself, Cornwell is on much firmer ground. He has clearly thought a lot about the sort of person that Arthur would have been and tried hard to create something believable from the legend. The official title of the series is *The Warlord Chronicles*, and this evokes Cornwell's view of Arthur as a talented military leader who was never actually a king in his own right. It is a convincing story. Arthur would have been desperately needed by the British kings when Saxon raiders threatened, but feared as a possible usurper immediately the danger was over. His lack of royal status might explain why he does not feature in the reported family trees of any British king.<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, what Cornwell does with the timeline of the legend is completely inexplicable. Traditionally the battle of Badon is the start of the golden age of Camelot, and things do not go bad until many years later. Cornwell, on the other hand, has Arthur spend most of his early years fighting to unite the British kingdoms against the Saxons. Camelot follows his success at Lugg Vale, and Badon is a glorious but futile footnote which takes place long after the quarrel with Lancelot.

There seems little doubt that the reason for this fiddling with the timeline is to allow Cornwell to emphasise defeats of the Welsh and play down defeats of the Saxons. But the effect is to place a cloud over the whole of the first few books. The Arthurian saga is one of hope followed by triumph followed by treachery and disaster. Cornwell's story, with the Saxon threat unchecked until very near the end, is much more downbeat.

And finally on the script, considerable praise is due for Cornwell's use of incidental detail. Little known stories such as the tale of Ligessac related above turn up all over the place. Having dropped many of the lead characters from the legend, he has worked overtime to replace them with minor characters that he can use more freely. Look up just about any character in the book in an Arthurian glossary and you will find a minor player from the legends whose tale is very similar to that which Cornwell describes.

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### **The cast**

One of the things that struck me immediately on reading the series was how few real people there were in it. Derfel and Arthur obviously get reasonable treatment. Bishop Sansum, Lancelot, Galahad and Mordred also have some personality. Ceinwyn seems human but on closer inspection is a fantasy figure. Guinevere becomes human in the third book. Merlin and Nimue are weird but just about believable. And a few figures such as Ban and Tristan acquire personality during their brief visits to the plot. Everyone else is a cardboard caricature put in place to serve a particular purpose like a bunch of garden gnomes, carefully picked, painted

and positioned about the lawn so as to cunningly represent the positions of regiments at some famous battle. Oh look, there is the strong, silent one, and there the ale-sozzled hearty.

Now I have to admit that there are a lot of books with characters like that. But not so many on such a grand scale. If a writer producing a series can't do characters, that writer tends to restrict the cast. But you can't do that with Arthur, because there are so many well known names that you have to fit in, and the story has such epic scope. I guess it would not have been so bad if I had not recently read a George R.R. Martin book. *The Song of Ice and Fire* is so packed full of wonderful, rounded, believable people that almost anything would be a let down afterwards. Cornwell was very poor indeed in comparison.

But just how did those characters he did portray stand up against history? What has he brought new to this cast of thousands?

**Arthur** is perhaps the most conventional of his characters. No one seems to know what to do with the saga's principal hero. Clearly he was an exceptional general. Almost certainly he was too nice and was given the run around by stronger willed characters such as Lancelot and Guinevere. Cornwell's Arthur is another in a long list of vaguely pathetic characters who, for all their military brilliance, are unable to take charge of their kingdom. Cornwell adds to this by making it clear that a King is that last thing Arthur wants to be, even though it is clear that he would be a better one than any of his potential rivals.

**Guinevere** I have already dissected above. Really she should be treated as two separate characters, the vacuous, scheming bitch of the first two books and the Xena clone of the third. Neither of these characters, however, would have had the slightest chance of being taken in by such an obvious charlatan as Lancelot. It was merely necessary that she was for the continuance of the plot. Zero out of ten for Cornwell's use of the character.

The one major deviation that Cornwell makes is in his treatment of **Lancelot**. A character who is so fulsomely praised in the mediaeval romances is almost a sitting duck for cynical modern writers. Cornwell, however, goes for the jugular with dripping fangs. His Lancelot is vain, cowardly and treacherous in the extreme. It works because Cornwell has also made him a master of spin. Lancelot understands bards and the public, and no matter how craven his actions, he always manages to end up being the hero of the victory ballads. Bill Clinton would die for such consummate skill.

