EMERALD CITY

Introduction

Here we are again, and this time I have actually found the time to do a bit of research into the eBook industry. I appear to have gone on a bit. Here's hoping that it is informative and useful.

Also, of course, there are many fine books reviewed as usual. I'm still working my way through the pile I acquired at Wiscon. I need to get on with it because there are new books by Iain Banks, George Martin and Storm Constantine due soon.

For those of you who like to follow my peregrinations around the world, I should be back in the UK by the time you get this. I'm also intending to be at Lexicon in Oxford in mid-August. If you pick up a copy of this there, Guinness please.

In This Issue

Future Publishing?

OK, here we go at last. I have been promising an in-depth look at eBooks for some time, and finally I have got round to it. Here's hoping that you find it worth the wait.

Hardware

The first question that I want to address it the type of hardware that is used. At present the only way that most of us can read an eBook is on a PC. As I quickly found out when I tried to read one, this is a pain in the butt. A book I can take with me anywhere. A PC is stuck on my desk.

The obvious thing to do is produce smaller PCs, and these days you can get them pretty small. However, you should think carefully before buying one. If the machine in question is one of the new breed of pocket PCs such as the Cassiopeia or the

Jordana then it will probably have Windows CE as its operating system. That isn't straight Windows and you may not be able to do everything you can do on your desktop. In addition it will probably have very limited storage: no hard disk, no CD. Anything you want to read you will need to download from the PC at the time and then delete it when you have finished.

What is more, you can't get a copy of Adobe Acrobat for Windows CE, so you can't read PDFs on these tiny PCs. A company called Ansyr (http://www.ansyr.com) has produced a PDF reader that runs under CE, and is apparently planning to port the technology to other platforms such as Palm and Rocket, but I haven't tried it so I don't know how good it is.

The alternative is the dedicated book reading device such as the Rocket or the Softbook. Such things are purpose designed for book reading but, as anyone familiar with the computer business will immediately spot, this means compatibility problems and potentially high prices.

In my particular case this is a real pain. I spend a lot of my working life reading academic papers and industry journals. Typically these come as PDF files downloaded from the Web, but they may be HTML, or DOC. I could very much do with a book-reading device that also allows me to download this other reading material to it. I have yet to find anything that will allow me to do that for all usual PC file formats. Of course that is a personal problem, and it does not affect people who only want to read books, but I'm sure I'm not the only person who wants to do that sort of thing.

The space issue is interesting. In the past the space that material in books took up was determined by its size on the paper. In the digital world space is determined by

information content. That means that pictures are now much more expensive on space (whoever said 1000 words was pretty prescient). This means that a plain, boring old novel is just perfect for small PCs but non-fiction, magazines and brochures filled with fancy graphics are a disaster.

The other major hardware issue is the screen. Modern computer screens are a lot more tiring to read from than the printed page. That is one of the main reasons why I make a point of providing *Emerald City* in printable formats. Right now there doesn't seem to be a lot of hope on the horizon for significant improvement. However, some clever software folks think they can do better by changing the way text is displayed on existing screens. This is called Sub-Pixel Font Rendering (or ClearType if you prefer the Microsoft trademark) and you can read more about it at http://grc.com/cleartype.htm. Expect to see this technology deployed by Adobe as well in the next few months.

There are a couple of caveats here. First the technology only works on LCD screens, not CRTs. Second, for it to work well the orientation of the pixels within the character has to be correct. The block of pixels making up a character can be oriented either vertically or horizontally, and if it is the wrong one the benefits are not nearly so great. See the web site I mentioned for more details.

Software

The software that is used to access an eBook is also an issue. As noted above, the default standard on the Web for printed material is PDF. This is the format used by Adobe's Acrobat program. It is popular for two main reasons. First it is portable between all leading computer operating systems, and secondly Adobe provides a

reader program for free. Only the program to create PDF files has to be purchased.

However, the design criteria for PDF were couched largely in terms of being able to transfer existing printed documents to digital form. It is not designed for digital text that is native to the electronic world, which means that it is not best suited to eBooks. You will notice, for example, that I supply two different versions of the PDF version of *Emerald City*: one for A4 paper and one for US Letter paper. The format of a PDF document on the page is very strictly constrained by the production process.

Now if you think about a custom-designed book reading device the last thing you want to be worried about is page layout. Ideally you want the text to adapt to the size and shape of the screen that it is being read upon, especially because the screens of hand-held PCs tend to be quite small. HTML, the language used to create web sites, does this quite well, and indeed many current eBooks are issued as HTML files rather than PDF. However, a custom designed eBook reading application would seem like a good idea.

At present there are two such systems being created. One, not surprisingly, is from Microsoft and is called Microsoft Reader. The other is known as the Open eBook Standard (OEB) and is an industry initiative to establish a non-proprietary standard around which eBook reading software can be written.

From the point of view of us readers it would obviously be much better if the open standard is successful, otherwise we may end up paying a substantial amount of money to Microsoft each time we buy an eBook. Microsoft says that the Reader will be OEB compatible. But then Internet Explorer is supposed to be HTML compatible and that hasn't stopped MS from introducing a whole raft of custom features and trying to force developers to use them.

A company called Overdrive has recently released a set of tools that allow the easy creation of MS Reader files from other common formats but, surprise, surprise, PDF is not one of them. See http://www.readerworks.com for more details.

