

# EMERALD CITY #68

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## Introduction

Is it only a month that has passed? It seems an eternity now since California and sunshine and rushing to get #67 out before I had to go catch a plane. But then I have been busy in the meantime. Lots of good books and a good convention too. Here is what went down.

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## In This Issue

Or is it all too boring? - Cheryl finds the UK Eastercon in the midst of an identity crisis

What You Want - an investigation of Print-on-Demand publishing

Final Release - Tad Williams' virtual reality epic, *Otherland*, is finally complete

Right on Track - Ian McDonald takes a fast train through the red sands of Mars

Tales of Woe - Brian Stableford hears warnings about genetically engineered mice

Ship of Fools - Kathleen Ann Goonan sails down the Mississippi

River of Life - Nicola Griffith finds purpose in water decontamination

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Here Come the Hugos - this year's nominations are out

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## Or is it all too boring?

Another year, another Eastercon, another round of whinging about how British fandom is being destroyed by the monstrous evil of a Worldcon bid. This year's con was already suffering from having been unceremoniously bumped from its chosen locale of Blackpool and had ended up in Hinckley, Leicestershire, a place close enough to Rutland to be describable as the arse end of nowhere. It also had to contend with a predecessor of such legendary mediocrity as to lead some to suspect that Eastercons were now impossible. And yet 2000 had been the best year for British SF since John Brunner won a Hugo for the brilliant *Stand on Zanzibar*. Could the new wave of fiction breath new life into fandom or, to coin a popular phrase from last year's Eastercon programme, is it all too boring? Does

anyone in the UK care about SF conventions any more?

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### **Carbuncle**

In many ways Paragon, the 2001 Eastercon, got off to the worst possible start thanks to its choice of hotel. Hinckley might have been an easy destination in Roman times (it is close to the intersection of the Fosse Way and Watling Street), but it is a pain in the butt by train and for most people involves the ultimate horror of changing at Birmingham New Street. Still, trying to drive on a bank holiday weekend is even worse, and renting cars is expensive, so I put up with the overcrowding and delays and rude, drunk, fellow passengers and got there as best I could; whereupon my eyes popped.

The Hanover International Hotel is an eyesore, an architectural anathema, a piece of ocular excrement of such titanic proportions that you have no choice but to laugh and cry at the same time. Had I encountered this temple to tackiness in America I might have put it down to an excess of traditional cultural barbarity. There are, after all, vast numbers of mock-historical hotels in the US. But I have never seen anything like this. It is as if someone set out to reproduce several Las Vegas hotels on a single, small site and with a minuscule budget. In a word, it is horrible.

The exterior is faux classical, complete with elegant columns and gleaming white statues. There is even a mock Michaelangelo's David on guard outside ready to fend off passing giants with his sling. Reception is similarly styled and centred around a giant figure of Neptune below a rising mirrored roof. The restaurant is in the style of a Mediterranean bistro, and you can perhaps allow that on

the excuse that the classical stuff is also Mediterranean. But then you go inside.

The main bar is faux village pub, which means mock half timbering cut with jolly woodcut scenes of fox hunting and other supposedly quaint rural pastimes. The closest it managed to Real Ale was some supposedly artful brew from Bass, and I was surprised not to see large swathes of British fandom expire from thirst on the spot. Later they got in some bottles of the right stuff (and sold them in large quantities) much to the relief of fandom assembled. It is a Pepsi house too, and Steve Davies and I were very pleased to find the hotel shop (probably in breach of contract) selling cans of Coke.

Pride of place for tackiness, however, goes to the corridors in the conference area. To faux classical and faux mediaeval add faux Dickens. The passages are lined with bowed and small-paned shop windows full of the most incredible collection of tat I have ever seen. Monstrosity spotting soon became a con pastime, with people going round asking, "have you seen the garrotted baby, the sperm balloons, the Marilyn Monroe with a rooster on her head"?