**Merlin** is another character whom Cornwell makes a fairly decent job of. A marvellous actor and manipulator, the great magician wields influence over the country far in excess of his sorcerous knowledge. Had Cornwell been satisfied with that portrayal it would have been highly successful, but in order to stick the knife into druidism he had to give Merlin a darker side. The great showman is not satisfied with his charade, he longs to have the actual power that he is reputed to possess, and searches ceaselessly for it through the books. It almost works, but in the process Merlin acquires a ruthless fanaticism that more properly belongs to his acolyte, Nimue. His treatment of Gawain is so savage and heartless that the whole characterisation falls apart at that point. A shame.

As with Guinevere, **Morgan** and **Nimue** have been mentioned briefly above. Morgan is a pathetic character, and it is hard to escape the feeling that the indignities heaped upon her are a direct insult to Marion Bradley and everyone who enjoyed *Mists of Avalon*. Nimue, in

contrast, is a wonderful character, and clearly the most evil and dangerous person in the entire book. A better description of why sorcerers are mad and bad I have not read in a long time.

**Galahad** is one of those characters from the legend who is so goody-goody that no one seems to know what to do with him. Surprisingly, Cornwell has again done a fine job. Of course he is neither saintly nor pure, but he is loyal, trustworthy, brave and tireless. He is supposed to be the most noble knight of the Round Table, and here at last is a portrayal of that character which is believable. Nice one.

**Sagramor** is a minor character whom Cornwell uses a lot but never really explores. The mediaeval original is a Moor, and Cornwell makes him a Nubian, a trained Roman soldier, and a loyal supporter of Arthur's. Much is made of the fear that his black skin and matching armour raises in the Saxon ranks, but nothing is ever said of his place amongst the British. Most of the time his actions take place off-screen, as it were, and I think I'm correct in saying that he doesn't get to speak until the last few chapters. It is as if Cornwell has this great idea of putting a black man into the story and was then afraid to address the consequences. Another missed opportunity.

Of all the characters from the legend, **Gawain** is the one who is worst treated by Cornwell. I was beginning to think that he would not make it into the tale at all. His brother, **Agravain**, has a cardboard role as one of Arthur's cavalry commanders, but no mention is made of his Scots ancestry. Gawain is made a French prince<sup>6</sup> and a complete idiot, raised from birth by Merlin for the express purpose of being a willing human sacrifice. It is very clever, because Gawain is the character from the legend who has the clearest pagan connections. Cornwell has thus chosen him for his most vicious attack on Celtic culture, and on those in the modern world who find value in what we know of Celtic beliefs. It is seriously ugly. No blow from a weapon could possibly be as cruel as this stroke of a writer's pen.

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## The battles

The one area where you expect Cornwell to shine is in the description of military matters. I'm by no means a great expert, but it seems pretty impressive to me. Arthur's armour, for example, is clearly a standard cataphract suit common in the eastern reaches of the Roman Empire. Other Roman armour and fighting tactics are also clearly described. Cornwell even makes the point that Romano-British soldiers, for all they might be hated Celts, would not be so dumb as to have not learned a few things from their conquerors. Gone is the wild rush of traditional Celtic battle tactics. Just as well really. If the British had not been able to maintain formation a Saxon shield wall would have destroyed them.

Mount Badon is the one of the two battles of Arthur's that you expect so see described in detail, and so it is. Cornwell has gone along with the usual interpretation of placing it at the hill fort on Solsbury Hill near Bath and has put a lot of effort into explaining how a fairly insignificant little fortification could have become the centre of such an epic battle. Me, I'm not convinced. Some of the rival sites make much more sense, but it is unlikely that the matter will ever be proved one way or another.

Whilst Badon is supposedly Arthur's greatest victory. Cornwell cannot give it the attention it deserves because the Saxons lose. He puts at least as much, of not more, effort into describing Lugg Vale, in which Arthur beats the crap out of those awful Welsh. I've no idea if there is any



legendary evidence for this engagement, and it would not surprise me if it were entirely invented, but the description seems pretty convincing. If it is made up, Cornwell probably had a lot of fun going round the Welsh borders looking for an interesting site.

