

# EMERALD CITY

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

## Introduction

This month's issue concentrates once again on British writers. There is a lot of good stuff coming out of the UK right now, and much of it is available internationally. Don't assume that you won't be able to get hold of these books, you almost certainly can.

Talking of getting hold of books, you may have noticed that the *Emerald City* web site is now covered in links to Amazon. There are good reasons for this. The most important of these is money. I'm still not making enough to be able to afford anywhere to live, and if *Emerald City* cannot start paying for itself it will have to end, period.

The other reason is that living in Darkest Somerset has taught me just how hard it can be for people to get hold of the books that I review. I have every sympathy with independent booksellers, and buy from them whenever I can. But they cannot be everywhere, and Amazon can. As I see it, my first duty is to help authors sell their books, and if that means getting people to buy from Amazon then so be it.

By the way, those of you who find the extra graphics a problem when accessing the current issue might like to click directly on the print version link instead. You will find that it loads much more quickly, and some

people have said that they prefer it for reading online.

Still with the web site, a whole new section has gone up recently. It is devoted to SF&F literary awards, currently primarily the Hugos. See the article in this issue for more news.

And finally, I have found a web site crazy enough to want to publish my travel writing. This means two things. Firstly I won't be putting travelogues in *Emerald City* any more (they don't really belong here anyway). And secondly I will be occasionally encouraging you to go read my work elsewhere. Please follow this link to <http://www.igougo.com/planning/result%20morgan&keyword=&image=47&image1.y=12> (or just go to IgoUGo.com and search for me).

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## In This Issue

Rebel Angels - Philip Pullman declares war on God

Rodent Royalty - China Miéville introduces us to the King of London's sewers

Meme Mayhem - Kim Newman does unforgivable things with other people's characters

Adventure Tales - Juliet E. McKenna brings a D&D style world to life

Mindless Cruelty - Ricardo Pinto creates a world without morals and a hero without brains

Alternate Arthur - Jo Walton takes a well-loved tale to another universe

Sun Stealer - Alastair Reynolds revives the art of space opera on a grand stage

Hugo Central - A brand new development on the *Emerald City* web site

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## Rebel Angels

*In a valley shaded with rhododendrons, close to the snow line, where a stream milky with meltwater splashed and where doves and linnets flew among the immense pines, lay a cave, half-hidden by the crag above and the stiff heavy leaves that clustered below.*

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So begins the final volume of what, in my humble opinion, is the finest fantasy epic of the decade. It is, of course, Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*, and it is written for children; children of almost all ages.

Some of you may remember that I reviewed the first two volumes in the series back in *Emerald City* #42. I commented at the time that, because the books are aimed at young adults the plot is occasionally a bit simplistic, but that the issues the books deal with could not be more intense.

*The Golden Compass* and *The Subtle Knife* introduced us to our heroes, Lyra and Will, and to the strange collection of parallel worlds that Pullman has created. They also showed us that in Lyra's world at least the Church is an evil, all-powerful dictatorship to be hated and feared. *The Amber Spyglass* tells of Lord Asriel's war against Heaven, and the role that Lyra and Will play in that war. Devout Christians will, I suspect, hate this book almost as much as Pullman hates Christianity.

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*"I used to be a nun, you see. I thought physics could be done to the glory of God, till I saw there wasn't any God at all and that physics was more interesting anyway. The Christian religion is a very powerful and convincing mistake, that's all."*

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Thus spoke the Serpent, in tempting Will and Lyra from the Path of Ignorance and Obedience to the Path of Knowledge. I'll get back to Pullman's theology in a little while, but for now I want to talk a little about why his work is so good.

It has to start with the writing. Elsewhere in this issue I discuss the concept of objective standards for fiction. Pullman, however, is the empirical proof. Just as when you bite into a really good cheese, or sip a superlative wine, you know in your heart that there are some things in the world that are better than others so, when you read Pullman, you know that he has a rare facility with words that charms and exhilarates. He's good, and you can't argue with that.

Next there is the imagination. Pullman has created a bunch parallel worlds, and he is not afraid to use them. He is writing fantasy, not SF, so he can do pretty much what he wants. I mean, where else would you find a book whose supporting cast

includes a massive, intelligent, armour-wearing polar bear, a Texan balloonist, a former nun, a broomstick-riding witch, two dragonfly-riding Lilliputian secret agents, and a pair of gay angels? I suspect that someone writing for adults would have been afraid to run riot in this way, which is a shame, because Pullman makes it work.

I have mentioned before the intensity of the books. Much of the time I was reading *The Amber Spyglass* I had tears brimming in my eyes. Lyra and Will face some truly awful situations, but they face them as only kids can: with innocence, with courage, and with an as yet uncorrupted sense of fair play. And even at the end where they discover that the world isn't fair after all, they don't rail against it; they just get on patiently with the difficult job of trying to make it so.

Finally, Pullman is not afraid to pose the Big Question. Not for him some trivial muttering over small issues of politics and morality. Oh no, he just gets with re-writing *Paradise Lost* and changing the ending so that mankind wins. The arrogance of it is breathtaking. Why the books have not been burned all over America I do not know. Possibly Pullman is simply too good a writer and people are afraid to challenge him the way they have done with Rowling. Possibly, as I said in my Harry Potter review (*Emerald City* #57), the Fundamentalists see Pullman as just a fantasy writer whereas Rowling has inadvertently given them the impression that she is writing about Real Magic. Whatever, Pullman has got away with something staggeringly bold and has got into the best seller charts with it. More power to him.