My main worry about these new reader programs is that, whilst they are format independent, they will probably be platform dependent. We may well find that they are available only for certain custom bits of hardware. This is less likely for the open standard, because someone should be able to provide a PC or Mac version. Thus far, however, Microsoft Reader is only available for Pocket PCs.

OEB is based around XML, an extension of HTML that allows the text being displayed to do things rather than just sit there. In theory, therefore, it should be possible to read an HTML eBook into any OEB-compliant reader. The Rocket comes with all you need to port everything through from your PC, so it should be easy. But not having actually done it myself I'm a bit nervous of promising anything.

By the way, many eBooks are available in HTML form and there is a trap to beware of here. HTML is a developing standard. Responsible web site developers try hard to ensure that their material is viewable with a wide range of browsers no matter what version of the HTML standard they were written for. Irresponsible software developers keep adding their own proprietary features to the language in the hope that this will lock customers in to their product.

In almost all cases these special features are of use only to web site developers. They are not needed to display the sort of plain text

that you find in a book. Nevertheless, there are e-publishers out there (Wordwrangler.com is one) whose products are only readable using Microsoft's Internet Explorer browser, or who require you to make a special order to get a book that is readable in other browsers. Why these people feel that it is necessary to irritate customers like this I do not know. But I refuse to buy anything from them, and hopefully you will too.

Copyright issues

The excuse that software and hardware manufacturers will give for moving eBooks away from PCs, and in all probability away from the Web as well, is to avoid piracy. Book publishers are probably watching what is happening right now in the music business with some terror. For the benefit of those of you who have been living in a cave for the past few months, or who ignore any news story about pop music, here's a quick recap.

Music can be stored digitally. We have known that since the arrival of the CD. But if it can be stored digitally it can be copied by computers and given away for free. The music business disliked home taping, but they put up with it because they knew that it took time and effort to do and that the end result was always of worse quality than the original. On a computer music can be copied very quickly, and retains all of the original quality.

Of course music is copyrighted. You can't just set up a web site and sell pirated versions of the latest Britney Spears album. Corporate lawyers will be down on you in seconds. But kids can swap disks amongst themselves. And more importantly, they can swap them over the web.

The source of the current panic is a web site called Napster. Napster does not sell

pirated music itself. That would be illegal. What is does is maintain databases of music that individuals have on their home PCs and that they are willing to allow others to copy. If you want free music, you just ask Napster to find someone who is willing to give away the song that you want.

The people doing the giving away are probably acting illegally, but the illegality of what Napster does is much less obvious. A California judge recently ruled against the company, but there are potentially two levels of appeal for the case to go to yet. Or Napster could just start up again in Taiwan. In the meantime record companies are unwilling to sue some 20 million individual customers around the world who use Napster. Also other smart programmers are coming out with new and improved Napster-like web sites that are going to be even harder to pin down. Look out for something called Gnutella that is going to cause a big splash sometime soon. Or Scour, which does for movies what Napster did for music. The grail for the software designers is to produce a distributed version of the server, so that if one server site is shut down, others immediately take over.

Some people in the music business are terrified by this. Heavy Metal band Metallica sued Napster and forced them to revoke the memberships of all people who had offered Metallica songs on the network. Of course all that happened is that a bunch of Metallica fans got very pissed off and immediately signed up again under different names. It is also worth noticing that a study of Naspter users by Jupiter Communications found that they were 45% more likely to buy more music because of their ability to get some material for free.

Courtney Love takes a different tack. In a recent speech (available from the Hole web site, http://www.holemusic.com) she said that she felt that artists could probably earn more for their work by putting it out free on the Web, and hoping that people would send them money out of the goodness of their hearts, than they could through the current music business. If the figures she gave about how music publishing contracts work are at all accurate (and they seem to be) then she may be right.

From what Courtney says, both writers and consumers of music could be better off by using the Web to bypass the existing industry structure. Will the same apply to books? Maybe, but I suspect not. To start with, authors, unlike musicians, are usually able to secure contracts that allow them to retain the copyright of their work. This means that the economics of book publishing are not as badly stacked against the artist as is the case in music.

My other worry is with regard to the ease of creating and reviewing the product. Making a pop song is a complex process, probably requiring several people and some expensive equipment. But you can listen to it in about 5 minutes. Making a novel requires one person with time on their hands and a word processor, but reading it can take many hours. My concern with Courtney's publisher-free world is that it has to be possible for consumers to find good product amidst a probable sea of dross. I think that will be much easier with music than with books.

Publishers

In the meantime, there are a whole bunch of web sites out there selling eBooks. Some of them are one-man-and-his-dog outfits. I could, after all, set up as an eBook publisher using the technology I have for producing *Emerald City*. Others are much more sophisticated organisations. There are also quite a variety of companies out there.

Perhaps the most interesting and valuable of the eBook publishers are those who specialise in republishing out of print works. For example, Napoleonic Literature Publishing (http://www.napoleonic-literature.simplenet.com/publishing) is a site that is specialising in books about Napoleonic France. Many of the books it plans to publish were written at the time. You can't get this sort of stuff elsewhere, and it is unlikely that it would be very economic for a traditional publisher to handle such material. An eBook publisher, however, can do this sort of thing much more cheaply. It is a valuable service, and to be applauded.

If someone could do the same for out of print SF&F novels it would be great. One site that is making an effort is Alexandria Digital Literature (http://www.alexlit.com). They have quite a bit of out of print short fiction, but they are finding novels harder to get hold of. CEO Dave Howell says, "novels are much harder to get rights to than short stuff, and we sell more short works (proportionally) than long. Nevertheless, what we're trying to do is recover as much out of print SF as possible, long and short. We're at the mercy of the authors as to how much we get."

