

EMERALD CITY

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Introduction

Well, it has been another one of those months. I still have nowhere to live in Britain, and the prospects don't look good. Self-employed people who have spent the last 4 years overseas are not, it seems, looked on favourably by rental and mortgage agencies. The good news is that right now I don't have any work in the pipeline, so the December issue might be less skimpy than this one. The bad news is that I'm not sure how much longer I can go on like this. Kevin always says that something will turn up. Here's hoping.

Meanwhile, on with this issue which, as I've said, is a little short on quantity. Hopefully it makes up for it in the quality of the books reviewed. By some strange coincidence all of this books reviewed in this issue are by women writers and all of them have a strong political subtext. Thus are theme issues created. Enjoy!

Dao and the Art of Housebuilding

Back in issue #36 I quoted Nalo Hopkinson as saying that SF is often about alienated people, but rarely written by them. Maureen McHugh is, at first sight, one of the last people you would think of as alienated, and yet she has written a wonderful book about being an outsider. She's white, an academic, from a small farming town in Ohio for goodness sake. How less alienated can you get? She has also lived and worked in China, which is about as far from Ohio as Oz is from Kansas.

I know a thing or two about this. You wouldn't think that for a middle class white girl, uprooting yourself from Britain and going to work in Australia and then California would be a huge culture shock. But it is. In some ways it is a very nasty one because you don't start to realise just how different those societies are until you have been there a year or two. China at least is recognisably different from day one. It is also the only society on the planet that can, with perfect justification, look down on Westerners as ignorant, barely civilised barbarians. And it is still avowedly Communist. If you want to feel alienated, it is a good place to go.

And so to *China Mountain Zhang* which is chock full of alienated people. Zhang, the hero, has it in spades. His mother is Hispanic, but his parents had him genetically altered so that his looks came solely from his Chinese father. In the post-revolutionary America in which the book is

set, being a racially pure Chinese is an enormously valuable asset, but Zhang only looks like he is, and he knows it. He is gay too, and whilst that is survivable in his native New York it is still a bullet through the back of the head job in the People's Republic. If that wasn't enough, his parents named him after a great Communist hero, Zhong Shan. It is, he tells us, rather like being called George Washington Jones, or Karl Marx Smith.

Zhang isn't the only alienated character either. San-xiang has a rare bone defect that gives her a face more like a monkey than a woman. Cinnabar used to be a kite racer, but he hurt himself in a crash and is now grounded. Alexi has simply, through no fault of his own, fallen to the bottom of the social pile. He has discovered that whilst Communist America will always find him a job, it will always be one that no one else wants and he will never get a chance to earn enough to work his way back up because he'll never get an opportunity to use his programming skills. His wife died soon after childbirth, and right now he and his six-year-old daughter have just been relocated to Mars.

It is, I found, a very depressing book to read. All of these characters are put upon by society in some way. All of them seem destined to fail, in a society that is supposed to enforce the dictum that all men are created equal. But of course they are not, and never will be. One of the lessons that McHugh seems to want us to draw is that no amount of Marxist dialectic can make people equal, and if we believe that simply by having a revolution we make them so we are deluding ourselves. Any community which relies on theory rather than care is lost.

There is more politics too, most of which I should probably steer clear off to avoid giving anything away. What I think I can say, because this is definite interpretation and not an obvious message in the text, is that the book is about organic social engineering.

About what? It goes like this. Zhang eventually ends up learning the craft of organic engineering. This is a very eastern sort of thing. It is holistic building design that you can only do in a Daoist or Zen-like trance. It goes with the flow of the world around it, rather than imposing structure on the world as Western engineering tends to do. Politics, I have interpreted McHugh as saying, should be done in the same way. Don't impose theories on the world, take it as you find it and work with what you have. Very anarchist, though perhaps not very practical. Real life, after all, tends not to have happy endings.

This book has won a heap of awards. It got the Tiptree for having a gay hero without that being the point of the book. It got a Locus Award for Best First Novel. There are Hugo and Nebula nominations in there too. All I can say is that they are thoroughly deserved. But try not to read this book when you are seriously depressed.

China Mountain Zhang - Maureen F. McHugh - Orbit - softcover

Promising Future

I have to confess that I was not best pleased when the George Turner prize was first announced. Coming only a week or so after his death, it seemed more like a cheap attempt by a publishing house to cash in on the publicity that Australian SF was getting at the time rather

than a genuine wish to do anything for the genre. The prize was, of course, intended to encourage new writers to enter the field. But Australia was already chock full of very good SF writers. Was there really anyone out there left to be discovered? The inaugural prize-winner has now been published, to coincide, of course, with the Australian Worldcon. And it is, I am pleased to say, rather better than I had expected.