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Now it is time for a bit of theology. Sorry, but it is inevitable. The book is about theology after all.

Pullman's world runs on a sort of deviant Gnosticism. As in the Gnostic worldview, God is an evil Demiurge who has created the Church in order to subjugate mankind. However, Pullman does not postulate that behind all this there is some true Creator whom the Demiurge is somehow keeping us from. Instead he postulates an alternative cosmic order in which freedom, knowledge and love allow mankind, and the many other intelligent species he has introduced, to coexist harmoniously without the tyranny of religion.

His characterisation of Christianity is extreme and, many will say, highly distorted. By no means every Christian is an authoritarian fanatic, though there are many who are. And Christians will react with disbelief and outrage at his characterisation of their religion as being anti-love. And yet there is a sense in which Christianity holds that love of God is elevated far beyond love of anything else. Consequently there is a view that mankind should be discouraged, or even prevented, from achieving happiness in any other way than through love of God. After all, anything else would not be true happiness, would it?

The main point of Pullman's attack, however, is thoroughly justified. There are many aspects of Christianity that are unfortunate, unpleasant, and even damaging. Vast numbers of Christians accept this, acknowledge that much of it is the result of historical development rather than Divine Writ, and are doing their best to steer their dogma in the direction of compassion rather than compulsion. But there is one cancer at the very heart of Christian belief that it is hard to dismiss, primarily because the whole mission of Christ can seem meaningless without it, and that is the concept of Original Sin. Pullman seeks to root out that concept and trample it to pieces. He is neither subtle nor

respectful, but he is doing something that he believes is necessary, and on that level at least I cannot disagree with him.

There are of course those who would disagree with Pullman. One of the more eloquent is Gene Wolfe. In his *Book of the Short Sun* he has his hero, Horn, explain to us that without God, or at least belief in God, mankind is incapable of moral behaviour. That is an honourable belief, and one that is often used as a justification for religion. It is also a point that is rather hard to prove one way or another. Pullman's response appears to be that, armed with knowledge and love, humanity can learn to behave itself. Indeed, he says, that is the function of myth, and what is myth if not stories: stories with a ring of truth about them.

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*"Tell them stories. They need the truth. You must tell them true stories, and everything will be well."*

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Beautiful isn't it: a clarion call to fiction writers everywhere, and in particular writers of mythic fantasy. It is a piece of advice that one of the Dead gives to the Serpent regarding how to help Lyra and Will through the trials ahead of them. You could of course argue that by "true stories" Pullman means stories that are about things that have actually happened and have no trace of fabrication about them. But in that case what is he doing writing these books that are manifestly not true, in the literal sense, but which he clearly believes are True, in the mythic sense?

So let us tell stories, and let us try to make sure that there is a grain of Truth in each one that we tell. For what is this magazine if not a vehicle for persuading people to read the stories that others have told? I'm not going to be so pretentious as to say that

I have a holy mission, even if Pullman has kindly given me the excuse to do so, but I do believe that stories are valuable, and I hope that I can help you find some good ones. Starting, of course, with anything by Philip Pullman.

*The Amber Spyglass* - Philip Pullman - Knopf - hardcover

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## Rodent Royalty

In a grimy tenement in North London, Saul's father has just died. Well, to be precise, he has just jumped, or been pushed, out of the window and has ended up an ugly mess on the pavement. Saul doesn't know this yet. He is asleep. But one of the neighbours has called the Police and they are already on the way. Being the only plausible suspect, Saul is about to be arrested. But Inspector Crowley and his men are in for a surprise. Saul doesn't know this yet, but he has a surprising benefactor.

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*I can squeeze between buildings through spaces you can't even see. I can walk behind you so close that my breath raises gooseflesh on your neck and you won't hear me. I can hear the muscles in your eyes contract when your pupils dilate. I can feed off your filth and live in your house and sleep under your bed and you will never know unless I want you to.*

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Many years ago in a small town in Germany the citizens made a fatal mistake. They made a contract with a madman, and then tried to renege on it. The plague of rats that afflicted them was cured, to be sure, but it was only when they refused payment

that they discovered the real power of the musician they had hired to help them.

What kind of maniac will take the life of every child in a town as punishment for their elders' misdeeds? The rats would doubtless say it is the same sort of maniac that would kill hundreds of thousands of their brethren without a qualm. It was the greatest disaster of rat-kind. King Rat has not forgotten. He has skulked and pondered and planned, and now at last he believes that he has the weapon he needs to strike back. But the Piper has not been idle either. He too has learned from the modern world, and he won't be the pushover that the Rat Lord had hoped.

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Many people have been recommending *Perdido Street Station*, China Miéville's latest novel, to me, but I figured that I should read his other book first. For a debut novel, *King Rat* is hugely impressive. Miéville's liquid prose oozes from the page as dark and suffocating as a London fog, wrapping you in seemingly insubstantial tendrils, creeping upon you in silence, until it is all there is and it has become your world. Boy, this guy is impressive. The book is, perhaps, a cute short story idea that has been padded out, albeit succulently, to make a novel, but it is glorious reading all the same.

Two things occurred to me as I read it. The first Miéville himself acknowledges in the book. King Rat is the character that Batman ought to have been. He is a far better Dark Avenger than anything Frank Miller ever created. He has amazing powers, he is quite mad, and he owns the night streets the way a bat never could.

The other resonance concerns the Piper, and is not acknowledged. There is another character in horror literature who plays the flute. He is a mad god who writhes

ceaselessly in the centre of the universe dreaming of formless chaos. Wind City, the music that Miéville's Piper composes, is just the sort of tune he would have loved. Did Miéville have Azathoth's tuneless piping in mind when he created his Piper? Or had he just been listening to too much re-mixed Philip Glass? Maybe one day I will get to ask him, but for now I'm plumping for Azathoth.