There was a window full of books on Eastern mysticism, one of awful fantasy figurines, one with Charles & Diana wedding memorabilia, and one containing some of the ugliest teddy bears I have ever seen marked, "The Cliff Richard Collection". Why? By Monday night James Steel was running impromptu tat tours to point out the worst excesses to those who had been unable to find them, and Steve Cain was floating the possibility of an "I Spy Book of Tat" competition should we ever return to the hotel.

The ceiling mirrors in reception of course brought to mind *Hotel California*. There was no pink champagne on ice, but many guests were surprised to find that there

were mirrors on their bedroom ceilings too. But before you get too many interesting ideas about the sexual proclivities of the good people of Leicestershire I should point out that the mirrors covered the head of the bed only and thus afforded at best a chaste head and shoulders view. As Steve Davies pointed out, most fans have less than ideal eyesight, so the functionality of the mirrors extended only to providing a morning view of a blurred, pasty oval peering down at you: more Lovecraft than Lovelace, I think.

As I said earlier, why? What on Earth possessed anyone to design a hotel like that? It was hard to escape the conclusion that someone, somewhere, had vastly more money than taste.

On a more practical note, I don't think the hotel was quite big enough for the 750 or so people who were actually there. More to the point, it did not have enough twin rooms. The ConCom tried to fix this by putting sofabeds in some of the larger singles. This is all very well if you get told in advance, but I don't expect to pay the ridiculous rates that British hotels charge and then be required to sleep on a sofabed. It is not on.

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### **Whys and wherefores**

Of course the Paragon committee was far from stupid. They had good reasons for selecting the hotel. To start with there are not many good sites to be had in the UK. Manchester has good food but a split site and awful weather. Liverpool has security problems and the soccer derby. The Radisson Edwardian is a confusing warren and deep in the heart of Heathrow. Glasgow is, well, Glasgow, and no one dares suggest going back to Brighton. Hinckley was worth a try, and it had some advantages.

The function rooms are by and large good, although some poor programme scheduling occasionally resulted in the room usage pattern being wrong. Two of the smaller function rooms are up steep stairs with no disabled access, but we managed. There is also an excellent meeting space. The Rotunda is one of the few tastefully decorated areas of the hotel. It is on three levels around an atrium with seating on each one and is absolutely ideal for paper aeroplane fights. If only the hotel had provided a decent snack bar through most of the day they would have taken a fortune.

Finally the hotel is dealer heaven. It is just off the motorway, has decent parking and no stairs between the front door and the spacious and comfortably rectangular dealers' room. They loved it. Indeed it was so popular that we got all four of the UK's specialist new SF book dealers and a bunch of second hand people as well. As a book reader, I found it the best dealers' room I had seen since World Fantasy Con in Monterey. I bought 27 books, almost all of them at least half price and in very good condition.

I should also add that the hotel staff tried very hard indeed. It was clear from their lack of facility with cash registers that many of them were very temporary employees indeed, drafted in solely for the holiday weekend. But they were always courteous and helpful. When an unannounced fire alarm test went off on Saturday morning the maids in my wing immediately rushed to explain things to people. One or two were a bit clueless, and reportedly one waitress was overheard saying to another, "oh, science fiction, not Christian Science...". However, a special award should go to whichever member of staff put a "my other trolley is an x-wing" sign on her equipment. All of this was in marked contrast to the management who

seemed to have a policy of nickle-and-diming us for everything, including £1 for a towel in the excellent pool/gym (you were not allowed to use your bedroom towel) and charging parking fees to passengers as well as drivers.

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### **Culinary disaster**

The other major disaster of the weekend was food. The hotel had by far the worst food for that class of hotel that I have ever suffered. Possibly this was again in part due to lack of regular staff. Even so, serving spaghetti hoops as one option for the main course in the evening buffet was inexcusable. I got the impression that anything that didn't come out of a can or a microwave was beyond the hotel's ability to master. This was particularly evident at breakfast. How many hotels do you know that serve black pudding rare? I overheard one comment of, "the butter tastes like butter so I'm making the most of it".

