

EMERALD CITY

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

Introduction

If you happen to pick up this magazine at Potlatch, hello, and welcome to San Francisco. I'm Cheryl, what follows is all my fault, and you can probably find me helping out in the con suite.

To everyone else, welcome back. Yes, I am in California again. No, it isn't any much warmer than England. Heck, we had snow a few days ago: unheard of. But it will get warmer fast, whereas when I get back to England in April I suspect it will still be threatening snow. Still, enough whinging, on with the show.

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Merlin's History

Thesis: Rob Holdstock is the William Gibson of Fantasy.

Justification: In the 1980s Gibson produced *Neuromancer*, one of the great books of science fiction and the progenitor of a whole new sub-genre, that of cyberpunk fiction. Since then he has written a succession of books which, whilst stylistically brilliant, have lacked the spark, vitality and imagination of the original. Holdstock too produced a showstopper of a book in the 80s: *Mythago Wood*. Yet his output since has been strangely disappointing. Whenever I want to praise an author for eloquent use of mythic themes I liken them to Holdstock, but the man himself has produced little of note.

So far, so depressing. However, in his last but one book, *Gate of Ivory*, Holdstock showed some signs of breaking away from the rut he had dug himself into. He

produced a book in which most of the main characters were not humans, but mythagos - people out of myths. I was quite cheered by that, and said at the end of my review (*Emerald City* #44) that I hoped his next book would have no humans in it at all. I very much doubt that Holdstock read that comment, but he seems to have done exactly as I had asked.

The new book, *Celtika*, is set fairly and squarely in the land of myth. The action does not take place in Ryhope Wood (at least as far as we can tell) but rather on a world stage. It is clearly in the same universe, because many of the deities of the mythago world (the entities that channel through the masks from *Lavondyss*) still exist, but the story is free standing.

Our hero, perhaps not surprisingly from the name of the book, is Merlin the Enchanter; Merlin the Old; Merlin, the man who dawdles through time and who sees the lives of men (or mythagos) as we see May flies. But this is not the Merlin of the Arthur cycle. Those days are yet to come. Instead Merlin remembers his time on the Argo; a time when he was known to men as Antiokus. The theft of the Golden Fleece is, after all, the greatest raid myth of all time, and therefore fully understandable to any Celtic warrior.

Those of you familiar with the myth will remember that Jason and Medea eventually fell out. She murdered their sons and fled. Yet with sorceresses nothing is quite what it seems, and only Merlin, with his very long life, might hope to see through the deception. Seven hundred years in the future he at last gets a clue to what really happened and sees a chance to put things right. Unfortunately, just at that point, the Celtic nation embarks on the greatest raid in its history.

So far, so good. Is that a story to inspire or what? Merlin and Jason fighting back to

back, Celts pouring through Themopylae to sack Greece. Here, at last, I thought, we have a story that will once again show Holdstock's talents to the full. This is going to be a great read.

And yet, and yet... Where was the drive, the tension, the anticipation? One of the cancers that has eaten into Holdstock's work through the mythago series is that of the hopeless, inadequate lead character. In the land of myth, Holdstock writes not about heroes, or even anti-heroes, but about hopeless cases driven only by their own neuroses and inability to do anything except fail in the most abject and uninspiring way possible. Even when things go well he is at pains to point out that this was the result of some happy chance, and in complete despite of the actions of the characters. Sadly that atmosphere carries over into *Celtika*.

I'm not sure what Holdstock thinks he is doing here. Perhaps he thinks that mainstream literary people won't take his work seriously unless all of his characters are Consumed with Angst. Perhaps he is right. But then whom exactly is he writing for? And if he is writing solely for people who look down on fantasy as a form of fiction, what right does he have to expect fantasy readers to buy his books? There are ways of producing a let-down ending, but producing an entire let-down of a book is, I think inadvisable.

So here I am, still hoping. I will keep buying Holdstock's books, and one day I very much hope I will love one as much as I loved *Mythago Wood*. But despite the change of scenery, I think Rob is still in as much of a rut as ever.