Back with the book, however, *King Rat* is a fine dark fantasy and an excellent first novel. It is Jeff Noon without the drugs and with plenty of garbage. Miéville, I suspect, can do better, and everything I have been told about his latest work suggests that he has done so. There is a star in the making here. Watch this space, but in the meantime go take a walk in the sewers with King Rat. You won't regret it, and you won't forget him.

*King Rat* - China Miéville - Pan - softcover

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## Meme Mangling

Whitehall: a bespectacled, tweed-suited secretary ushered me into a large office and motioned me towards a small, deliberately uncomfortable chair. She then left for a side-room where she was doubtless to prepare to record my interview. After a suitable interval to allow his lackey to get set up, Chief Inspector Crenshaw leant on his elbows across his impressive oak desk and peered at me through a forest of greying, bushy eyebrows.

"Ah, Miss Morgan", he said, "what can you tell me about this fiend Newman?"

"Well sir, it is a bit complicated."

"Don't give me any of that academic nonsense, young lady, this is a dangerous

man we are investigating, and I need information, facts. Get on with it."

Oh dear, this was going to be even harder than I had expected. I paused briefly, collecting my thoughts, and wondering how I could get through to this tunnel-visioned police bureaucrat.

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The Office of Mimetic Stabilisation is one of the more totalitarian aspects of New Britain. Its purpose is to regulate public perception of, well, everything. In another world they might have been called the Thought Police, but such honesty of description is completely alien to President Blair's spin-doctored world-view. The OMS had recently started a campaign against writers of "subversive" literature. As an acknowledged expert on speculative fiction, and having a personal connection with their number one suspect, I had been drafted in to provide advice. Assuming, of course, that the OMS had anyone actually prepared to listen.

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"As you know, sir, most of the OMS's work in the past has focussed on correct interpretation of historical events. Meme criminals such as the Nazi apologist, David Irving and the American writer, Harry Turtledove, have had their work banned."

(Not that Secretary Mandleson and his buddies in the Office of Factual Truth had not been at least as prolific and imaginative as Turtledove in re-writing history, but it doesn't do to even think such things in New Britain these days.)

"Furthermore, writers of popular fiction such as Iain Banks, Terry Pratchett and Margaret Atwood have been banned for producing unacceptable visions of imagined worlds. Novelists are now encouraged to base their work solely on guidelines produced for the Government

by the Plot and Characterisation Committee headed by Sir Ben Elton and Lord Archer."

"I know all this, young lady, get to the point."

"Well sir, the evil genius of Newman is that he combines both of these Meme Crimes. He re-writes history, but also re-writes fiction, melding the two so seamlessly that it is difficult for the reader to establish what is supposedly factual and what is purely fiction."

"And how exactly is this so dangerous?"

"Sir, if you will allow me to skip over an explanation of the work of C.G. Jung and Joseph Campbell, with which I am sure you are familiar, what Newman is doing, very successfully I might add, is using mythic archetypes to shore up his criminal interpretations of history. By using well known and loved figures from popular fiction he engages the reader on a far deeper psychological level than can be achieved in a simple history book. This causes people to be much more susceptible to his lies and distortions than would otherwise be the case."

"Take a look at this book, for example." I placed a copy of *Unforgivable Stories* on Crenshaw's desk, just far enough away from him so that he could not snatch it up without standing, which would give me warning of his intention. "He has used a whole range of well-loved characters here, some of them quite horribly. His treatment of the story Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde is so repulsive that it should probably be forwarded to the Secretary for Public Morality."

(Recruiting Ann Widdecombe to his National Government was a masterstroke of Blair's. She is now so feared that no one dares speak her name, not even in plush Whitehall offices.)

"He even has the gall to taunt us with what he is doing. There is a story in here about the German occupation of Paris during WWII. Newman makes out that the Nazis tried to capture the spirit of Paris by rounding up all of the famous characters from French literature and bending them to their will. Of course in his version the literary characters are all rescued by an American terrorist. The implication is obvious. He is daring the Government to try to take control of Britain's cultural heritage, and equating them with Nazis should they attempt to do so."

"By God that is monstrous", thundered Crenshaw. "Secretary Mandleson shall hear of this forthwith. Your contribution to the Greater Good and Prosperity of New Britain has been noted, young lady. Dismissed."

I picked up my copy of *Unforgivable Stories* and headed for the door as rapidly as I could without arousing suspicion. I didn't want him to read the book and discover that in Kim's story the Nazi's just wanted to annihilate the characters from French literature. Not that there was much danger of that, he'd be too afraid that the book might damage his ideological purity. New Britain people hardly ever read the books that they ban.

Now it was time to leave the country. If the meme I had planted in Crenshaw's mind worked as I hoped, then soon the Government presses would be turning out mountains of books that portrayed fictional characters as Heroes of New Britain. Dan Dare would fight The EUkon and his European hordes in a Union Jack covered space suit. Oliver Twist would ask for more from Social Security, and get twice what he asked for. Sherlock Holmes would investigate the accounts of private companies and find them guilty of excessive profiteering. And the general

public, with any luck, would laugh themselves silly. I hoped that Kim would be pleased with me.