The first thing you have to say about *Time Future* is that it is heavily derivative of *Babylon 5*. It has the space station setting, the lone, powerful alien with the funny atmosphere and cryptic utterances, and the gritty station commander wrestling with vicious inter-species politics and a possible galactic war. Having said that, what Maxine McArthur does with the setting is somewhat different and pleasingly thoughtful.

The other major influence on the book appears to be Terry Dowling. Many of Dowling's stories are set in a world where Earth has been annexed by aliens so much more powerful than us that we are reduced to the role of plucky mice, nibbling at dinosaur eggs and hoping that the big, clawed foot doesn't descend upon us by accident. (See *Emerald City #12* for more details.) McArthur hasn't quite gone that far, but her Earthlings are very much second class citizens in the Galactic Confederacy.

There is a purpose to this as well. The book is a (fairly obvious) allegory about how in our own world the developed nations effectively run things and keep the rest of the countries in their place. McArthur seems to have a personal fondness for South American liberation movements. It isn't clear why this should be so. Perhaps she has some personal connection with South America that caused her to focus on that continent. But I think it is a shame, particularly in view of the inevitable species-based nature of galactic politics, that she didn't take the opportunity to add a racial element to her Earth politics. This is especially true coming from Australia, a country that was the scene of one of the worst pieces of post-colonisation genocide the planet has ever known.

In *Time Future* the galaxy is divided into two groups. The original four members of the Confederation effectively take the part of the UN Security Council, taking a firm grip on galactic affairs and preventing lesser species from making technological progress. In particular, only these four species have hyperspace drive technology. The other nine members of the Confederation, including Earth, play the role of developing nations and are kept in relative poverty. The objective of the book is to explore how Earthlings can progress their political ambitions within the Confederation, and in particular whether armed revolution is the only practical option.

This is all good stuff. I'm delighted to see a new author using SF to tackle serious political issues rather than just producing what the publicists describe as "a terrific sci-fi novel". The only problem is that the book is stuck in a 1950's view of the world in which politics and military might are the only drivers of world (or galactic) affairs. I couldn't understand why some rogue K'Cher trader hadn't sold the secret of hyperspace drives to the other races long ago.

Talking of the aliens, McArthur makes a reasonable attempt at creating something interesting, but there are a few tired clichés as well. We should be long past the stage where we have species who specialise in war, trading, bureaucracy and so on. Larry Niven did that 20 years ago.

All in all, however, a very competent book. It is space opera, but it is intelligent, has a good central mystery and some interesting characters. George tended to write his SF on behalf of the poor on a personal rather than national level, but I think he would have appreciated what McArthur has attempted to do with this book. Here's hoping that the prize turns up similarly good stuff in future.

Time Future - Maxine McArthur - Bantam - softcover

Frogs in Space

From two books that have won awards to one that perhaps should have got something. Amy Thomson won the Campbell for her first novel, *Virtual Girl*. That was a good story, but her second attempt is a far better effort, brimming with innovative ideas, good science, an engaging story and philosophical ambitions way beyond your average novel. Yeah, OK, Amy is a dear friend, but the book jacket sports a rave review by Mary Gentle and I have never, ever seen Mary say anything nice about a book she is reviewing before.

The Colour of Distance is about an Earth biologist on a survey mission who crash lands in the jungle of an alien world. By the time Juna is able to get to a working radio her colleagues have given her up for dead and are on the way to the jump point. They don't have the fuel to return immediately, but promise to come back in a few years time. Juna is left to survive by herself, and it isn't going to be easy.

To start with, humans are severely allergic to just about everything on the alien world. Without her environment suit, Juna will go into anaphylactic shock very quickly. British and American fans who found themselves with headaches and streaming noses all through Aussiecon Three will have had a very mild experience of the problem, but at least they could eat the food. Fortunately, Juna has discovered an intelligent life form. They might be able to help her survive, if she can just learn to communicate with them.

The Tendu look a bit like large tree frogs. As with many Earth frogs, they can change their skin colour. What started as camouflage and simple colour signals has evolved into a sophisticated symbolic language, presumably along the lines of Egyptian or Mayan hieroglyphs. Tendu don't have the vocal apparatus to talk, and Juna can't change her skin colour. So much for the Star Trek universal communicator.

Once communication is underway there is Tendu society to cope with. Like human forest dwellers, the Tendu live in harmony with their surroundings, taking just enough from the forest to survive and ensuring that it will continue into the future. That makes them very keen on population control which, if you are a frog and lay 100 eggs each time you get pregnant, is an interesting problem.

By now you should be starting to see that Amy is not just writing about aliens. In the very best traditions of SF she is helping us look at human problems by creating an alien society that throws a completely different light on the issue. The environment and population control are

issues that tend to bring out the worst in human thought processes. We need books like this that help us look at the big questions in a new light.