This would not have mattered so much had we been able to do the traditional fannish thing of heading off into town to look for some decent restaurants. But we were not in town. We were on a motorway junction a mile or two from the nearest habitation. There was a fish farm across the road that supposedly had a good restaurant, but you had to book way in advance and anyway they were closed Sunday and Monday. There was a pub and a steak house within walking distance, but the other side of the motorway. I managed to find things I could stuff myself with at breakfast, but other than that chocolate bars from the hotel shop were about the best food on offer. People who had come in cars were very popular.

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*"I don't want pre-opposing, I want downright hostile!"* - Alison Scott at the UK2005 bid table

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### **Moral obligation**

These days turning up at a British convention as a representative of a seated Worldcon is a bit like walking into a synagogue with your clothing festooned with swastikas. The hostility was palpable. Even some of the UK2005 folks were nervous about having me around because I used the dreaded "w" word with enthusiasm. Apparently the team spin-doctors have decided that the terms "work" and "Worldcon" are never, ever to be uttered within the same conversation, let alone the same sentence.

That same air of ennui about conrunning extended also to Eastercon itself. Jersey had been chosen as the site for 2002 amidst loud objections that it was too expensive but no willingness to launch a counter-bid. As of the start of Paragon the best bet for any bid at all for 2003 was persuading the Octocon folks to run something in Dublin. Off the mainland is one thing. Out of the country is another entirely. I was wondering how the Scandinavians felt about taking on the task. After all, they seemed to be the only people around with any enthusiasm for doing anything.

Steve Davies attempted to assure me that there was no lack of interest in conrunning, but that everyone preferred to run small simple events with only a hundred people or so. The sort of con that Terry Frost once commented could be run by a committee that met either side of a condom. Running an Eastercon, Steve said, was now viewed as a moral obligation rather than anything that someone might do for fun. In typical fashion Steve put this down to the after effects of the 1995 Worldcon which was

apparently so traumatic that no Brit conrunner now wants to work in a committee larger than the aforementioned Frost model. He also mentioned that British conrunners get bored doing the same thing each year, and that having done a con job once they have no interest in ever doing it again.

My own view of this is that the management model used at Eastercons is not really suitable for conventions of that size, and that until British conrunners get practice with different structures for a 1000 person con they will never be able to scale up effectively to a Worldcon. There are parts of Eastercon that run pretty much on autopilot. The dealers' room (barring the traditional Liverpool burglary) is a good example of this. There is a small group of people who know how to run one, and they can do it with very little effort year after year. Most of the rest of the con, however, is run from on high by Ops. There are no departments, and consequently no development of expertise or passing on of experience to new people. Volunteers are apt to be sent hither and yon by Ops to work an hour or so in each area, and never to get the feeling of being part of a team. You can perhaps put all this down to the traditional inability of the British to do man management, but I think a change of organisational structure would help a lot.

There was a panel at the con on how different fandoms around the world do things differently. We came to the usual and expected conclusion that the differences between a British convention and an American one were fairly small - bar instead of con suite and so on - and were insignificant compared to the differences between a fan run con and a for-profit media con. One thing that did strike me though was when Wombat, one of the panellists, started talking about how

he ran Albacon back home in Albany, New York. Wombat went on at some length about how he wanted to run the greatest little con ever, and how each year it was a challenge to do things better. Most of the Brits in the audience looked blankly at him as if he was crazy. Here, perhaps, there is a genuine cultural difference.

I know that the Australians would get nervous about such views. Many of them would see Wombat as setting himself up as a "tall poppy" who thought he was better than other fans. The Brits, I think, just don't see the point. That's sad, and potentially a serious problem. You won't get good cons unless people see running a good con as a worthwhile achievement. That in turn requires handing out a bit of praise rather than whingeing. I've done quite a bit of whingeing up until now, so let's take a look at how the con went.