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One final note. *Unforgivable Stories* is a collection of Kim Newman tales that have all appeared elsewhere. The book includes some brilliantly scathing satires about science fiction fandom. And best of all, it contains *Teddy Bears' Picnic*, the story from *Back in the USSA* that features characters from British sitcoms in an Apocalypse now version of the Vietnam war (and is co-written with Eugene Byrne). If non-American readers have been uncertain about importing the hardback *Back in the USSA* they should get this book and see just how good it is. If ever there was an evil genius of speculative fiction, Kim Newman is that man. I can't recommend him too highly.

*Unforgivable Stories* - Kim Newman - Pocket Books - softcover

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## Adventure Tales

I used to think that it was impossible to make decent fiction out of a *D&D* adventure. Then I met Juliet E. McKenna and all of my misconceptions were neatly exploded.

Juliet is a regular at British conventions (or at least at Unicons which is where I have met her). The launch party for her third novel was at Lexicon. These days I tend to avoid what appear to be formulaic fantasy series, but Juliet was such a nice person, and had so obviously thought seriously about what she was doing, that I decided to give her stuff a try. After you have finished

this review I suspect you might want to see what she does too.

There are, I think, three basic modes of fantasy novel writing. They are as follows:

1. The mythic style, following a tradition laid down by Dunsany and Tolkein in which magical things happen for sound mythic reasons;
2. The explain-it-away style, in which magical things appear to happen but it is all explainable as a result of the characters being gullible primitives who don't understand science; and
3. What Juliet cheekily calls Realist-Magicism, in which magic is a reality and the world is structured around the fact that it is so.

*Dungeons and Dragons* was always intended for a Realist-Magical universe. Whilst Gary Gygax might occasionally have paid lip service to the concept of the game as interactive fiction (and I was there when he made that famous remark about the GM only rolling dice for the sound it makes), he was nevertheless adamant that *D&D* was a Game which had Rules that were intended to be Predictable, just like chess. I have known many *D&D* players for whom magic was simply another form of technology. I always found that rather sad, which is why I preferred to play *Call of Cthulhu* or *Pendragon*. But so it goes.

And as *D&D* is Realist-Magical, so Juliet's Realist-Magical novels are placed in a *D&D* setting. *The Thief's Gamble* features the adventures of a thief, a swordsman, a magician and a scholar, all of whom are on some sort of secret mission on behalf of the Archmage. If that isn't enough of a clue, then any experienced role-player will pick up other signs as she goes along. The real give-aways are when Juliet has done something really evil to her ~~players~~ characters and one of them makes a

comment that this sort of thing never happens in adventures that you read about.

For the most part the *D&D* nature of the book does not detract from the story. There is one fight scene that sounds like it was inspired by the (deliberately unrealistic) *D&D* combat rules rather than by actual knowledge of sword fighting. But on the other hand the defences deployed by the water mage in the story are wonderfully imaginative and are the sort of thing you are only likely to come up with if asked to use water magic in a combat situation. Juliet modestly attributes this deviousness to her husband, Steve.

So what did I make of the book? Well Juliet doesn't yet have the skills of a George Martin or Tad Williams, but she recognises that and does very well with the abilities that she has. The net result is that she has written the sort of highly entertaining but relatively unchallenging book that normally sells in truckloads to the fantasy-buying public. Furthermore, she has done so without resorting to mindless sentimental pap, odious WASP politics, S&M fantasies or mind-numbing detail that we get with most best selling fantasy writers. (And I leave it to you to work out to whom I am referring in the previous sentence.)

*The Thief's Gamble* is nicely paced and has some interesting characters (although I found most of them rather too nice). It has a plot that is complex enough to sustain interest but doesn't require you to stop every so often to take a breather and try to work out what is going on. In lesser hands it would be comfort reading, but Juliet is not afraid to occasionally upset expectations. I think she has done just enough to get the undemanding reader to sit up and take notice without getting them to say "yeuch" and put the book down. I



suspect that is quite a hard balance to strike.

Much as I like Juliet, I'm not yet going to be nominating her for any awards. That sort of thing is more likely to go to China Miéville. But I am going to say that she is a natural storyteller with plenty of talent and bags of promise. Furthermore, whereas some people with one self-published e-Book strut around like they were the next Steven King, Juliet is modest enough to know she has room for improvement and be determined to make use of that room.

There are two more novels published in the Einarinn series (Juliet makes no spurious comments about trilogies, of any length) and I have high hopes for them. If I were a publisher, this is the sort of thing I would snap up and expect to make me big bucks. As a critic I see it as the sort of thing I expect to sell well and thereby give the author every opportunity to fulfil her potential. Here's hoping.

*The Thief's Gamble* - Juliet E. McKenna - Orbit - softcover

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## Mindless Cruelty

There are many devices that authors use to progress their plots, but the one I think I like least is that of the clueless protagonist. I'm sure you are familiar with the idea. The world of the book is a dangerous place, but the lead character is hopelessly naïve and consequently keeps making silly mistakes. As a result (surprise!) our hero or heroine keeps getting into nasty scrapes which just happen to be exactly the events that are needed to progress the plot. No logic is required, other than the assumption that someone is so stupid that they can be relied

upon to do exactly the wrong thing at exactly the right time, time and time again.

Ricardo Pinto's new novel, *The Chosen*, uses this device mercilessly. Pinto's hero, Carnelian, is so witless that conclaves of learned monks have been known to gather together for the purpose of debating how many million copies of his brain could be carried by a single nanotech assembler without interfering with its normal operation. He does, in the end, manage to start learning something about the world, and even essaying the odd constructive action, but it takes him until around page 500 to do so. It was really hard not to put the book down while I was struggling to get to that point.