Celtika - Robert Holdstock - Simon & Schuster - hardcover

The Tongue Snake Strikes

Noon has been a talent waiting to happen. Now he has: SF has given him his opening but, like Ian Banks, I do not expect it to confine him.

Cheryl Morgan
Emerald City #3

Rotate

Jeff strode into the bars at noon, finding there a bunch of talents recently escaped from nearby banks. The notes quavered at his approach.

Minimise

This - review - book - Noon - poetry - experimental - wetware - experience - mental - convolution - metamorfiction.

Imaginate

Once upon a time in the land of Dub there lived a prophet called Jeff. The people of Dub were cool and laid back, for it was their habit to be so: mixing and re-mixing any and every sound that came their way. Yet the prophet was not happy. Jeff saw Dub not as a land of freedom, but as a land circumscribed by the vinyl groove. "There is more than one dimension to your art", he cried. "Look to your lyrics, for they can be fluid too".

Sample: Cover Blurp

Please note: *Cobralingus* uses only imaginary technologies and the strangely twisted pathways inside Jeff Noon's head.

Surrender

Look folks, I can't do this stuff. My neural pathways are not strangely twisted in anywhere near the same way as those of Jeff Noon. There are things that you need to know, and these are they:

- There is a new book by Jeff Noon called *Cobralingus*;
- It is experimental poetry, not an SF novel;
- It is very clever, but very weird;
- You can learn more about the *Cobralingus* engine at <http://www.cobralingus.com>.

Cobralingus - Jeff Noon - Codex - softcover

Under the Heel

A pavane, for those of you not into mediaeval re-enactment, is a long slow dance. It is so slow, in fact, that even someone with two left feet such as myself can manage it without treading on people's toes too often. It is also, as Keith Roberts noted, a bit like the passage of history.

I have been meaning for some time to start reviewing books from Millennium's excellent SF Masterworks series. It would plug quite a few of the gaps in my reviews of Hugo winners for a start. But what finally got me started on the project was a very unfortunate coincidence. At the end of last year, Keith Roberts died, just weeks before his masterpiece was due back in the shops.

Pavane is undoubtedly one of the classics of science fiction. It was by no means the first alternate history novel, but it is a very early one and one of the finest of the genre. It is

also very much a work of science fiction, not just a book in which history happened differently.

The basic plot idea is that Elizabeth I was assassinated shortly before the Spanish Armada set sail. Demoralised, the English were in no position to resist when Admiral Medina-Sidonia landed his army. So here we are, in 1968 (two years in the future when the book was first published) with the UK still ruled from Rome and technological progress having moved forward at a sedate crawl. We do, just about, have steam engines.

That does not mean, however that people have been completely inactive. They have just had to work within the restrictions imposed by the Church. There is, for example, a splendid array of heliographs criss-crossing the country and providing high quality communication. I like to think that *Pavane* was one of the inspirations for the technology in Sean McMullen's post-holocaust Australia. Certainly the feel of the settings is quite similar.

Structurally *Pavane* is a collection of short stories. These are inter-linked, although it doesn't seem so at the start. Roberts uses his metaphor of the pavane to tell his tale on a historical stage. His hero is a bloodline, not a person. That in itself is unusual in a single novel, but it is the quality of the writing that really stands out. Words like "haunting" and "lyrical" come to mind. Roberts was a very fine wordsmith, and it is sad that his work is not better known.

Of course it is very hard, especially with science fiction, to write a book that is not a product of its time. In reading *Pavane*, especially towards the end, one is left with an indelible impression of the hope and naivety of Harold Wilson's Britain. With hindsight, however, we can forgive Roberts his innocence and simply enjoy his writing.

Thanks to the SF Masterworks series, it is now easy for all of us to do so.

Pavane - Keith Roberts - SF Masterworks - softcover

Building with Gravity

I really don't know what to make of this one. Americans are so well known for failing to understand subtle jokes that when you get a book by an American that appears to be a clever satire you start to wonder whether the guy is actually serious. And when many of the jokes involve bizarre ideas like using black holes as building materials, and the author, Wil McCarthy, says that, well, yes, this is actually technically feasible...