The majority of publishers, however, specialise in new books. There are two types: those that pay their authors, and those that expect their authors to pay them. It is important to check which type you are dealing with before wasting any time looking at books.

Vanity publishing has, of course, always been with us. There are still people who, despairing of finding a traditional publisher prepared to print their masterwork, have paid to have it printed

themselves. However, such people are increasingly turning to eBooks as a much cheaper alternative.

There are, of course, good authors who do not get publishing contracts. Mary Doria Russell had *The Sparrow* rejected by something like 16 publishers before it became a world-wide best seller. Because e-publishing is so much cheaper, it is likely that more authors will take this option more quickly rather than keep banging their heads against a brick wall. This means that there will be some gems out there waiting to be discovered. But they are buried in a mountain of dross.

The first thing to do when you check out a new eBook publisher is look at the contract. A responsible publisher will look to make its profits from sales. That means that no up-front fee is charged to the author, and both author and publisher share in the proceeds of any sales. In order to make a profit the publisher has to select works that it thinks will sell. Vanity publishers charge authors a fee for publishing the book. They have to make their money that way because they will take anything presented to them and most of it probably won't sell at all.

Another thing to check is the names of existing authors. If one or two names are very common you can assume that these authors are in fact the people who run the publishing company. Whilst their contracts might look like they are doing the right thing, this is simply a front for publishing their own material, at their own expense. This doesn't guarantee that the books will be bad, but it should make you suspicious.

One thing you should look for in an e-publisher's web site is a preview facility. In most of the better sites it is possible to read a few chapters of each book on line before committing to buy it. This is very useful. These days I can normally tell within a few paragraphs if a book is going to be awful. As the vast majority of them are, having this screening facility is very useful. As for the rest, if the authors can write, the next test is to see if they can make the first few chapters interesting enough to make you want to carry on reading. This is, in effect, pretty much the same test that professional editors apply to unsolicited submissions. It won't always give the right answer, but it is a very good guide.

One interesting development with some eBook publishers is that they claim that e-publishing allows them to create a new art form: books that are much more graphic and interactive than the old paper things. So far most of what I have seen of this seems to be a case of throwing in a pile of computer graphics to distract from the fact that the text is so poor. However, some people are trying to do interesting things.

Frank John Giovinazzi is producing something that he calls The Global Epic (http://www.theglobalepic.com). This is a sort of Eternal Champion type idea which has a series of loosely connected heroic stories. On the web site a documentary section that details the background setting of the book accompanies each novel. There is also a chat area where readers can discuss the latest instalment. The sample chapter of the first book didn't really appeal to me, but there is no doubt that Frank is using the technology to produce something far more than just a novel.

Recommendations

Having looked at a large number of eBook web sites, I have so far found precisely two new novels that I think are worth reading. The first is *Magnificat*, by Chelsea Quinn Yarbro, which is reviewed in this issue. This was a bit of a no-brainer; firstly because Quinn already has a good

reputation amongst the SF community, and second because the owner of the publishing house is a good friend of mine and I know he has good taste.

The other book I fixed upon is *Demiurge* by Sheldon Pacotti. I'm pleased with this one because it came to me unsolicited. About one person a month writes to me and asks if I will review their eBook. Generally I say no. Most of them are pretty bad, and I don't see any point in giving a bad review to a new and struggling author. Sheldon's email stood out because he is the first author to contact me who has actually been able to point to previously published work as evidence of his ability. I then read the introductory chapters on his web site and was hooked. This is the way the process is supposed to work. I only wish that it worked right more often. *Demiurge* will be reviewed next issue.

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Author comments: #1

Having Sheldon's email, I decided to get in touch and find out a bit about why an author decides to opt for e-publishing. He gave three reasons: economics, copyright and marketing.

The economics of eBook publishing are initially impressive. Producing the book cost him nothing but time. Even the cover is something he and his wife knocked up on the computer. His publisher, Booklocker.com, offers a 70% royalty, because their only costs were adding yet another book to their web site. The book sells for $8.95. Sounds like a gravy train. Except, as Sheldon puts it, "I have had ample time to thank each and every reader".

With sales like that marketing is clearly an issue. Sheldon opted to do his by email, which also only cost him his time. He found me that way. He also found that

being nice to people helped. If someone wrote back and said no thanks, he would write again, thanking them for their polite response. A few changed their minds as a result. Clearly selling your eBook is a lot of work.

We briefly discussed my views of the problems of good eBooks getting known and Sheldon agreed with me that it was going to be very hard. His view is that the market is going to fragment into a large number of sub-genres. There will be web sites that specialise in reviewing only novels about cat detectives, or romance stories involving an alien as one partner, or whatever. Because people like to get "more of the same", they will look only at the specialist sites that interest them. I understand his reasoning, but I think it will be tragic if it happens. I have no intention of narrowing *Emerald City's* focus beyond its already rather limited scope.

Demiurge is a book that Sheldon first wrote many years ago and had rejected by several print publishers. Recently he did a major re-write. He considered submitting it to print again, but then decided that if he was going to make it big he wanted to do so with something new, not an old re-write that wasn't the sort of stuff he is writing these days. In any case, he liked the idea of having something that he owned all of the copyright to.