All of which is a huge shame because otherwise Pinto's book is very interesting. Yes, it is the massive first volume of an even more massive multi-volume fantasy "trilogy" (called *The Stone Dance of the Chameleon*). But it is not your usual Tolclone fare. There are no Elves, no dwarves, precious little magic, and only passing reference to dragons. Pinto has tried hard to be different, and has succeeded.

The world of *The Chosen* revolves around an autocratic race (the Chosen) who have effectively enslaved other sentient creatures and created what is supposedly a mighty empire, though, with typical fantasy world economics, it is hard to see where their money comes from. The Chosen are tall, elegant, cultured, arrogant, and so unbelievably cruel that they would turn the average decadent Melnibonian the same colour as Elric. They are, to put it mildly, a right bunch of conniving bastards.

This makes it an even greater shame that Carnelian is such an idiot. Pinto has created a setting that cries out for the sort of devious court politics you find in the works of, say, Dorothy Dunnett. Unfortunately

that kind of complex plotting is something that Pinto has not attempted, which is a real waste of a lovely background.

Anyway, Carnelian's father, who is a lot more sensible than his clueless son, seems to be a bit of a reformer and has opted to live away from court in an island fiefdom where he can treat his serfs slightly less brutally. However, the imminent death of the current God-Emperor causes him to be rushed back to court in a hurry, as he is the only person that the warring factions will trust to run the election for a successor. Lackwit, of course, gets towed along, and causes chaos.

There will be more books. The first one was over 700 pages and there is clearly a lot more to come. Book one ends hanging so far over the cliff that it is probably attached only by one ripped fingernail, the smallest one on the left hand. Here's hoping that in future volumes Carnelian manages to exercise some wit.

One final point. The final 200 pages or so contains a fair amount of enthusiastic gay male sex. This goes right past me, so I have no idea whether it is well done or not, but it is good to see this sort of thing being published in books that are marketed as mainstream, best-seller fantasy. It might just shake a few people up a bit.

*The Chosen* - Ricardo Pinto - Bantam - softcover

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## Alternate Arthur

Jo Walton is a long time British fan whose first novel, *The King's Peace*, has been picked up by Tor. It is an Arthurian novel, so of course I am already suckered, but this is Arthur with a big difference.

Following the Bernard Cornwell approach (see *Emerald City* #43), Jo has gone for detailed historical accuracy and realistic warfare, though thankfully without the deep and subtle anti-Celt bias that permeated Cornwell's work. Jo does of course have her own biases, but she has declared them up front by setting her story in an alternate universe.

Now you may think this is a bit strange. After all, Arthur himself is not proven to be an historical figure. Therefore any book featuring him is a fantasy, right? Well yes, but by going for a strictly realistic 6<sup>th</sup> Century feel Jo is tying herself to 6<sup>th</sup> Century culture. Nevertheless she wants to have a woman hero, in fact a world in which women are much more equal to men than they are here. She also wants to use the odd bit of magic. So she takes the historical setting, and then moves it sideways into another world where the other things she wants are true. I think it works very well.

The alternate world setting also allows Jo to play fast and loose with the Arthurian setting. The basic story is there: Urdo (Arthur), the Romano-Celtic war leader, struggles to hold civilisation together in the face of barbarian invasions and the petty quarrels of local kings. Much else, however, is different. Merlin (here called Raul) is a Christian monk whose primary talents are in administration, finance and diplomacy. Guinevere is an Irish princess called Elen ap Allel, and that should give you a clue as to who her mother is, and therefore who else might appear in the story.

Much of the rest of the traditional canon is missing. Gawain is there and pretty much unchanged. Morgan and Morgause are combined and play a relatively minor role. The traditional Arthur-Guinevere-Lancelot triangle has been replaced by a complicated relationship between Urdo, Elen, Sulien

(the heroine) and a Saxon prince. Jo has the style of Arthurian relationships off pat, but the stories have been changed.

Reading the book, I felt that there were times when Jo was writing too much history and not enough story. She creates some lovely situations, and then approaches them like a nervous horse. The reader finds herself galloping towards an interesting scene, and then lands with a bump on the other side while Jo has gone off to describe some other event a few months later. It is another case, I think, where a book could have done with being longer, or at least in more parts.

The world building, however, is excellent. Jo has a tremendous feel for 6<sup>th</sup> Century Britain and the political problems that Arthur would have faced. She also manages some nice mythic scenes, and her debate between Christians and Pagans is far more balanced and far reaching than that given by Philip Pullman in *His Dark Materials*. In addition Jo has an excellent sense of humour. The characters crack lots of jokes, as soldiers often do, without the book looking remotely like a comedy.

I think the Irish will be a little upset with the book. The Saxons (and I should point out that from the description in the book it sounds like Jo's "Jarns" actually come from Denmark) are given pretty fair treatment, but the Irish are portrayed as irredeemably awful. I think Jo tends to forget that us Welsh were blue-painted barbarian louts who collected heads too before the Romans came. Besides which, the Irish are fun, and Conal Fishface is my favourite character in the book.

One area where I did have trouble with the alternate world setting was the lack of maps. I suspect that Jo did not include any because she didn't want to make it too obvious that the setting was Britain or tell readers where all of the places were. Also,

of course, I have made my feelings about maps in fantasy books very plain many times before. On the other hand, maps in military books are very useful. I got a little lost occasionally as to where the various armies were. I could, have course, have sat down with a map of Britain and worked it all out, but I think that is asking a little much of readers, especially non-British ones. There is, I discovered later, a map on Jo's web site, which you can find at (<http://www.bluejo.demon.co.uk/>). If you want to follow the military action I recommend checking it out.