The jacket blurb compares the book to Moorcock's wonderful *Dancers at the End of Time* series, so clearly someone thinks it is a satire. I don't know, maybe you should read it and make up your own minds.

The Collaspium is set somewhere in the far future of our world when scientific miracles are commonplace. Nanotech is the order of the day. Black holes, as I said, are used as building materials, and fax machines can send anything, even people. Here quite clearly McCarthy is having bit of fun, because he goes on about people using fax machines to create copies of themselves to send to work while they stay at home and enjoy themselves. There is no hint of the discussion of the legal implications that you find in, say, *The Resurrected Man* (*Emerald City* #48) or *Demiurge* (*Emerald City* #60).

Elsewhere, however, you can't be sure. McCarthy goes on about how the human brain is wired to want to live in a

monarchy. He's quite right that people like to have someone to blame when things go wrong, but you can't help but feel that he's got a strong dose of "grass is greener" syndrome. I kept having this urge to pat him on the head and say, "there, there, we'll sell you our monarchy, OK, and then you can find out what a bunch of ignorant, in-bred buffoons they really are".

McCarthy does have a point in saying that if you have a monarchy it should be elective, but if we did that in Britain we'd end up being ruled by Posh Spice and David Beckham, or even worse Cilla Black and Terry Wogan. Besides, isn't that what the US Presidency is supposed to be, and look where that gets them.

But it is the physics, not the politics, which really catches the eye. The book is structured as three short stories, each of which involves some impending disaster to do with Collapsium, a black hole based building material. Each is duly solved by the hero, Bruno de Towaji, by cunning application of fundamental physics. There were times during all this that I was tempted to come to the conclusion that McCarthy was barking mad. This was especially so when he started going on about Wellstone, a "programmable material" that can be turned into atoms of any element you wish, including, of course, unobtanium, impossibilium, impervium and rainbow kryptonite. But no, McCarthy says in an appendix that all of this stuff about quantum dots is amongst the more plausible of the ideas he has extrapolated. Given that he's an engineer at Lockheed Martin and that he cites a bunch of theoretical physics experts who have helped develop his ideas, he may well be right.

Anyway, it is all a lot of fun, and what is more it is quite a good book too. McCarthy's plotting is frenetic, and as the

book goes on he clearly gets rather more interested in his characters than you might expect from someone who is dealing with cutting edge hard SF. By the end my head was spinning and I was wishing that I knew enough physics to know when I was supposed to laugh and when I should gasp with admiration. It wasn't spinning so hard that I failed to notice a gaping hole in the plot, but fortunately that didn't affect the story at all.

Goddess, this was weird. Next job: go read some of the theoretical stuff that McCarthy recommends. I note that Bernhard Haisch, whom he claims as a guru of this field, works at Lockheed Martin's Solar and Astrophysics Laboratory in Palo Alto. Have we had this guy to speak at BayCon or BASFA?

Oh, you want to know the whys of black hole engineering? High bandwidth communication. You see the speed of light is much higher in the supervacuum inside a Collapsium lattice. That means you can use Collapsium highways to bypass irritating communication bottlenecks such as getting messages to planets that are on the far side of the sun. You did have to ask, didn't you? And you thought that building fusion reactors was kind of dangerous. Told you it was wild.

The Collapsium - Wil McCarthy - Gollancz - hardcover

Rubbing it in

Here we have one of those books that I suspect will be praised to the skies by lovers of "serious literature" and regarded a complete yawn by everyone else. *Salt* is the first novel by British writer Adam Roberts. It has already attracted quite a bit of critical

praise, and I picked it up because it got onto the Clarke Award short list. It was an enormous struggle to get past the first few chapters. After that, although the book got going a bit, I could see that I was always going to end up thinking, "so what?"