The other thing that a good first contact novel must do is present an alien society that is both different and believable. Once again, Amy is right on the button. As far as classical technology goes, the Tendu are nowhere. There's no use for a wheel in a rain forest. They have managed to invent the spade, the blowpipe and the fishing net, and that is about it. Biotechnology, however, is another matter entirely. The Tendu have venom spurs on their wrists which were presumably originally used to stun or kill prey, but are now capable of delivering any chemical the Tendu bodies are capable of synthesising. Their medical skills are light years ahead of humanity. To them, any creature that can't cure a cold when it gets one is a hopeless primitive.

As you might guess, Juna survives her exile, and the final section of the book is devoted to the return of the human survey ship. It has taken Juna 4 years to understand the Tendu. Now she has just a few days to help her fellow humans do the same. And given humanity's track record with foreign cultures, doing so might just be condemning her froggy friends to slavery or extinction.

And so we come to the inevitable sequel. *Through Alien Eyes* relates the story of how Juna and two of the Tendu travel to Earth. As the title suggests, the book again asks us to look at human problems from a distinctly skewed perspective. If the Tendu can learn to understand why we are the way we are we might just be able to fix things.

To start with I was expecting the book to be a fast-paced political thriller. There would be diplomacy, negotiation, greed, skulduggery, prejudice, demonstrations and assassination attempts. Somewhat to my surprise, Amy elected to keep the book on a very personal level. In some ways this was a success because it allowed her to carry on looking at questions like population in a way that makes the issues mean something. Certainly the books are a refreshing change from the likes of *The Mote in Gods Eye*, where one of the major questions was whether or not the Moties were a military threat to Earth. That book was written by two men, Amy is female: the difference in the writing is stark.

On the other hand, in order to keep the plot on a personal level, Amy has to assume some remarkably atypical behaviour on the part of the human authorities. My suspension of disbelief disintegrated rapidly as the book went on. This is a shame, because Amy continues to raise interesting issues of population control. The Tendu, though they are appalled by the level of sickness and environmental decay on Earth, quickly find themselves thinking Prime Directive in capital letters because they don't want humanity to do itself any more damage through being gifted biotechnological miracles.

One of the problems, I think, is that Amy always tries to illustrate a problem rather than just talk about it. This might be good for the story, but it tends to result in relying on someone doing something stupid in order to cause the problem to happen. Most of what goes wrong on the Tendu visit to earth could probably have been anticipated during a brainstorming session on the flight back.

The other difficulty I had is that Amy is just too nice. There are serious issues of racism that she tries to raise, but it all falls flat because the racists are portrayed as an irrational minority. As the British police are discovering, racism is not something that can be removed by a few new

regulations, it is a deep-seated feature of the human psyche which will manifest itself in all sorts of ways, even in people who believe that they are without prejudice.

The most glaring example of this is the Tendu being welcomed with open arms by Juna's family. Sure, there are nice people around, but the human family is not, at root, a caring, nurturing organisation. It is an economic and political unit that looks after its own provided that they don't pose a threat to its survival. Ask anyone who is gay, who has a mixed race marriage, or even a mixed religion marriage. Ask Romeo and Juliet. Some families are supportive, but most of the time the best you can hope for is something like "you have our full backing in private, but we can't risk the family reputation by associating with you in public". And even where the family is supportive, the same is never true of all the neighbours. Someone will start throwing bricks through your window.

Finally, whilst I am in nit-picking mode, I've gained the impression that Amy always writes at the same pace. There are techniques to writing that enable the reader to feel the tempo of the action pick up. Amy doesn't seem to have mastered this skill yet, which is a bit of a problem when she does insert a bit of physical action. I'm sure she will get the hang of it.

Despite the flaws of the sequel, I would strongly recommend that you read these books. *The Colour of Distance* is an excellent piece of SF, and the issues that both books raise are serious ones that need all the discussion they can get. Amy doesn't present any trite, simplistic solutions, and her personal touch means that you cannot avoid being affected by the issues she raises. SF, as a genre, has two major reasons for existence: innovative ideas, and the use of alien settings to help ask difficult questions. Without those it is just adventure stories with ray guns instead of swords or pistols. SF needs more people prepared to take risks with their writing, and there are few new writers braver than Amy Thomson.

The Color of Distance - Amy Thomson - Ace - softcover
Through Alien Eyes - Amy Thomson - Ace - softcover

Meandering

Hmm, only six pages. That's hardly a proper issue. I guess I'd better find something to talk about. Fortunately with me that isn't difficult. Here's hoping it is actually interesting.