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### **The show must go on**

There are some conrunning addictions that are probably incurable, and my love affair with masquerades is one of them. Thankfully Giulia de Cesare was in charge and she leapt at my offer to help out backstage. Actually this wasn't too much sweat. With only 12 acts, and 4 of them very well behaved kids, the green room was not much larger than a typical Worldcon den. I was a little taken aback by the large troupe of drunken Irishmen intent on a Pythonesque skit, but most of the other acts were veterans who knew exactly what they were doing and were a piece of cake to look after. We had precisely two panics: one when tech took up the stage carpet before the show after having promised one group of contestants it would stay down, and the other when Tom Nansen thought he had dropped a glass bauble on stage. Both were coped with, and

at least from backstage the show seemed to go well.

I note, however, that at about 15 minutes to curtain up two people from Ops arrived to take charge. They were very nice lads, and they had some good ideas, but this isn't the way masquerades should be run. As I wasn't ConCom and wasn't Ops I probably shouldn't even have been there, but as I was a friend of Giulia's, had a big mouth and seemed to know what I was doing no one thought to throw me out. It was, from my point of view, and exercise in seat of the pants green room running. Had the show been twice the size it could easily have gone badly wrong.

A note to US and Australian costumers before you go looking on the web site for photos. The tradition in British masquerades is far more towards presentation than costume. Many of the acts made their outfits at the con (Teddy ran a Chaos Costuming room precisely for that purpose). There are some really good costumers in the UK, but their talents do not seem to be widely valued which is a shame.

Having said that, the results of the judging were very strange. The audience got it spot on. M@ (pronounced "Matt", slowcoaches) had them in fits with his 2001 skit ("I'm sure I heard someone say that they needed an Obelix"). The other serious contenders were as follows: Tom Nansen, Andrew Adams and Andrew Patton with some seriously good costumes; Gary and Linda Stratmann plus Nigel Furlong with an acrobatic vampire hunt; and the traditional SMS extravaganza which involved Queen Victoria apparently cyborged into a giant tricycle and Sparks as an anarchist assassin. The obvious thing to do was to give Best Workmanship to Tom's lot, Best Presentation to the vampire hunt and Best in Show to SMS for all round quality even

though it wasn't the best in either Workmanship or Presentation. I could have judged the thing in two minutes. But for some reason our judges gave Best Workmanship to SMS (a chaos costume, for heaven's sake), best Presentation and Best in Show to the vampire hunt, and a special Most Beautiful award to the others. Very strange.

Special mention should also be made of little Karen Furlong who looked perfect as the Peter Davidson Dr. Who. Karen is too young to participate by herself, and was a bit tired and fractious (especially as father Nigel would not let her wear his vampire hunter shades). However, all the act required her to do was run to Mummy (Sabine, cunningly disguised as a Tardis) and that seemed to work pretty well.

All in all it was a good show. I never cease to get a buzz from running masquerades, especially when it goes well and the audience ooh's and ah's.

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### **All this and programme too**

Well yes, there was programme. Quite a bit of it, in fact. The schedule left a little bit to be desired. Personally I always like cons to set aside times when everyone can go for meals. There were also silly things like scheduling the art and book auctions against each other, and scheduling the art auction before the art show closed, at the far end of the hotel, thereby requiring the art to be carried back and fore through the hotel. These are the sort of things that people would not do if they did programming regularly.

Having said that, there was a lot of interesting stuff, and only one programme title containing the word "boring". The fan room programme items were nearly all along the lines of "what is the point of...", but they did seem to be genuinely

constructive rather than excuses for more whingeing. I was on one about electronic fanac, and it wasn't the knocking session that I expected, although Alison Scott did try to perpetrate the myth that *Emerald City* was always intended as a web zine and is only available online. Hopefully she has that right now.

I was amused to note that Arnie Katz, one of the doyens of paper fanzine fandom, has recently discovered that it is much cheaper to distribute your fanzine electronically as a PDF than to print it and post it. It has only taken him five and a half years to catch up with me, and he's apparently sending out 5Mb files to irate now ex-friends, but I guess it is progress.