So how does the book stand in relation to the rest of the vast Arthurian canon? It is a bit hard to say, because Jo has moved quite a way from the traditional story. Patricia Kennealy did an alternate world version too, but she was quite clearly doing Arthur in a different setting. Jo, on the other hand, is doing Arthur differently in pretty much the usual setting. It doesn't compare so easily.

A few issues ago I reviewed Guy Gavriel Kay's fantasy world version of Byzantium and showed how the alternate setting allowed Kay to tell the story of Justinian and Theodora as he felt it should have been, rather than how it actually was. Jo may have something similar in mind. For all the flexibility in the Arthurian story, there is still a basic plot that few have the courage to deviate from. We won't find out how Jo's story ends up until the second volume emerges.

Yes that does mean that this is only a first part, although Jo tells me that there is only one more book to come. It doesn't leave the reader hanging anywhere nearly as badly as the Ricardo Pinto novel, but the book does just stop without any obvious conclusion. Part two, I suspect, may deviate a little further from the traditional story. I am particularly interested in the arrival of

Rigg, the giant horsewoman from a land "beyond the North Wind". And then there is the Byzantine ambassador. Hopefully the next volume will see Jo stretch her wings a little.

Meanwhile, what of this one? I very much enjoyed it although, as I have said, I found the pacing a little off. It isn't going on any award lists, if only because it is a part work and I never give award recommendations for part of a novel, even for George Martin. However, there is a definite possibility of a Campbell nomination here. With the book being published in the US it will get good distribution. And if British fandom can get its collective act together and support Jo she should get on the ballot easily. Get to it, people.

*The King's Peace* - Jo Walton - Tor - hardcover

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## Sun Stealer

Cue rock guitars and keyboards.

Cue the latest synthetic narcotics.

Cue bizarre humanoids sporting fashionable bio-mechanical body augmentation.

Cue massive ramjet engines accelerating the ship out of the system and heading for relativistic speeds.

On my mark... play!

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*The gardener plants an evergreen  
Whilst trampling on a flower.  
I chase the wind of a prism ship  
To taste the sweet and sour.  
The pattern juggler lifts his hand;  
The orchestra begin.  
As slowly turns the grinding wheel  
In the court of the crimson king.*

King Crimson

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The last time I heard that little ditty in a science fiction novel was in Elizabeth Hand's *Aestival Tide* (*Emerald City* #11) where it was presented as a well-loved traditional folk song. But tell me, what exactly is a Pattern Juggler, and what would he do? What is knowledge if not stored patterns of information? Now there's a germ of an idea.

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The ancient lighthugger, *Nostalgia for Infinity*, hurtles through space, its gunnery officer gone mad and its captain trapped in cryo-sleep because if he were any warmer the nano-plague that afflicts his implants would run riot.

In Chasm City, Yellowstone, former soldier Ana Khouri has found a new career - the bored rich of the city pay her to try to assassinate them so as to bring a little excitement into their lives. Little does she know that she is just being tested.

On the planet Resurgam a team of archaeologists excavates the remains of a nine hundred thousand-year-old civilisation, the Amarantin. They were destroyed when Resurgam's sun flared dramatically. But was the disaster a freak of nature, or did the Amarantin somehow bring about their own demise?

Linking these strands is Dan Sylveste. He is the son of Chasm City's richest and most notorious scientist. He is the leader of the Resurgam survey team. And he is the only man alive to have pierced one of the anomalous gravitational fields known as Shrouds to communicate with the mysterious beings who live within them. If only he could remember what they had told him.

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Contrary to what may or may not have been said at Worldcon, Ben Yalow does read books. I know he does, because he recommended this one to me. It is called *Revelation Space*, and it is by Alastair Reynolds, a new British author who also happens to be a practising scientist working on projects for the European Space Agency. That of course means that you are going to get a book by someone who understands relativity and particle physics and all that weird stuff. You might also think that you would get a rather dull book from someone more interested in numbers than stories. And there you would be wrong, very wrong indeed.

I must admit that I was wrong too. I put off buying this book for while, indeed until Ben recommended it. And I did this because on the cover some idiot had written, "The first great science fiction novel of the century". Now it may well be the case that SF publishers can't count, but they should know by now that their readers, in particular readers of this sort of book, can count very well. Consequently that comment comes across as an enormous insult to just about every major SF writer there has ever been (Verne and Wells excepted). So I treated the rest of the hype for the book with disdain which, as I have said, was a mistake.

*Revelation Space* is a fabulous romp of a space opera, a spiritual heir to M. John Harrison's brilliant *The Centauri Device*. It has huge space ships with silly names. It has galaxy and century-spanning conflict. It has planet-busting weapons, weapons the size of planets, and computers the size of, well, I mustn't spoil all of the fun. It treats of engines of destruction of unimaginable ferocity, and of people ruthless enough, or mad enough, to use them.

If this book had been published in the US it would be the talk of fandom by now. Instead it was published in Britain where the talk of fandom is still Real Ale and where it is presumably being read with horror by environmentalists and neo-Luddites. And if such people are reading it they will doubtless come away confirmed believers in the Sheri Tepper ideology that it is a far, far better thing to wipe mankind from the face of the universe now than to allow us to develop to the point where we can actually do these things. There, of course, is the question. It is the same question posed by Ken MacLeod and Justina Robson, but then it is probably the only question worth posing for SF in Britain these days. Reynolds just does it on a vastly bigger stage that's all.