The other battle that must feature in any re-telling of the Arthur story is Camlann. By the time he gets to this point it is clear that Cornwell has lost interest. He says in his notes that he set the battle at Dawlish Warren in Devon on a whim. The whole thing reads as such. Compared to the other epic engagements, it is very poor indeed.

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### **Do you believe in magic?**

And finally, we come to magic. Clearly no telling of the Arthurian legend is complete without it. Equally clearly from what we have seen before, Cornwell isn't going to have much truck with actual sorcery. Nevertheless, he manages to do a creditable job of including the major events. We have already seen that his Merlin is a clever con man. For two and a half books, everything that he, Nimue or Morgan does is explainable. Derfel, indeed, sees through most of it, but then he knows the sorcerers very well indeed. Cornwell, in fact, is being as clever as he wants us to think that Merlin is. So far so good.

A particular triumph is the Grail Quest. For this, Cornwell has abandoned all pretence of Christian symbolism and has created a search for an ancient, druidic cauldron that Merlin needs to become a real sorcerer. It works pretty well. He even manages to spirit Derfel and friends away from the bad guys thanks to Merlin's intimate knowledge of the weather. The view that Cornwell wishes us to take of Arthurian magic is all very convincing.

And then, in the final chapters of the last book, it all falls apart. There are three specific instances of magic use that have no rational explanation at all. Does the magic work after all? Clearly it does. Does this mean that Merlin and Nimue have been right all along? And if so, why have they become so desperate, cruel and manipulative when real power was in their hands all along? It doesn't make sense. It is as if, just with the description of Camlann, Cornwell has got fed up with the whole thing and stopped trying. Bizarre.

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### **Conclusions**

Oh boy, after all that, how do I summarise? To start with, for the most part I enjoyed the books. I did get rather mad with them in places, especially when Cornwell's political objectives were allowed to override the plot, but they were entertaining enough. Certainly good reading for plane journeys or on the beach. From a literary point of view, the characterisation was woeful. From an Arthurian point of view, there were enough innovative ideas to maintain interest. But at the end, Cornwell just threw up his hands and gave up. Abject surrender. All that careful work, especially on Merlin and Nimue, thrown away. Very strange.

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### **Notes**

1. Yes, I know I was born on the wrong side of the Severn Sea. I also happen to have more Welsh ancestry than several members of the current national rugby squad. Besides, the

Saxons only came this far west when they were raiding or when they needed to hide from the Vikings.

2. John Morris - *The Age of Arthur*, Vol 3, Pg 446 - Phillmore
3. *Enemy of God*, Pg 351
4. Morris - op. cit., Pg 369
5. The Roman name Artorius is in fact virtually unknown in Britain before 500 AD, but is quite common for a period thereafter. King Meurig of Gwent named his son Arthur, which perhaps shows that he thought rather more of the warlord than Cornwell makes out. This coincidence of name giving is one of the best pieces of contemporary historical evidence that Arthur actually existed.
6. Cornwell is actually being quite clever here. The various versions of the legend are unclear as to just how many sisters Arthur had. Lot and Morgause seem to be a relatively late addition. By making Gawain the son of Arthur's forgotten sister, Anna, Cornwell cuts out the entire Scottish connection of the legend whilst preserving the familial relationship between the knight and his king.

*The Winter King* - Bernard Cornwell - Penguin - softcover

*Enemy of God* - Bernard Cornwell - Penguin - softcover

*Excalibur* - Bernard Cornwell - Penguin - softcover

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## Beggars' Banquet

I'm starting a project of reading my way through Hugo winners that I have unforgivably missed. High on the list of those is *Beggars in Spain* by Nancy Kress. I do have a small excuse here, because it wasn't the novel that won the award. The Hugo winner was a novella, and the fairly long novel was an afterthought arising from the award. How it shows.

For much of the first two thirds or so the book reminded me strongly of Anne McCaffrey's Pegasus series: a shallow little tale of persecuted mutants and bigoted normals that would have had trouble being accepted as an X-Men plot. This was not the high quality critique of bioscience that I'd been led to expect. Indeed, the science itself is disappointing. There is very little of it at all. That, of course, is not necessarily a problem, but I was expecting something good, and it wasn't there. Nor was there much else good to take its place.