Also on the programme was lots of stuff about archaeology, green politics, psychology, genetic engineering, martial arts, *Buffy*, land rights in space and even books. There were lots of quiz shows, which I'm not good at but Kevin would have loved. Dave Wake did his play, and managed to avoid breaking any bones. A few items had to be rescheduled - they always do - and one or two items looked like they had been put in the wrong room. Two panels I went to, the one on Dolly the cloned sheep (by Helen Priddle of the Roslin Institute who made Dolly) and the one on archaeology and fantasy writers, were both standing room only. But hey, maybe other rooms were full too, or had tech requirements. The fact that there were panels, and they were full, is a very good sign.

I should also mention that the fan room, run by Greg Pickersgill and Catherine McAuley, was superb. It was packed with fanzines, some of them very old. From somewhere they had found a large amount of Dick Jensen's artwork to display - and it wasn't brought over by GUFF delegates, Jean Webber and Eric Lindsay, they were

just as surprised and delighted to see it as I was. The fan programme was good too. My only complaint is that the fan room programme appeared to have been scheduled entirely independently of the rest of the con. This was unfortunate, and smacked of lack of communication amongst the committee.

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### Award Night

One thing that pleased me very much was the number of authors present. The old guard: Stableford, Newman, Holdstock and so on have pretty much given up coming. Ken MacLeod was at Minicon and Ian Banks appeared to have heard rumours about the lack of good beer. But there were authors everywhere. I met up for the first time with China Miéville, Tom Arden, Justina Robson, Al Reynolds, John Courtney Grimwood, Molly Brown and Mike Scott Rohan. Gwyneth Jones was there too, but I didn't manage to get an introduction. And of course I renewed my acquaintance with the effervescent John Meaney. It was an excellent turnout.

Authors, of course, are interested in awards, and this Eastercon was unusual in that the Richard Evans Award was to be presented. This award, named after a former editor at Gollancz who died a few years ago, does not happen every year because it carries with it a substantial prize (£2000) and it takes time to raise the money. It is also rare to find a worthwhile recipient, because it is intended for unsung heroes of British SF. It was first presented in 1999, when it went to M. John Harrison. British SF writers simply don't come any better than him. This year it went to Gwyneth Jones, who is certainly a worthy recipient. I suppose that getting the award is something of a double-edged sword, because it implies that you have failed to match your sales to your talent, but

hopefully it will bring with it some recognition and commercial success.

The main attention, however, was on the British Science Fiction Association Awards. The BSFA gives prizes for artwork and short fiction as well as for novels. These went to Dominic Harman (*Hideaway, Interzone* #157) and Peter Hamilton (*The Suspect Genome, Interzone* #156) respectively. Like the Hugos, the BSFA's are voted on by fans, including Eastercon members. The Clarke Award is voted on by a committee and will be announced in May. As regular readers will know, I have been predicting that both the BSFA and Clarke awards will be a very close thing between Mary Gentle's *Ash* and China Miéville's *Perdido Street Station*.

Helpfully the con put on a panel in which a number of literary experts (including former Clarke judges) gave their views of which books should win the awards. The panel was split 3-2 in favour of *Perdido*, thanks largely to the fact that Farah Mendleson and Edward James, historians both, objected strongly to the portrayal of their profession in *Ash*. The audience was more strongly for *Perdido*, although a depressingly large number had not read any of the nominated books. There was therefore considerable surprise at the Award Ceremony when Mike Scott Rohan opened the BSFA's envelope and announced *Ash* as the winner.

China, to his credit, took it very well, and was up drinking in the bar with us until gone 1 am when I went to bed. Mary was not present, pleading deadlines, but she's doubtless very pleased. It is a very well deserved award, and I'm delighted to see Mary back in business. China, I am sure, will win other awards. It is possible that the Clarke judges will decide that the two books are so close that in fairness they should opt for China, thus giving each

book one award. On the other hand, Tanya Brown, who knows how such panels work, said that if the judges were heavily split between *Ash* and *Perdido* they might be forced to choose a compromise winner. If they do my money will be on *Cosmonaut Keep* by Ken MacLeod. There is also the possibility that the judges will be struck with a fit of political correctness and give the award to Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Talents*, even though it is an awful book.