The basic plot of *Salt* is as follows. A migrant group of spacecraft sets out from Earth and arrives at a habitable but inhospitable planet that they call Salt after its vast deserts of sodium chloride. The migrant party is made up of several groups of non-conformists. One such group, the Senaarians, is comprised of hard line Fascist Christian Fundamentalists (or possibly Zionist Jews). They fall out with the Alsists, a supposedly anarchist collective. The two groups merrily slaughter each other once they have arrived at Salt.

So much for the plot, but what is the point? It clearly isn't the characters. The novel is told from the viewpoint of the leaders of the two factions (in as much as a group of anarchists can be said to have a leader). It would be hard to find two more despicable characters for the "heroes" of a book. Roberts does a pretty good job of portraying them: the smooth lies, self-aggrandisement and false modesty of the dictator, the raw selfishness and insanity of the anarchist. I hated them both.

Perhaps, then, it is a book about politics. But if so, why choose such extreme caricatures? The Senaarians are like something out of a Sheri Tepper book: fiercely patriarchal and militaristic. They only avoid being a parody through their leader's constant attempts to paint them in a good moral light. The Alsists are, if anything, worse. Roberts' take on anarchism is that its adherents must be utterly selfish. This is not the imperialist selfishness of Heinlein; "your freedom impinges on my freedom so you must do as

I say". Instead Roberts postulates a society in which caring at all about anything other than your immediate personal self-interest is viewed as "rigidist" or "hierachist" and is to be despised. The Alsists are so utterly insensitive to anything and anyone that it was hard not to cheer when the Senaarian planes came to blast them off the face of Salt.

The issue here is that there is no point in debating politics between two lunatic extremes. Both societies were portrayed as unworkable: Senaar because, like Hitler's Germany, it could not exist without war; Als because as a society it was so inhuman that heretical behaviour was inevitable. Neither position is worth attacking, and the conflict between the two was as inevitable as, if you will excuse the simile, the impact of sodium on water.

How about the SF angle? Perhaps the story was simply an excuse for some interesting scientific exploration. There certainly are some intriguing ideas. For example, the way that the migrants travel by hitching a ride to a comet is a new method of close-to-light-speed travel to me. Also some of the techniques that they came up with to survive on Salt were reminiscent of the better bits of Kim Stanley Robinson's Mars series. However, it is clear from the relative amount of text spent on these issues as compared to the amount devoted to the Senaar-Als conflict that the science is intended to be a minor issue. Some of it is even a distraction - for example the early discussion of the discomfort of interstellar travel later proves to be an illusion. Doubtless the Senaarian leader exaggerates the luxury in which his people travelled, but it is clear that the Alsists travelled in squalor because, like New Age Travellers, they were dirt poor, badly organised, and opposed to any trace of luxury on political grounds.

In the end I was forced to conclude that the whole SF angle to the book was intended as some sort of elegant allegory about the futility of war. The sterile backdrop of Salt and the fragile position of the migrants as colonists on a new and inhospitable world was supposed to highlight the idiocy of the conflict. Here too, however, Roberts has got it wrong.

Sure, wars of ideology are stupid. Our species spent much of the 20th Century fighting them. They happen because the two sides, as Roberts clearly demonstrates, are incapable of communicating. They cannot begin to understand how the other side thinks. It is all very sad, but to a large extent we are learning that lesson. If Roberts really wanted to talk about the futility of war he should have based his story on somewhere like Northern Ireland or the Middle East where the real tragedy is not that they combatants are so far apart, but that they are so close together. Als and Senaar were doomed to destruction because Roberts gave them every reason under the sun to hate each other. So the sky is blue: how insightful! A much better approach to the subject is that taken by Iain Banks in *Look to Windward* where the only reason the combatants have to fight is their own history of mutual hatred.

I have been very hard on this book, which I hope is unlike me. It is a first novel, and clearly Roberts set out to write an "important" book rather than the sort of fluff that we get so much of these days. However, in doing so he seems to have forgotten a) that to write an important book you have to have something worth saying, and b) that most people are not going to want to read a book simply because it has high pretensions. Worthiness on its own is not enough.