Let's go back to last August when Tom Whitmore asked me if I would, in the event of us winning the site selection vote, be ConJosé's representative on the WSFS Mark Protection Committee. Kevin would of course have been the obvious choice but, SuperSMOF that he is, he is already an elected member, so we needed someone else. As I had attended a few meetings of the committee (in the interest of finding out what Kevin was talking about) I got asked to carry on doing so in an official capacity.

But what, I hear you ask, is the Mark Protection Committee? Is it, perhaps, the secret committee through which the SMOFs run fandom? Nothing so exciting, I am afraid. The World Science Fiction Society does not have much of an existence outside of the annual

Business Meeting held at every Worldcon. However, it is a legal entity and, as such, has a few responsibilities.

In particular WSFS owns a number of service marks (which are like trademarks but are for services rather than goods). These are things like WorldconSM and Hugo AwardSM. Ask anyone in fanzine fandom about this and they will probably tell you that this is yet another evil plot by convention runners to make vast sums of money out of unsuspecting fans. In fact it is largely a defensive exercise. We don't particularly want some Star Trek merchandising company starting up a "World Science Fiction Convention", nor do we want publishers claiming that books or authors are Hugo winners when they are not.

Anyway, once you have a trademark or service mark you have to protect it. If you don't complain when people use your property then, should a case come to court, you could lose the mark because you had not been sufficiently diligent in looking after it. So WSFS needs someone to keep an eye out for service mark infringements and to write polite letters to the perpetrators. This happens a few times a year, normally because "Worldcon" is a rather neat word. It isn't exactly a glamorous job, but someone has to do it.

Given this requirement, a permanent standing committee was created. And it is the only permanent organisation that WSFS has. It might seem sensible that there should be some sort of long term organisation for WSFS, and attempts to create one have been tried in the past, but it will probably never happen. So, when people who want to know something about science fiction look up the WSFS web site, the Mark Protection Committee is the only official body that they can contact. And this is where the job starts getting interesting.

Some of what comes through is nonsense. There is this one publishing house that keeps spamming us with news of their mailing list which contains all sorts of "thrilling sci-fi" stuff. Obviously the PR girls have no idea who they are talking to (Ben Yalow and Robert Sacks, for heaven's sake). But every once in a while something interesting turns up. And so, at last, we get to the point of the story.

Earlier this week an email came in from a PR consultant in the Philippines. She was working on behalf of the Carlos Palanca Literary Awards, the most prestigious literary competition in the country. This year they have added a category called "Future Fiction" and our contact was a bit bemused as to what this meant. Could WSFS perhaps enlighten her?

My initial reaction was that it was probably just a camouflage term. When writers such as Borges and Rushdie produce books with magic in them the Lit Crit crowd call it "Magic Realism" because they can't bear the thought of having to read a Fantasy book. I figured that Future Fiction was probably a term invented to describe works by fine writers such as Iain Banks and distinguish them from the low brow hackwork of his notorious namesake, Iain M. Banks.

A bit of net browsing also suggested the possibility that it was a PC term. After all, a lot of what is published as SF these days doesn't have a lot to do with science. Sci-Fi rarely has anything to do with it at all (look at Star Wars or The X-Files). Besides which, it might be said, using the word "science" might discourage girls from reading it. (Yes, I know, but people do say things like that.)

Then I discovered something quite interesting. "Future Fiction" is also a term used in some circles for new fictional structures, in particular interactive stories. For example, Humboldt State College ran a "Future Fiction Project" for which Vonda McIntyre was writer in residence. This appears to have been an attempt to create a hypertext novel. Works such as Kim Newman's *Life's Lottery* and Chelsea Quinn Yarbro's *Magnificat* would presumably qualify under this definition. It seems to me a pretty silly term to use because someday soon this stuff won't be "future" any more, whereas SF will always be "future". Interactive Fiction might have been a better term. But so it goes.

Anyway, we haven't yet got to the bottom of what the Philipinos meant by the term, but I will let you know when we do. In the meantime, being asked to serve on a particularly boring SMOFish committee has proved, at least in my eyes, unexpectedly interesting.

Footnote

Another issue comes to a close. My apologies about the lack of a Mary Gentle review. It appears that *Ash* is being published first (in paperback) in the US and only later (in hardback) in the UK. And this is one of Britain's best SF writers. Sigh. At least it probably means that she will sell better.

Were I in California right now I could happily predict that the next issue would include new novels by Gene Wolfe, Pat Murphy and Mary Gentle. But I'm not, and I'm still fighting the temptation to buy from Amazon. Fortunately there is some good stuff published first in Britain. In particular we have the latest book from the exceptionally wonderful Tom Arden. I guess it also gives me a chance to catch up on the backlog.

Ciao,

Love 'n' hugs,

Cheryl