I have to say, however, that the book gets better as it goes along. Slowly but surely you get the idea that perhaps there was a damn good story in there somewhere. The last section is a little strange. Kress is playing with some unusual ideas about cognition and communication which don't really come across very well. But, the story rolls on much more effectively than before and kept me reading whereas previously I had been wondering what all the fuss was about.

The sequel, *Beggars and Choosers*, is a much better book. For a start it was presumably written to be novel. It is also much shorter than the re-written *Beggars in Spain*. Kress obviously isn't

much good at padding. But most importantly it really gets its teeth into the questions that the first book tried to address but rather skirted around. You see, these books are not about bioscience at all, they are about politics.

The first question that Kress wants to address is a commonplace one in books about genetic engineering. It is: who controls the technology? We have reached a stage now in scientific progress where things are happening so fast and the details are so complex that no government can really hope to keep a lid on developments, except perhaps by extreme repressive measures. In fact of course we may have been in that stage for some time. Doubtless the Renaissance popes would have banned the printing press if they had realised what effect it would have. There may even be a reasonable argument that could be made for not allowing ordinary folk access to the infernal combustion engine. Can governments stop the cloning of humans, or genetic manipulation of human foetuses? No, they can't. It will happen, whether we like it or not.

Kress's answer to this is practical but frightening. The only people who will control technology, she says, are those who can. And with the introduction of super-intelligent, engineered humans, the smart guys are going to end up in charge. So will their morality grow with the brains? And will they care at all what happens to us norms? It is by no means certain.

And let's face it, the norms might be beyond caring about by then. Kress takes just one small element of "beneficial" scientific development and with it creates a truly appalling society. She postulates an America with unlimited cheap energy, a country so rich that it can afford a generous welfare programme, and so automated that few people are needed to work. The result is an American's nightmare of Socialist society.

In Kress's future world the only people who work are those who want to. And mainly they want to because they have political ambitions of some sort. Everyone else is perfectly happy with free fast food (multiple varieties of flavoured soya), free clothing (garish and plastic), free TV and free sporting events (with live death, if you get what I mean). No one bothers to go to school because no one needs to get a job. All you need to survive is a vote. The politicians (called "donkeys" after the totem animal of the Democrat Party) always promise more free handouts in return for votes, and once you have voted them in, well, you have a right to be given the stuff, yes?

The hell you do. But, when you sit down and think about it, it is a logical extension of that old adage about all men being created equal. And that, ladies and gentlemen, is the crux of the argument.

Consider. Suppose a bunch of very smart people are created by genetic engineering. Suppose further that they are so smart that they create sufficient technology that a) few people have to work and b) very few people are smart enough to help anyway. Result, 99% of society on welfare with no incentive, no ambition and no future except to stay right where they are: dependent. That, says Kress, is the sort of society we are creating for ourselves, and if you look around carefully you can see where she gets the idea. Even *The Economist* has noticed. Blue collar jobs are vanishing fast. Older, working class males are finding it harder and harder to get work, their sons are without hope, and education is failing dismally. She might just be right.

So what is the answer? Kress says that the problem arises because people are dependent. Give them the ability to look after themselves, rather than handouts, and they will become responsible citizens again. It is an interesting argument but, as with much SF, the solution

seems just a little too glib. I would like to see the issues explored a bit more. I gather that there is a third book in the series, though it is seemingly unavailable in the UK. Must get round to taking a look at Amazon (not to mention cruising the dealers' room at Eastercon).

I have one more thing to say about these books, which is that they are disturbingly US-centric. In part this just comes over as the rather silly idea that world-shaking events all occur in the US and the rest of the world is both unable and unwilling to do anything about it. That sort of thing you just ignore. But, quite unexpectedly, the title of the book got me quite mad. It arose like this. Two characters in the first book are having an argument about social responsibility. One says you have a duty to help, the other says no. What, he says, about all the beggars in Spain? Can you afford to support them all?

So just what has poor old Spain done to Ms. Kress? I've never actually been to Madrid, but I'm willing to bet that it has no more beggars than London or New York, and that compared to Mumbai or Delhi it is a positive haven of beggar-free tranquillity. Perhaps Kress thinks that beggars must come from Spain because Hispanics speak Spanish. Perhaps she just had a bad experience on holiday. Whatever, it is a bizarre slur to visit upon a seemingly innocent foreign country. I wonder what they did with the translation.