Salt - Adam Roberts - Gollancz - softcover

Castle in the Air

Still in the mode of trying to find good books on the cheap, I have been looking for classics in second hand bookstores. Twenty years ago, Robert Silverberg's *Lord Valentine's Castle* was a giant of the fantasy genre. I missed it at the time, and now each time I see a new book labelled something like "the ninety-fifth volume in the Majipoor Chronicles" I worry about what I have been missing. So I picked up a copy of the first book in the series, one so old that it still refers to the "Majipoor Trilogy". It told me two important things. Firstly, Silverberg can do an awful lot better than this; and second, epic fantasy has come a very long way in twenty years.

The book starts off OK. In fact it begins with "And then", quite appropriately so because it dumps us right *in media res* with much confusion and uncertainty. At this point Valentine is a lonely vagrant with no memories and no direction in life. I really enjoyed the first few chapters. Before long, however, it becomes obvious that Valentine is indeed the rightful Coronel of Majipoor and that he must regain his crown. Thenceforward it is all sadly predictable, right down to the need to travel to all areas of the (incredibly badly drawn) map.

These days a book like this would be a trilogy in its own right, and perhaps that would be an improvement. Silverberg clearly knows that there are character development issues involved. Valentine himself has to grow back into his regal role, and those people who knew him as a common juggler will acquire different attitudes to him as this happens. It is all there, but very much skimmed over. Whether Silverberg couldn't be bothered to do the job properly, or whether he felt that

500 pages was quite long enough for a book, is a matter of conjecture.

What really stands out about the book, however, is the poor quality of the world building. This is one of those fantasy novels where suspension of your disbelief requires the sort of crane one might use to haul a Saturn V up onto the launch pad. I guess it dates from the days in which people happily played D&D games in worlds that were an ugly hotch-potch of everything and anything that happened to strike the GM as interesting. The days before we all read Tolkien's essay, *Tree and Leaf*, and started trying to create consistent and believable worlds.

Perhaps the most bizarre and dated thing about the book is Silverberg's apparent belief in the efficacy of Big Government. He seems to think that it is entirely possible for a world to be "run" by a massive and arcane bureaucracy. It is a nice image, and Paul McAuley does a good job of showing how it would actually (not) work in his Confluence series. But the unquestioning way in which Silverberg presents it leaves you understanding why Heinlein got quite so rabid in the other direction. No one these days is that naïve. Well, except in California that is.

All of which just goes to show that books can and do become dated. From now on, however, I will try to be less hard on epic fantasy books because I know how really bad they used to be.

Lord Valentine's Castle - Robert Silverberg - Pan - softcover

Award Season

Yes folks, it is that time of year again. There's far too much to talk about if you include everything, but here's the basic rundown on best novel awards.

The Hugos

Nomination forms for the 2001 Hugos should be arriving in our mailboxes real soon now, given that the deadline for submitting them is the end of March. This seems to have galvanised people into action and I have had quite a few submissions to the *Emerald City* recommendations lists in recent weeks. Many thanks to everyone who has participated. If you are interested you can find the recommendations online at http://www.emcit.com/hugo_rec.shtml.

Those of you intending to vote might also consider the short lists for British awards given below for ideas.

Clarke Awards

This has been a pretty good year for British SF and that fact is reflected in the short list for the Clarkes. Miraculously I have managed to review every single book in the list. The nominees are: *Ash* (Mary Gentle), *Cosmonaut Keep* (Ken MacLeod), *Parable of the Talents* (Octavia Butler), *Perdido Street Station* (China Miéville), *Revelation Space* (Alastair Reynolds) and *Salt* (Adam Roberts).

My view, as you might guess, is that it should be a close run thing between *Perdido Street Station* and *Ash*. *Parable of the Talents* is doubtless only there because of its Nebula win, which in turn was really for *Parable of the Sower*. How *Salt* got in ahead of John Meaney's *Paradox* is a mystery to me.

BSFA Awards

As might be expected, the BSFA Award short list is very similar. Final voting for these takes place at Eastercon in April. The nominees are: *Perdido Street Station* (China Miéville), *redRobe* (Jon Courtenay Grimwood), *Paradox* (John Meaney), *Revelation Space* (Alastair Reynolds) and *Ash* (Mary Gentle). Given that I have an Eastercon membership I am actually going to have to make up my mind here which one to vote for out of *Perdido* and *Ash*. Oh dear.