Returning to the Elizabeth Hand novels for a moment, you may recall that the final book in the series was entitled *Icarus Descending*. Liz was probably thinking about her decadent Aviator culture in general, and Margalis Tastanin in particular, but it is funny how these things resonate. Because beneath all the hardware and software and particle beams and gravity waves is a small, golden glimmer of myth. Reynolds, I am delighted to say, has not forgotten that the story he is telling is a very old one. Thousands of years ago in Crete there was a scientist who dreamed that one day mankind might be able to fly.

There are no new stories, only old ones told by new writers in new and different ways. For a first novel, *Revelation Space* is very good indeed. It is not brilliant literature, and some of the characters are a bit sketchy, but it does what it does very well indeed. Compared to *Ash*, I personally would not describe it as Hugo-winning material, but I would say that it is just the sort of book that would win a Hugo if only people in the US knew about it. And now

some of you do, because I have told you. Spread the word.

*Revelation Space* - Alastair Reynolds - Gollancz - softcover

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## Hugo Central

The sharp-eyed amongst you may have noticed that there is a new navigation button on the *Emerald City* web site. Or alternatively you may have bothered to read the Introduction. What this is all about is a new section of the web site devoted, at least for now, to the Hugo Awards.

Ever since the Chicago Worldcon I have been thinking about what I can do to better promote the Hugos. There are a lot of things involved here. Firstly an awful lot of people don't understand the process by which the Hugos are awarded. Many people think that they can't vote, when in fact participating is very easy. And as we discovered in Chicago many people, even on Worldcon committees, don't understand what the awards are for.

This doesn't surprise me, because the only public information about the Hugos tends to be taken from the WSFS Constitution. Now while I have the utmost regard for Kevin and his friends' ability to draft watertight legalese, the Constitution is not the most readable document in the world. Nor does it contain anything approaching informative commentary on why things are as they are. Hence the need for some plain English explanation of the process. Please take a look at the FAQ and the explanation of the voting process, and if there is anything that is still not clear, get back to me.

Another function of the site is to tell people more about the Hugos themselves. There are good sites doing this already, and I have pointed people to them, but I happen to believe that there are things that I can do differently, and perhaps better. In particular, and following standard *Emerald City* philosophy, I want people to actually buy some of this award winning work and read it. (Yes, I know, I nag.)

Finally there is a page where you can recommend works for the awards. Whilst it is very easy for anyone to get to vote, it does cost and I know that some of you are not able to pay. But *Emerald City* is read by a lot of people who do vote regularly. My recommendations are all very well, but I can't read everything, and my tastes are not necessarily the same as yours. So here is your chance to tell people what works and people you think should be nominated. This is especially important for people from outside the USA as, thanks to the resolution passed in Chicago, works from those areas published in 1999 are eligible again this year.

Another useful feature of the recommendation page is to help people voting in the Retro-Hugos. I am still not convinced that Retros are a good idea, but while they exist I will try to make sure that they are voted on responsibly. 1950 was a pretty good year for SF&F. I have suggested two great novels: *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, and *Gormenghast*. Thanks also to David Braddick for going through his Ray Bradbury collection in search of great short stories. If you know of anything else good from that year, please let me know and I'll put it on the site.

Assuming all of this goes down well, I will then look at extending the site to include other major awards, including national ones. But in the meantime, as you will see, there is a fair bit of work to be done to the

Hugo stuff. Well it keeps me out of mischief, doesn't it?

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## Miscellany

First up in this section a brief coda to my piece on SF web sites last issue. For those of you interested in keeping up with developments in Australian science fiction there is no better site than Eidolon.net (<http://www.eidolon.net>). This site has been off line for quite a while for a major revamp, which is why I had forgotten about it last issue. It is now available again, although large parts of it are still under construction. Despite the gaps, however, it is still a valuable resource, and will become more so as further updates are made.

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Still with Australia, I have received an absolutely awesome fanzine from that incorrigible perfectionist, Bruce Gillespie. *SF Commentary* #76 is special for two reasons: it is the 'zine's 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary (yes, seriously folks, thirty years of fanzine publishing - well thirty-one actually as this issue is, for very good reasons, a year and a half late), and it is devoted entirely to the late George Turner. Bruce was named George's literary executor in George's will, and this fanzine can therefore be seen as an impressive coda to the great man's work as an SF critic.

Some perspective first: the 'zine is 120 pages long and produced to a quality that would shame many professional magazines. Bruce does things like this. I think he's mad, but he probably thinks that I am mad for publishing an issue every month. Much of the material is reprinted from elsewhere, but as it dates back as far as 1967 I don't think we can complain.

Whatever, it is a hugely impressive publication, and if you are looking for the best fanzine of 2000 then there cannot be much competition.

The star of the show, however, is George himself. I haven't had the time to read through by any means all of it yet, but I have certainly got the flavour of the man's views. Bruce subtitled the 'zine *The Unrelenting Gaze*, in tribute to the constant and merciless scrutiny to which George subjected the corpus of SF. I only met George on a couple of occasions, and in no case for long enough to actually establish a conversation. This is both good and bad. Bad because I would have learned a lot, and good because I suspect that I might have been so intimidated by him that I might never have written anything ever again. Having read a bit about George's requirements for good SF reviewing, I am in no doubt that he would have dismissed *Emerald City* as juvenile trash. Heaven only knows what he would have said about the sort of book reviews you see elsewhere on the web.

Of course the thing to do when someone rubbishes your work is to try to do better, which I shall continue to try to do with some of George's words in mind. However, there are areas where I have the temerity to disagree with him, in particular with his view of what SF should be like. This view is neatly encapsulated in his now famous excoriation of Alfred Bester's *The Demolished Man*.