*Beggars in Spain* - Nancy Kress - RoC - softcover

*Beggars and Choosers* - Nancy Kress - RoC - softcover

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## Peace Movement

"If there was a Fort Knox for the science fiction writers who really matter, we'd have to lock Haldeman up there." - Stephen King

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Or, to put it another way, if Joe Haldeman did not exist, it would be necessary, for the good of humanity, that we should invent him.

When people ask me what SF I like to read I normally say that I like it to be well written, and that I prefer to avoid the military stuff. There are war writers who manage to avoid glorifying their subject matter. Bernard Cornwell, I was pleased to note, is one. His Arthur goes from one battle to the next fervently hoping that it will be his last one and that the British can get back to important jobs such as growing crops, building houses, repairing roads and bridges, and restoring the rule of law. Sadly this is often not true of military SF. There are writers whose primary interest is to invent new and more efficient ways of killing people and there are those who disguise their racism in stories of war with aliens. Some, following Heinlein, believe that military societies are innately superior to all other forms of social organisation and produce their own brand of sociological SF. All of these I find annoying.

Joe Haldeman does write stories which involve wars, but his work is nothing like what I have described above. Haldeman knows what war is like. He served in Vietnam.

In his introduction Haldeman comments that *Forever Peace* is not a sequel to his classic *The Forever War*, but adds that the new book returns to some themes from the former that he felt had not been fully addressed. A quick recap of the earlier book is therefore in order.

The SF element of *The Forever War* is an accurate portrayal of the inherent difficulties of waging war on galactic scale when relativistic effects have to be taken into account in planning troop movements. Also, although Haldeman has always denied that the book was written as a response to *Starship Troopers*, it provides a fine rebuttal of Heinlein's glorification of the military life. Finally Haldeman cast doubt on the whole legitimacy of war by revealing some nasty double-dealing on the part of Earth's government.

The latter point is certainly re-addressed in *Forever Peace*. As Machiavelli might have said, had he lived in a democracy, war is the continuation of public relations by other means. Haldeman, with his Vietnam experience, understands this only too well. In one of the most dramatic episodes in the book a large number of children are killed, horribly, and very publicly. Both sides blame the other. But, as Haldeman points out, it doesn't matter who was responsible. The action was so unimaginably cruel that neither side can conceive of their people being responsible. Even if the weight of evidence were firmly against one side, their own people would not believe it.

But the major theme that Haldeman is working on is violence. Are humans naturally nasty and brutal? If not, why do they become killers? Why do they fight wars? And can we do anything to stop it? Three separate causes of violence are identified: fanaticism, alienation and revenge.

By fanaticism I mean that the person concerned has acquired a belief system whose morality is so skewed that any means is seen as justifiable and laudable if it helps achieve the desired end. Haldeman chooses to illustrate this with the example of Christian fundamentalists. He could, of course, have used any other religion, Nazis, nationalists or any other group of extremist crazies. My guess is that he chose Christians firstly because they are the most numerous, influential and dangerous group of fanatics in America today, and second because their apocalyptic views (we are talking believers in the End Times here) so clearly deny all value to Earthly life. God is going to destroy the world soon anyway, what does it matter if we kill a few million early?

Haldeman seems to believe that these people are pretty much beyond hope. They are so entrenched in their views that neither logical nor emotional arguments can sway them. Of the three major characters of this type that appear in the book, one goes catatonic rather than listen to rational argument and the others have to be killed. In disposing of the ringleader of the Christians, the hero of the book likens him to a dog with rabies that has to be put down. It is a harsh judgement, but Goddess help me I'm afraid he might be right.

I should point out here that Haldeman is not issuing a blanket condemnation of all violence as a means to an end. Marty, the leader of his peace movement, is seen as being just as cynical and manipulative as the warring governments and the Christians. What distinguishes him from the fanatics is that he feels guilt and remorse when his actions have unfortunate results. The Christians, in contrast, glory in anything that advances their cause.

I use the term alienation to denote an emotional as opposed to an intellectual detachment from the rest of mankind. Such people care nothing for their fellows, or even actively fear them, and so see nothing wrong in killing. This group, Haldeman says, can be helped. Give them a way to relate more fully to the rest of humanity and their tendency towards violence will be greatly reduced. I'll say no more about how he does this, except to say that those of you who have read Sheri Tepper's *Raising the Stones* will see a whole area of discussion that Haldeman has neatly sidestepped.