Finding the right publisher is another hurdle for a writer to overcome. Sheldon spent quite a bit of time researching the field before settling on Booklocker.com, and even then they were not exactly what he wanted. Part of the trouble, he told me, is that the market is in such flux. With so many small start-ups around, and new technology such as Microsoft Reader on the horizon, no one quite knows where to jump.

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Author comments: #2

Chelsea Quinn Yarbro's reasons for e-publishing were somewhat different. In an interview for the *Library Journal* (April 15th edition) she said that, although an established author, she found it difficult to sell *Magnificat*. The subject matter was regarded as too risky. After all, look what happened to Salman Rushdie when he upset a bunch of religious folks. Catholics are a little calmer, but no publisher was prepared to take the chance, except Hidden Knowledge. Quinn is still hoping for print publication at some point, but that will probably depend on how the eBook sells.

Another reason that Quinn felt *Magnificat* was hard to sell was that it was a cross-genre book, or rather there isn't a genre for it. Modern publishing is so heavily dependent on pigeonholing in order to market a book that it finds it hard to deal with anything that doesn't fit the established categories. Quinn hopes that e-publishing, being young and fresh, will not be so hidebound. That's quite the opposite of Sheldon's nightmare vision of micro-genres. I have no idea which will be correct, but I know which potential future I prefer.

Author comments: #3

The biggest name author to have experimented with eBooks is Stephen King. His novella, *Riding the Bullet*, was a runaway success. It sold 400,000 copies in the first day, which is quite possibly more than the whole of the rest of the eBook market put together.

King's novella was heavily protected to prevent it from being printed or copied, but it didn't take long for hackers to break the security and put unprotected copies on the web. That probably scared the book industry as much as Napster is scaring the music business, but King is undaunted. He's just going to try a new business model.

The new book, *The Plant*, is being published in instalments (the first one went on line on July 24th). Each one will be separately downloadable, and has to be separately paid for. On his web site (http://www.stephenking.com/) King says that he will assess the success of the project after the first few instalments. If it looks like he's doing OK income-wise then he'll carry on with the story, but if it looks like most people are downloading it and not paying he'll stop. It will be interesting to see how it goes. The latest news is that the first instalment is getting at least 75% payment. King thinks he might get as high as 85% or 90%. So far so good.

Short stories

So far I have been concentrating largely on novels, but in fact the quality of short stories on the Web is far superior to that of novels. A number of really good authors are experimenting with this option. I guess that a short story is seen as a much smaller risk than a novel.

Two of the best places to find short stories are Alexandria Digital Literature and, believe it or not, SF Weekly. AlexLit was started by Seattle fan Dave Howell and began life as a book recommendation site. I have mentioned it many times before, including in this article. That function still exists, and may prove to be useful for sifting eBooks, but the site has since attracted venture capital and now has a large stock of short stories available. In addition to new authors the site also republishes out of print work by big name writers. The web site has recently been completely revamped, so if you haven't

visited it lately go take a look: it is vastly improved.

I also note that AlexLit has managed to get nearly all of this year's short fiction Hugo nominees on line, which is a fine service to fandom. Members of Chicon 2000 can even get them all for free! See the web site for details. The authors who refused to have their work e-published were Kage Baker, Harry Turtledove, Greg Egan, James Patrick Kelly, and Eleanor Arnason. Egan is, of course, no surprise. He is anti-almost everything. As for the rest, if this year's promotion succeeds, hopefully they will realise that they have made a mistake.

SF Weekly's fiction site, called Sci-Fiction (http://www.scifi.com/scifiction/), is edited by well-known professional editor, Ellen Datlow. Ellen originally tried to go it alone with a site called Event Horizon. That has since folded, though it is still on line (http://www.eventhorizon.com) and has some fine stories on it. But SF Weekly had the good sense to ask Ellen to do the same job for them and the results are impressive. Each week Sci-Fiction publishes a brand new short story. Each fortnight it reprints a famous old story. There is some tremendous stuff on the site, including the newest Kim Newman Anno Dracula story, *Castle in the Desert*.

Info sources

I have used a variety of excellent sources in putting this together. Most of them are, of course, on the web. Just about everything you want to know about the eBook business can be found at eBookNet (http://www.ebooknet.com). They have some good reviews too. It is an excellent place to look for information on quality eBooks.

Another potentially useful site is eBookConnections

(http://www.ebookconnections.com). They are trying to be a *Locus*-like magazine with news of forthcoming publications, best seller lists and so on. Obviously the success of such a scheme is dependent on the co-operation of publishers, and with so many about it may be a while before the site is genuinely useful, but good luck to them.

Of course there are web rings too. I found three separate rings devoted to eBook publishing. If you have time and a good connection, go browse.

Cardinal Sins

This being the issue in which I'm taking an in depth look at eBooks, the first question I have to ask on an eBook review is, how easy is it to read? Apologies to Quinn, because this isn't anything she can do much about, but it is important.

The book, *Magnificat* by Chelsea Quinn Yarbro, came on a standard CD and what I noticed immediately was that the installation process was nowhere near good enough. There was no auto-run on the CD. Looking at the disk, I found a read-me file, but when I loaded it with Notebook the lines of text were mostly too long for a normal window so you had to scroll back and fore to read it. To their credit the publisher, Hidden Knowledge immediately fixed that problem once I brought it to their attention.