As many of you will know, *The Demolished Man* was the first novel ever to win a Hugo Award (the 1946 award to Asimov's *The Mule* is a Retro-Hugo awarded in 1996). It is also a seminal work on telepathy. Indeed it is so famous that when JMS needed a name for the head of the Psi Corps in *Babylon 5* he felt there was no other choice than to call the man Alfred Bester. George,

on the other hand, in his very first work of SF criticism, explained to the world why *The Demolished Man* was seriously flawed.

The essence of George's criticism is that, regardless of Bester's obvious skill as a writer of thrillers, *The Demolished Man* is an example of poor science. George points to numerous examples where Bester has cunningly pulled the wool over the reader's eyes, or rushed the plot frenetically from one scene to another to prevent the reader from having time to stop and think about what she has just been told. Under George's unrelenting gaze, the illusion of believable telepathy that Bester creates is just that, an illusion. It is poor science, and therefore poor SF.

There we must differ. George, perhaps because he comes from a generation brought up on Gernsback's views of SF, believes that the genre must be science first, and literature second. I, on the other hand, believe that it should be literature first, and science second. I wonder, for example, that if faced with Orson Welles' famous radio broadcast of *War of the Worlds*, George would have complained bitterly of the various tricks that Welles had used to make the listener believe that Earth was really being invaded from Mars when in fact this was all merely an illusion.

That, of course, is a rather unfair comparison, but the point remains that we have to choose whether to judge Bester's creation of suspension of disbelief according to his skill as novelist or his skill as a scientist. Ideally we might want him to succeed in both, but if he does not then we have to ask what would happen if he succeeds in just one. What would have become of the book if it were scientifically sound but boring to read? George, of course, is not here to reply, which is just as well as he would probably wipe the floor with me. But hopefully in the end we

would agree to disagree, if only because we both clearly loved great books, even if we could not agree about how to judge them.

Anyway, those of you wishing to read more of George's incisive views should contact Bruce at [gandc@mira.net](mailto:gandc@mira.net). The 'zine is A\$15 within Australia, US\$15, or £8. If you need an Australian cheque, get in touch with me.

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More literary criticism, or rather absence thereof, comes from *Quantum Muse* (<http://www.quantummuse.com>), an online fiction 'zine that I discovered through *E-Stand*. There are a lot of these things about, and I single this one out, not for its fiction, but for its editorials.

The editors are a bunch of self-avowedly drunken New Yorkers who clearly believe that they have a mission to promote self-publishing. Consequently their editorials are full of ringing denunciations of the publishing industry and rousing calls for people to get out there and publish on the web where they cannot be oppressed by evil editors. Throw off your shackles and write, and all that.

Now this is all very well, but it reminds me strongly of a panel on literary criticism at Thylacon II in Hobart in which one member of the audience loudly and persistently maintained her equal right to determine what novels were good or bad, purely on the basis of personal taste. Any notion of literary worth as expressed by the panel (which, as I remember, included Jack Dann, Janeen Webb, Sara Douglass and George Martin, was mere Fascist oppression). It is, I should not have to remind you, a view that is totally at variance with the stated ethos of *Emerald City*, namely that there are good books and bad books and that you should read the good ones in preference.



Now the strange thing about *Quantum Muse*, is not that its editors should espouse such views. They are remarkably common these days. What is strange is that they should do so in so wonderfully eloquent a manner. If ever there were an amateur magazine that should be shouting aloud about quality writing, this one is it, at least on the basis of the editorials. Funnily enough, their by-line is "posting the finest in sci-fi, fantasy and alternative writing and artwork", but they are far too amusing for me to point out the inconsistency.

By the way, those of you who love animals should also check out the other site run by *Quantum Muse's* webmistress, Becky Kemp. It is devoted to wildlife and fantasy art and it is full of absolutely stunning artwork. You can find it at <http://www.wildlife-fantasy.com/>.

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One more comment on the subject of literary criticism and then I shall go away. As I may have said before, I am ConJosé's representative on the World Science Fiction Society's Mark Protection Committee (WSFS MPC). As the MPC has the only obvious public email address for WSFS, we are in receipt of all sorts of unexpected requests. The latest was a request for information from a professor at Belgrade University. This in turn led me to the web site of the Serbian Society for Science Fiction

(<http://www.geocities.com/CapeCanaveral/Launchpad/8396/>) and thence to Professor Nedeljkovich's doctoral thesis on SF alternate histories. There is an English version available, and it is very accessible for literary criticism. It even points the reader in the direction of those theorists who believe that there can be no such thing as objective standards of literary criticism, just in case you want to take pot shots at me with some live ammo.

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## Footnote

I still have a large pile of great new stuff from British-based writers for next issue. The latest Ken MacLeod novel, *Cosmonaut Keep*, is on the way and should have arrived by the time you read this. New books are also promised from Tom Arden and Jan Siegel.

*Locus* states that Neil Gaiman's *American Gods* will be published in the UK this month, but somehow I doubt it because Neil says he is still polishing it. There is a new Sheri Tepper out as well, but as it is a US-only publication I'm not sure I will get it in time for next issue.

In the meantime, of course, it is coming up to gift giving time. I know this is a tired and worn record, but why not buy some books.

And finally for this month, you may have noticed that recent issues of *Emerald City* have been blessedly free of the usual typos and grammatical errors. This is nothing to do with me, it is all down to my new friend and superstar proofreader, Anne K. Gay. Many thanks, Anne.

Ciao, Love 'n' hugs, Cheryl