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### **Cabal to the rescue**

By Monday evening I was seriously missing my food. I had been taken out to one of the nearby pubs by my Kiwi friends, Peter (the other one) Hamilton and Anne Shepherd (thanks guys!). It was a very pleasant meal in the excellent company of Mike Scott Rohan and his wife, Deborah, but it was pub food nonetheless. There was only one solution to this. To find a really good meal, you have to find a group of highly trained foodies, and that meant I needed the *Plokta* Cabal.

I must say that the guys came up trumps. People, if you are ever stranded in the heart of England in need of a good meal, find your way out to the Bell Inn at Monks Kirby in Warwickshire. It is about 8 miles from Hinckley, and therefore easily reachable from the con. It is run by a Spanish family, and the food is stunningly good. "Give us tapas", we said, "feed us", and so they did. This was not the derisory plates of olives that you get in so-called tapas bars in London, this was the real thing: mountains of it. There were mussels and mushrooms (both in a choice of two sauces); there were chicken and meatballs and calamari and sardines and deep-fried fish and chorizo. There were chili potatoes, fritata, a massive plate of paella and some very nice Rioja. We were royally stuffed, and still greedy enough after a weekend in



the hotel to tuck into dessert. It was a wonderful meal, and worth starving for days beforehand to enjoy.

So, many thanks to the *Plokta* people for saving my stomach and such pleasant company. I should add that, despite Alison's premonitions of doom, Marianne was angelic throughout and Ploktamon (who is the most intelligent-looking baby I have seen in a long time) slept peacefully. It was a wonderful evening, and I only wish I had found that place earlier. It is worth going through all of the horrors of the hotel's architecture and breakfast just to eat food like that.

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### Looking to the future

So, how did it go? The most obvious point to make is that almost everyone I spoke to said that the con was way better than last year. Most of them also added that such an improvement would not have been difficult. But the general impression on Monday night was that, despite the hotel, we had very much enjoyed ourselves. So, is Eastercon on the way back? Will it become less of a moral obligation and more fun in future? I hope so. Next year will inevitably be small because getting to Jersey is expensive. It will also be chocolate heaven if the reports I have heard of the previous Helicon are to be believed. The good news is that sometime during the weekend a bunch of generous souls decided to put together a bid for 2003. They don't have a site yet, but they have a lot of experience.

By that time, of course, the 2005 Worldcon will be a reality. There is no credible opposition so it is pretty much bound to win despite all of the predictions of doom. I would like to think that the right way to prepare for this is to get practice at running larger cons, and to learn to enjoy them again, rather than to stick your head in the

sand and whinge. Unfortunately, because I should be working in the US by then, I'll probably be unable to come over to see what happens. And in view of that I am rather glad that what will probably be my last Eastercon for some time was a good one. So, congratulations to Alice Lawson and her crew for swimming against the tide. And fingers crossed for subsequent years.

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## What You Want

I first heard about print-on-demand publishing at the World Fantasy Con in Monterey in 1998. Kent Brewster did a panel item about this fabulous machine that could take a digital file in at one end and produce a book out of the other. It didn't occupy an entire factory either. This was workable technology, and technology that we might expect to become smaller and cheaper as time went on. It wasn't quite the sort of thing that you expected to have in your living room, but it did hold out the promise of a whole new paradigm of book publishing.

There was a need too. At the time we were just coming to terms with the concept of the Mid List Crisis. With big chains taking a greater and greater share of the book retailing industry, and company accountants taking a very close look at the economics of book selling, willingness to stock works by less well known writers was declining. From an accountant's point of view, the vast majority of a bookshop's sales come from the likes of Jeffrey Archer, J.K. Rowling, and the plague of bonkbusters. Of the books reviewed in this issue, probably only the Tad Williams would pass an accountant's test for being worth stocking. Consequently, mid-list

authors were finding it harder and harder to get book contracts. There was a fear that SF publishing would die out altogether.