The instructions are printed on the inside cover of the CD as well, but I missed them first time through. The install files were self-extracting zips, and again the process was not automatic. This sort of thing is sloppy. Books are a mass-market product and you can't assume that people buying

them will be computer-savvy. Of course things would be much easier if eBooks didn't need copyright protection, you could just distribute them on CD with no install routine, but right now that's life. In the meantime, Hidden Knowledge say that they have taken my comments on board and that future products will use an installer program. I can't ask more than that, can I?

On a more positive note, the book is shipped in both HTML and PDF format and from what I could see there was nothing flashy in the HTML that would stop it working in older browsers. Both Mac and PC format files are provided on the disk. That's the way it should be.

Out of interest I decided to see which format seemed easier to read. Kevin and I both preferred PDF. Acrobat easily adapts the text to fit a big screen whereas with a browser you have to play with font sizes. Also, as Kevin noted, Acrobat displays the larger fonts better than a browser. The PDF version also comes as a single file, which is useful if you want to move it around and are not very computer-literate.

On the negative side, PDF was designed to imitate a paper document precisely and thus contains page breaks. This is annoying when you are reading because the text jumps suddenly as you pass the end of page. HTML, which has no page breaks, is much smoother to navigate through, especially if you have a centre wheel on your mouse. I think the advent of formats that are designed for book reading will be a great boon to the eBook industry.

Talking of design, one thing that I definitely want in the spec is an easy and obvious way to set a bookmark. There should be two types, a "where I am", which there is only ever one of per reader, and a "remember this spot", which you can have

several of. Microsoft Reader has a feature like this.

Finally, on readability, the major gripe, and this will affect all eBooks, is that I had to go sit in front of the PC to read the darn thing. I do most of my reading on trains, on planes and in bed. Eventually I had to resort to taking my laptop to bed; otherwise I would never have finished the book in time.

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OK, so what about the book? Well, you know I'm a sucker for religious stuff, and this one could almost have been designed to pander to my tastes. What follows is slightly spoiler-ish, but as it is trailed in all of the PR for the book I don't feel at all guilty.

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What if the Pope wasn't a Catholic? What if she never had been?

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With the death of the reigning Pope the College of Cardinals gathers in the Vatican to elect a successor. When the time comes to vote each man feels rather tired and scrawls a name that he can't quite remember. Imagine his surprise when he discovers next morning that he wrote a name in Chinese. And that all 88 other Cardinals wrote exactly the same name. Could it have been blind chance? Were the votes tampered with? Is it a miracle, or the work of Satan? With the Millennium fast approaching, anything is possible.

Magnificat is an alternate history of the last few years. It tells the tale of how a Confucianist-Communist Chinese widow was elected Pope, of the reforms that she instituted in the Catholic Church, and of the fury that her actions generated amongst reactionaries everywhere. It is, I thought, a little Sheri Tepper-ish, in that it aims an

incisive intellectual stiletto at the heart of patriarchal theology and impales it mercilessly. There is much entertainingly negative characterisation of fundamentalists, politicians and reactionaries. Also, and you don't find this in Tepper, a solid understanding of the role of the mass media in whipping up hysteria. Right up my street.

I should also point out that Quinn knows her stuff. I'm not an expert on Catholic theology, but I know enough about Christianity in general to see that she knew what she was talking about. What she isn't, is unbiased. I thought that some of the more right wing Cardinals could have made better cases for their positions, and I'd be interested to hear what a practising Catholic makes of it all (hello, Father John, where are you?).

From the literary point of view, the book starts off a little slowly as the Cardinals agonise over what to do but gathers pace nicely in the second half. There is a definite air of Millennial fever in the latter portions of the book. I also liked the way that some of the Cardinals changed their positions as the book developed. Much of the action takes place in Europe and Quinn clearly knows that of which she writes. I particularly loved a short speech by an Italian taxi driver that was just perfect.

If forced to categorise the book I would label it a political thriller. However, it is neither fast paced nor vacuous enough for typical airport bookshop material. Some of the elements of the plot are, I think, a little far fetched. And I don't mean the miracle. But unless you are a Le Carré fan and expect everything to be watertight and impenetrable I don't think you will have any trouble.

In summary, Tepper fans everywhere will love it, practising Catholics may hate it, and the rest of you will enjoy it and perhaps learn a few things about Christianity in the process. Which reminds me, my copy of the new Karen Armstrong book has just arrived, so you can expect me to bore you all stupid with more theology soon.

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Meanwhile, back with the publishing industry. The book is a little expensive, but substantially cheaper if you download it rather than buy the CD as I did. Downloading from the web also makes it a lot easier for a small press publisher like Hidden Knowledge to sell overseas.

I'm very glad that Hidden Knowledge decided to publish *Magnificat*, and will be interested to see how it sells. Personally I found it rather hard to read, but I'm willing to accept that I didn't have the right technology and that if I bought a Rocket or something similar I'd be happier with eBooks.

As to the future, I gather that Quinn already has a second eBook in the works. Set during the American Civil War, it is an erotic vampire novel entitled *In the Face of Death*. Once again it came to Hidden Knowledge because traditional publishers rejected it. "No one wants to read books about female vampires", Quinn was told. I'll be looking out for it.

And there's more good news. Hidden Knowledge has just agreed terms with Suzy McKee Charnas to publish a new novel by her. "The weirdest thing I have ever written", says Suzy. This I have to see.

In the final analysis the objective of eBooks, at least as far as I am concerned, is to find a cost-effective way to keep good-quality authors like Quinn and Suzy in business. Too often these days "mid-list" means "not mass market enough", and the literary world would be much the poorer if all we

ever had to read was Jeffrey Archer. I hope the eBook thing works.