The final source of violence that Haldeman considers is revenge. His hero, Julian Class, begins the book as a reluctant soldier and a pacifist. By the end he has killed three times. On the first occasion he kills in defence of his own life, and that of many others. The guilt drives him mad. The second incident has him kill a ruthless assassin who has already killed two of his friends. He finds the experience disturbing, but feels no remorse. And finally, as I have described above, he kills the leader of the Christian fanatics in cold blood with no more concern than he would have about stepping on a spider.

What is going on here? The main thrust of the book is the creation of a society that is free of war and murder, and yet the hero of the tale is seen to move in precisely the opposite direction, becoming a ruthless killer. I think that Haldeman's point is that feelings of violence are natural when we are provoked. It is the unprovoked use of force that is immoral. We should not feel guilty about wanting to kill a Hitler or a Pol Pot because it needs to be done. But if we can eliminate the causes of unprovoked violence, then the need for revenge will no longer arise.

That is all pretty deep stuff. It is why writers like Stephen King think so highly of Haldeman. It is why I love him (not to mention the fact that anyone who has met them at conventions will know that Joe and Gay are really wonderful people). And it is why he wins Hugo awards. If only there were more like him.

And of all that wasn't enough, Haldeman manages to plug one of the holes that Nancy Kress leaves untouched. Unlike Kress, he does have an international perspective. As with *Beggars in Spain*, the America of *Forever Peace* has achieved a phenomenal economic advantage over much of the rest of the world. In this case it is nanotech, not cheap power, that is the cause. Haldeman knows what comes next. Those countries whom America, perhaps with the best of interests, denies access to the new technology will fight. They will fight regardless of their technological inferiority, and they will fight to the last man, woman and child, even after their armies have been crushed and their countries occupied. Why? Because they have been alienated, condemned to live in a second class world. What else are they to do?

*Forever Peace* - Joe Haldeman - Ace - softcover

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## Knotty Problems

The hero and heroine of *Forever Peace* work as physicists. Julian Class is a mathematician and his girlfriend, Blaze, is an expert in fundamental particles. It seems, for the most part, that this is lightly tangential to the main themes of the book. The physics angle looks like it is only there to provide the Christians with a convenient means of hastening the End Times. But to assume such would be to do Haldeman an injustice. You may not notice it, but he has been keeping up with developments. The theoretical argument that he advances is pretty much consistent with what cosmologists and physicists now know about the fundamental nature of matter. How do I know this? I've been reading about String Theory. (Boy am I linking well this issue!)

I don't often read science popularisations. All too often they are either dull, or misinformed, or both. Top flight scientists who can explain their work clearly and succinctly are like gold dust, but when you find one it does wonders for your education. Brian Greene is one such writer,

and his feat is all the more impressive for the fact that he deals in the most obtuse and mysterious of all scientific disciplines, the sort of stuff that most of its practitioners can discuss only in the language of mathematics.

OK, so this should not be news. *The Elegant Universe* has taken America by storm, climbing high into Amazon's top ten list of best sellers. In the UK it has been the subject of a major article in the Sunday Times and even warranted substantial coverage on the BBC lunchtime news. But occasionally such media storms are the result of good PR. That is most definitely not the case here. Greene is a class act.

Part of the attraction of the book comes, I must admit, from that old standby of being *in media res*, in the middle of things. Theoretical physicists are famous people and we can relate to the action when Greene tells us that Einstein said this, Planck said that, or Hawking disagreed with them both. But the bits where the book really hums are those in which he can say, "I did this". Or, more specifically, "I was so anxious to see the results of this new insight that I ended up bribing my programmer colleague with a six pack of beer to get him to come in over the weekend and run the simulations".

No amount of entertaining journalism, however, would save the book if the explanations of the science were not clear. Thankfully, they are excellent. I learned things that I didn't know about relativity, let alone all the new stuff. Now I can tell you where all the other 8 spatial dimensions of the universe are and why we can't see them. I have a much better understanding of the physical process that was the Big Bang, I'm no longer worried about singularities causing all sorts of nasty infinities in the maths of the universe, and I'm even pretty much convinced that black holes, once they have formed, are nothing more than giant fundamental particles.