I did try to find a copy of *redRobe* before leaving the UK, but had no luck. I found a copy of *Remix*, another of Grimwood's novels. The cover blurb described it as a mix of Gibson and Tarantino, which is a sure-fire way to put me off before I have even started.

The Nebulas

The Nebula Awards are still at the long list stage. Fifteen novels are listed, including such fine books as *Midnight Robber* (Nalo Hopkinson), *Dark Cities Underground* (Lisa Goldstein) and *The Annunciate* (Severna Park). I would like to see Nalo win - *Midnight Robber* is still on my short list for the Hugos. However, I have this sinking feeling that the award will go to Paul Levinson's *The Silk Code*.

What does interest me about this is what it means for the Hugos. I have been blithely assuming that *Ash* and *Perdido Street Station* stand little chance, even with *Ash* having been published as four volumes in the US. However, the paucity of this year's US offerings suggests that things might go otherwise. *Galveston* by Sean Stewart and *Infinity Beach* by Jack McDevitt have been getting a lot of attention, and I will try to include both of them in next month's issue.

Right now, however, there is no obvious Hugo winner. That is a delicious rarity.

Aurealis

The short list for the Aurealis Award novel category is as follows: *The Deep Field* (James Bradley), *The Miocene Arrow* (Sean McMullen), *The Dying Light* (Sean Williams & Shane Dix), *Sea as Mirror* (Tess Williams).

As far as I know, *The Miocene Arrow* is the only one of these books that is available outside Australia. Sean Williams and Tess Williams (no relation) have both been reviewed favourably in these pages before. I will see what I can do about getting hold of copies.

Miscellany

Last issue's poll was a clear victory for *Perdido Street Station*, which perhaps should not be surprising because of the huge fuss I made of it. I was a bit disappointed that fewer people voted this time, but then there wasn't a lot of point. This issue should be more interesting with there being by no means a clear favourite. I will be fascinated to see what happens.

This month on IGoUGo I have contributed two travelogues. The first returns to Brighton and takes a look at a few historic sites. You get the famous Royal Pavilion, and also proof that when it comes to royal scandals Charles and Camilla are rank amateurs. The other journal tells a little about what Kevin and I get up to when we go up to Sacramento for the weekend. It is not all about trains, I promise. As usual you go to igougo.com and search for journals by me.

Talking of web sites, I have spent some of the money I saved by moving *Emerald City* to a new host on setting up a new site of my own. This isn't quite as extravagant as it might seem. If I am going to make a career out of being a journalist I need to have somewhere where I can demonstrate my skill at different types of writing. I am trying to keep *Emerald City* focused on science fiction and fantasy. I have IGoUGo for travel writing, and my company site for the energy economics stuff. Everything else gets to go on cheryl-morgan.com. And I get to have a serious vanity domain name, which is the sort of thing all good journalists should have. There isn't a lot on the site at the moment, but American sports fans might like to take a look at my attempt to explain rugby in terms they can understand. Oh, and if you do look up the site, don't forget the hyphen. The cherylmorgan.com domain name has been grabbed by a doctor from Texas who, rather annoyingly, is not using it.

And finally, having got to California I can report that Kevin's new home is very pleasant, and will be considerably more so in summer when it is warm enough to use the pool. Unfortunately the commute distance has lengthened considerably, but right now we are very grateful just to have a roof over our heads. Everything else we can sort out in due time.

Footnote

Next issue a feast of the latest releases from the US, including (I hope) Gene Wolfe, Dan Simmons, Sheri Tepper and Joe Haldeman. Also the novels by Sean Stewart and Jack McDevitt mentioned in the awards section above. And, if I have time, I have finally got hold of Kathleen Ann Goonan's

Mississippi Blues. There should also be a review of Potlatch. It is going to be a busy month.

Ciao,

Love 'n' hugs,

Cheryl