Magnificat - Chelsea Quinn Yarbro - Hidden Knowledge - HMTL/PDF
http://www.hidden-knowledge.com/

The Door to Atlantis

The trouble with sharing a room with Roz Kaveney at Wiscon is that she keeps recommending good books that I really ought to read. I come away from conventions with quite enough books as it is, and bankruptcy is something I'd prefer to avoid. Fortunately Roz's recommendations have one major redeeming factor: she's always right.

Not that it is hard to tell with *Prospero's Children*. How many first novels do you know that have fabulously detailed front covers and a cute cut out in the dust jacket that precisely represents the magical doorway featured in the book? Someone put a lot of work into that cover, and that means that the publishers expected the book to sell in bucket loads.

You can tell too from the prologue. Some writers are competent but pedestrian. Jan Siegel's prose, on the other hand, positively sings. The prologue to *Prospero's Children* is one of the most beautiful pieces of writing that I have read in a long time. Sadly Siegel cannot keep it up through the whole book, but there are regular flashes of the same sort of brilliance. This girl has talent. No wonder the publishers wanted to establish her as a major name from the start.

Of course beautiful writing alone does not a great novel make. It helps to have all that plot and character stuff as well. This is where I think Siegel's neophyte status is a little more obvious. The characters are OK, but perhaps a little too much of the action is convenient for the plot, and Siegel has a bit to learn about managing exposition without it being obvious.

Minor complaints aside, however, *Prospero's Children* is a fine fantasy novel. If pushed to pigeonhole it simply I would describe the book as Lovecraft meets Dion Fortune in Narnia. And if that doesn't have you confused, I'll just have to try harder. Fortunately I also try to explain.

We'll start with Narnia. The plot revolves around two British teenagers whose father inherits a mysterious old house in darkest Yorkshire. Various strange and magical things happen, and the house just might contain a magical door that leads, not to a fantasy world, but to ancient Atlantis.

Now Atlantis, you will remember, was sent to the bottom of the sea by a mighty cataclysm. Anything that involves Atlantis therefore also inevitably involves weird fishiness. Mermaids, giant crabs, all appearing around a gloomy old mansion in the country. Hence Lovecraft.

But whilst Lovecraft dealt almost exclusively in slimy, repugnant, low-life horror, Altantean magic is upper class, elegant and beautiful. It has much more in common with Dion Fortune's evocations of Babylon than grim, gloomy Innsmouth.

And that just about sums it up. You don't need to know the plot. It is a fantasy novel. Things that are supposed to happen do. There are only two real surprises. The first is that the book changes direction completely half way through, and becomes distinctly more adult. The other is the trick ending which, whilst very cute, was hugely telegraphed if you happen to know anything about boats.

All in all, however, a very fine debut from an author who clearly has tons of promise.

Roz tells me that a sequel is in the works. I'm looking forward to it.

Prospero's Children - Jan Siegel - Del Rey - hardcover

Right on Base

For a Founding Mother of the Tiptree Award Karen Joy Fowler doesn't write a lot of SF. Her first novel, *Sarah Canary*, was set in the western USA in the 19th Century. Some readers have claimed that the mysterious Sarah is in fact an alien, and that thus the book is a first contact novel. Karen says this wasn't what she intended, but people are welcome to believe it if they want to, it being a perfectly plausible version of events. Given that the novel is about perception, the fact that people in our society see Sarah as an alien is at least as revealing as how Karen's characters see her.

Karen's second novel, *The Sweetheart Season*, doesn't have any obvious aliens in it. There is a ghost, and there is a lot of very scientific cookery. But it is set in the American mid-west in 1947, and the main theme of the book is baseball.

Well, OK, I lied. The book is about women. What did you expect? The end of WWII was a strange time for feminism. All through the war women had been told to get out there and run the country because the men were all off fighting. Now the war was over they were being told that their duty was to get back in the kitchen pronto and get on with their allotted role in life, that of devoted wife and mother. Except, of course, that there was still a distinct lack of men around, many of them having ended their soldiering careers rather sooner than

they might have wished, and having been left behind to fertilise some Pacific island.

So what is a poor girl to do? In the small town of Magrit, teenage the girls resort to working in the local mill, home of the famous Sweetwheats breakfast cereal and its iconic cookery writer and advice columnist, Maggie Collins. Maggie doesn't actually exist, except perhaps in the mind of old Henry, the mill's owner, but to readers of *Women at Home* magazine (wonderful title, that) she is the fount of all knowledge and sage advice about correct behaviour. No true American housewife would dare make a move in the kitchen without consulting Maggie first.

Not a very stable situation, is it? A bunch of teenage girls in a small, man-depleted town working on devising recipes and writing advice columns about how to be a dutiful wife and mother. Not that Mr. Henry doesn't appreciate their difficulty. He wants to see the girls married off as much as anyone, so he comes up with a whiz idea. The mill will found its own baseball team - all girls: The Sweetwheats Sweethearts. If they go and play in neighbouring towns it is sure to be great publicity for Sweetwheats. And maybe a suitable potential husband or two will turn up at the games.

Except, of course, that baseball is a man's game. The girls quickly find out that a) some of them are quite good at it, and b) as a matter of courtesy to the men they are playing they are expected to lose.