All these things may be of no interest to you whatsoever. I guess it makes no substantive difference to the quality of our lives whether we know how the universe works or not. But I like to know. Especially as the more you find out about it the more amazing and beautiful it becomes. Forget all this stuff about bearded old men on clouds, if you want awesome, read some physics.

For some reason this all gets me thinking about Lovecraft. HPL, as I hope you know by now, looked upon the face of Shiva and saw only blind, unthinking chaos and destruction. He was right about the weird geometries that human minds find difficult to grasp (well, you try visualising 11 spatial dimensions), but he was wrong about it being hideous and scary. Brian Greene has looked in the same place and has seen the beauty of Shiva's Dance. And he can describe it to you. Don't be afraid, take a look.

*The Elegant Universe* - Brian Greene - Jonathan - hardcover

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## Britwatching

In a heart warming reaction to my criticism of the quality of BBC programming last issue (well, I can dream, can't I?), the British press has spent much of the past month considering the

phenomenon of "dumbing down". This is, of course, a self-fulfilling phrase, because it is an excellent example of how a perfectly good English word, "dumb", meaning unable to speak, has been replaced by an entirely different American word, "dumb", meaning stupid. Those bemoaning the demise of British culture and demanding a French-style language police can have a field day.

Thankfully the debate has been a little more interesting than that. *The Independent*, one of the few British newspapers left with any intellectual content since Murdoch's dragging of the broadsheet market into the gutter alongside the tabloids, ran a weeklong series on the phenomenon. It began with an interesting claim that we are not getting dumber, sorry, more stupid, at all, but simply learning different things. The best example was that whilst our parents prided themselves on knowing facts (and being able to answer questions on *Mastermind*, *Jeopardy*, etc.), our children pride themselves on knowing how to find facts, specifically on the Web.

It was an audacious start. Sadly, it was torpedoed by the newspaper's very own editorial which contained a ringing attack on the poor quality of political debate in the press. Furthermore that very issue contained firm evidence that perhaps the language police are right after all. No longer can the British claim that they use proper words that are in the dictionary whereas the Americans make words up as they go along. In the sports section of the paper a representative of Celtic football club was complaining that an official of the Scottish Football Association has failed to act "timeously". And at the hotel I was staying in that day a notice in the bathroom informed me that the facilities has been "sanified" for my convenience.

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Another excellent example of just how bad things have got is provided by one of the hot political issues of the moment, genetically modified food. A foreigner reading the British press right now would be forgiven for thinking that people are dropping dead in the street every day from hideous, food-related illnesses and that savage mobs of giant triffids are laying waste to the countryside whilst the RAF is otherwise occupied in Kosovo.

It has to be said that the Government has handled the whole thing fairly badly, having tried to ride out the media storm and then belatedly turned on the spin when things were already in a terminal nose dive. *The Times*, with the monumental cheek that only a News International publication could manage, stopped fanning the flames of hysteria for a day to admit that the debate had been largely irrational and have a good dig at the Government for their inept PR. When they have enemies like that you can even feel sorry for politicians.

Those I feel most sorry for, however, are those people who actually understand the subject and want to debate the issues but are not allowed to. In a recent issue of *The Independent* a pharmacology professor from Oxford related her experiences on a BBC discussion programme, *Question Time*. Expecting the GM food topic to feature, she had boned up on the subject and was ready to be informative.

"In due course a question on GM foods was indeed raised. However, what surprised me was that before I could settle into my carefully weighted arguments, a co-panellist had dismissed GM food as a rupture of a pact with the Almighty, while another had condemned biotech companies as forces of evil."



That, ladies and gentlemen, is the level of political debate in the UK these days. It was therefore highly appropriate that earlier this month Jerry Springer was invited to speak at the Oxford Union (and was given a rapturous welcome). Perhaps he should start a newspaper here. He'd probably do very well.

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## **Footnote**

And that, I think, is quite enough for one issue. Next time, my impressions of the Eastercon and the infamous Adelphi, Kevin's impressions of England, and whatever books happen to mug me in the dealers' room. There's a new Liz Hand novel due out any time now. Here's hoping a copy is waiting for me in Liverpool.

Ciao,

Love 'n' hugs,

Cheryl