From there, of course, it is all downhill. And the descent of Magrit society into farce is followed with a dry, biting satire that will surprise those British readers amongst you who think that American humour is all slapstick. The *Washington Post* reviewer described the book as "just this side of insane". I don't think it is quite that weird, but it has some very funny moments. I

could go on for ages about the "it was 1947 and…" asides, about Anna Peal, the plucky heroine of a Sweetwheats-sponsored radio series, or about Mrs. Ada and Mr. Ghandi, but I don't want to spoil all the jokes for you. I'll just mention that, to show that Karen hasn't forgotten SF fandom, there's a short section staring *Robert's Rules of Order.*

So there you have it. A feminist rant disguised as a silly story about a girls' baseball team. Making a powerful point with sharp observation and incisive humour. If that isn't what Wiscon is all about, I don't know what is.

Sweetheart Season - Karen Joy Fowler - Ballantine - softcover

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Escaping Dystopia

Something I always end up doing after Wiscon is catching up on famous feminist fiction that I missed first time through. *Halfway Human*, by Carolyn Ives Gilman, is one such book. It first came out in 1998 and I can't quite work out why I didn't hear more about it at the time. As a story it has flaws, but as an examination of social issues it is excellent.

Before I go any further, however, I should issue a spoiler warning. It isn't really possible to discuss the issues raised by this book without giving away two important facts about the background. Both of them are pretty well telegraphed, and I had both pegged early even though one is not announced until about half way through and the other near the end. So if you don't like spoilers, stop reading now.

Halfway Human is the story of Tedla, the only genderless human ever to have escaped from the closed planet of Gammadis. It is well known in the galaxy that Gammadians have three genders, but the planet refuses to allow access to outsiders so no one knows how or why this happened, or much about how Gammadian society functions. Until, that is, Tedla turned up in a back street district of Capella Two.

Most of the book is backfill, describing Tedla's childhood on Gammadis and the disastrous first contact with a Capellan expedition. As the story unfolds we learn more about Gammadian society, why the Capellan expedition went so badly wrong, and how as a result Tedla came to escape.

But of course the story is largely irrelevant, because the point of the book is to hold a mirror to human society by exaggerating certain parts of it in the created alien world.

The set-up goes like this. Gammadians are born genderless, and stay that way until puberty. Only when their sex hormones kick in do they develop distinguishing characteristics and become male or female. Except that in a proportion of cases nothing happens, the unfortunate Gammadian remains genderless for the rest of its life.

At this point you are probably thinking that Gilman is going to talk about the roles of nature and nurture in defining gender behaviour. After all, if young Gammadians are brought up identically because it is not known what gender they will be then any differences in behaviour must be genuine rather than socially induced. Sadly this issue is not really explored much. We see very little of adult Gammadians, especially females, so it isn't easy to judge how different they are. Gilman does, however, address the subject of social conditioning. Indeed, it is central to the book.

Gammadian scientists explain to their Capellan visitors that the adult neuters, known as blands, remain childlike and

simple all of their lives. They are not able to learn crafts and professions, and need constant supervision because of their lack of sophistication. However, they are able to learn simple jobs such as cooking, cleaning and looking after their gendered protectors and the children. The Capellans soon find out that what this means in practice is institutionalised slavery. Indeed, the blands are not even regarded as human.

There are echoes in here of how the enslavement of blacks was justified on Earth. Gilman lives in St. Louis and has probably got first hand experience of a few unpleasant Southern-US attitudes. She may also be having a sly dig at how many human societies make use of their children as household servants. But the main thrust of the book is clear long before she more or less announces it half way through. The blands fulfil the same role in Gammadian society that women fulfil in ours.

Got that? Cooking, cleaning, looking after others, always being told that you are not smart enough to go and have a career so you have to stay home and be looked after. The message is not subtle, but that way that Gilman provides example after example of how women are not only oppressed, but have long ago consented to actively participate in their own oppression is very impressive. Even after becoming a star pupil in a post-graduate xenology course at a Capellan university, Tedla still insists that there must be some mistake because it isn't smart enough to do anything but cook and clean.

The really clever part of the book, however, is the way that Gilman initially portrays Gammadian society as a sort of feminist utopia. Gammadian females have exactly the same rights and opportunities as males, except that they can also earn additional money by agreeing to bear children. Once they are born, of course, the kids are sent off to the blands to look after. It is precisely the sort of scenario that many career-obsessed feminists dream of. "Do you oppress your females by forcing them to bear and raise children?" Tedla asks its Capellan friend. But someone still has to do the dirty work. On Gammadis it is the blands. In our society, as Tedla insightfully points out, it is the poor.

Gammadis, then, is both Utopia and Dystopia. It provides just what some feminists have been asking for, but it goes on to show that no matter what set-up you end up with for society, someone is likely to end up on the bottom of the pile. Furthermore, as Gilman finally admits, in the case of Gammadis it was quite deliberate. Genetic engineering allowed the Gammadians to create their genderless children, and how those children transform at puberty is mercilessly controlled.

This is perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of the book, and one which does not seem to have been fully explored. It is clear that potential sociopaths are forced to become blands. But from what I could see I think that Gilman is also suggesting that the Gammadians bestowed gender on the most ambitious, self-motivated members of their race. Any child who cares deeply about others is left to become a bland. The consequences for their society are fairly obvious.

So there you have it: social engineering, feminism, eugenics, slavery, even a bit of paedophilia. *Halfway Human* is a fabulous collection of pointed observations of human society, as seen by aliens. It being in many ways a Utopian novel, the plot is somewhat shaky in places. But as a piece of sociology it is fascinating. Heartily recommended.

Halfway Human - Carolyn Ives Gilman - Avon - softcover

Fear and Goal Kicks

The only trouble with the fabulous new baseball park in San Francisco (see last issue) is that it is very hard to get tickets. Having failed miserably to get seats for the July 4th game against the Evil Dodgers, or more precisely having been unwilling to pay 3 to 4 times the normal going rate to get them second hand, Kevin and I were left with a puzzle. Where could we go to get our Independence Day firework fix? Normally, of course, we get it as Westercon, but for various reasons (including bankruptcy) we were unable to head off to Hawaii for the weekend. Baseball was out. So where could we go. Kevin suggested a soccer game.

Yes, seriously, there is a soccer league over here. It is nowhere near as big a deal as gridiron, baseball, basketball or ice hockey, but it does exist. And more importantly San José has a team, the Earthquakes, so we could get to a game very easily. If we wanted to.

Now I freely admit that I have never been to a soccer game in the UK, nor have I any intention of doing so. But with 6' 3" of Kevin at my side perhaps it would not be too bad. All I would need would be a few little extras: Kevlar vest, trauma kit, emergency medical insurance, cloak of invisibility… I figured I could cope.

Kevin was most put out. "This isn't England", he said, "soccer is a family game here". To prove it he directed me to the club web site so I could see the list of things that were not allowed into the ground. Hmm, no animals, good, that means no English supporters. No fireworks either, that should deter the Turks. On the other hand, no musical instruments, which means no

Brazilians. I am beginning to see what he means; this could be rather boring.

The Earthquakes play at Spartan Stadium, in winter the home of San José State University's gridiron side. Now college gridiron is much bigger business than soccer in the US, and San José State, though they are not very good right now, have some impressive alumni, including Jack Elway (John's father), Bill Walsh and Dick Vermeil. The stadium seats around 30,000, but the soccer crowd amounted to less than a third of that. The opposition were Kansas City Wizards, and if they had brought any supporters they were pretty well hidden.

As is usual in the US, the stadium had plenty of parking space, and when we arrived there were already lots of people having tailgate parties. This is something we have missed badly since the baseball moved out of Candlestick, so maybe we'll take more of an interest in soccer in future. Bizarrely one food stall was offering fish and chips, presumably on the grounds that this is what soccer fans always eat (except in Glasgow where they eat deep fried curry and chips).

The star of the evening was definitely Rikter, the Earthquakes' mascot. He had a costume that most furry fans would die for - straight out of a Taral Wayne cartoon. Must go back with a camera sometime, and if he's still around in two years time we must get him to come to ConJosé.

As for the soccer, it was a little dull. US teams appear to believe that it is mandatory to play in a 4-5-1 formation, and the Earthquakes compounded this by sending frequent long balls downfield. I guess they had spent too much time watching Wimbledon, but it did no good because the guy they were aiming the ball at hardly ever bothered to challenge for it if there was a defender near. Alan Shearer would have wept. The game ended 0-0, but

then it was soccer so this is hardly surprising.

I think the game was a poor advert for American soccer, because I have seen a few games on TV and some of these guys do know how to play. It is a summer game here, which means hard pitches and too much heat to run lots. Given time, they could learn to play like Brazilians, and that would be kind of scary.

Of course we had gone for the fireworks as much as anything else, and they were a lot better than we had expected. Not up to Candlestick quality, but a very good show all things considered.

By the way, Kevin and I have been watching Euro2000 on the TV. The ads they show with the games (at the start and half time, they have got over this silliness about wanting the game stopped every 15 minutes) have occasionally been quite interesting. There is definitely an air of soccer being the coming game. Adidas has a series of ads set in the near future focussing on the life of an ex-player who was the hero of the USA's two World Cup victories, the slogan being, "will that player be you?". The web site, Soccer365, is more direct. They show a young girl cleaning off a dusty tome to reveal the title, "A History of American Sports".

However, my favourite ad is the Soccer365 one showing an Italian youth going to confession because he hasn't logged on to the site in weeks. The ad ends with a brief shot of an angel-faced boy in a replica shirt bearing the name Batistuta. Very subtle. Far too subtle, I suspect, for the American audience. Just goes to how us Europeans can still occasionally have a good laugh at the expense of uncultured colonials.

Footnote

I gather from Dave Clark of Cargo Cult that there is a new Tim Powers novel out. Sadly it is a limited publication hardcover at $75 a pop. I love Tim's writing, but I have my limits. Fingers crossed it will be available at a more reasonable price soon. If only he'd gone for an eBook instead of small press.

For those of you who are sick to death of Potter-mania, the American satirical magazine, *The Onion*, has published an excellent piece entitled "Harry Potter Books Spark Rise In Satanism Among Children". It is hilarious, and you can find it on line at http://www.theonion.com/onion3625/harry_potter.html.

In the meantime, as I said earlier, new novels are due from Iain (M.) Banks and Storm Constantine. I understand that the George R.R. Martin has been delayed, probably due to Greenpeace protesting about the number of trees required to give their lives to print it. And I still have stuff from Wiscon that I haven't read yet.

The next issue will therefore contain reviews of books by Anne Harris, Sean Stewart, Sheldon Pacotti and anything else I have got hold of and read in the meantime. Plus a Lexicon report, which means it won't be out until just before Worldcon. Catch you then.

Ciao,

Love 'n' hugs,

Cheryl