Nor is this sense of disaster limited solely to the SF industry. The publishing industry as a whole has been examining its collective navel, wondering where it is going to find itself at the end of the current decade and, of course, publishing books on the subject. The debate even found its way into the pages of *The Economist*, which pitched the doom-laden views of André Schiffrin's *The Business of Books*, against Jason Epstein's upbeat *Book Business: Publishing Past, Present and Future*.

### **The e-book solution**

The most often quoted solution to the problem is e-books. After all, if a book does not need to be printed at all, the cost of producing it will be very low indeed. I took a close look at the e-book almost a year ago in *Emerald City* #59 and concluded that, while e-books were very interesting, they were a pain to read. Things have moved on since then. Most notably last November Random House announced that it would be paying authors 50% royalties on the sale of e-books. *The Economist* also reports on a Japanese consortium called E-Book Japan that has given away 500 e-book readers to regular commuters to test their willingness to buy e-book titles from railway station kiosks.

But of course we have heard this story before. Computer software vendors have been predicting the rise of the paperless office ever since PCs were first invented. We are still waiting. Indeed, the advent of cheap, high-quality printing from computers seems to have had precisely the opposite effect. We are using (and throwing away) far more paper than ever. I am thinking seriously of buying an e-book reader simply because I get a lot of material in PDF format these days and even my

laptop is a pain to read from while travelling or in bed. Print-on-demand, on the other hand, offers the possibility of real books on real paper that you can read anywhere (although having tried to read the new Tad Williams in the bath I would not recommend it). Will it, perhaps, overtake e-books and save the paper book as a concept?

### **The economics of PoD**

A traditional publisher may print 5,000 or more copies of a new book when it is issued. If the book doesn't sell well many of these may be returned, but the economies of scale that you get with a traditional printing press encourage you to print a fair number. Ben Jeapes of Big Engine (<http://www.bigengine.co.uk>), a British print-on-demand publisher, says that above 1,000 copies you can produce books more cheaply using traditional methods. But with fewer than 1,000 copies print-on-demand is the most economic method of production. And with big bookstores becoming less willing to take books that will not sell in multiple thousands PoD may become the only way that genre novels can get to see print.

The Big Engine philosophy is certain founded on this point. Their first book is a reprint of Dave Langford's classic comedy, *The Leaky Establishment*, a book about a nuclear weapons research establishment at Robinson Heath. Jeapes is also planning to reissue Brian Stableford's 1970s space operas, the *Hooded Swan* series. All of these books are currently out of print and their original publishers have waived rights to reissuing them. In addition Big Engine will publish a number of new works, including an early novel by Tom Arden. It isn't every day that the world gets a new SF publisher, and for that reason alone Big Engine should be welcomed.

### **But will they sell?**

Molly Brown, whose short story collection, *Bad Timing & Other Stories*, will be Big Engine's second publication, was very worried when Ben started promoting his company as a print-on-demand outfit. When I spoke to her at Eastercon she explained that she had heard far too many bad rumours about print-on-demand books, and was afraid that the label would reduce sales. For example, Molly had heard people say that PoD books were photocopied, or that the glue used to bind them was so bad that if you left the book in your car on a warm day it would fall apart. Whilst these rumours might once of have been true, they quite clearly are not so now. Big Engine's books are paperbacks, but other than that they appear to be of good quality. But, as Molly says, people don't know that when they decide whether to order, they just know what they have heard.

Problems like that will presumably be resolved in time as people get to see more PoD books and learn to have confidence in them. However, a more difficult problem to shake off may be the association of PoD with vanity publishing. I get self-published e-books offered to me for review on a regular basis now, and most of them are truly awful. But with the advent of PoD you can now self-publish paper books very cheaply. The American print-on-demand company, iUniverse.com, will set up a book for PoD publishing for as little as \$99. All the author has to do is provide the book in electronic form, preferably PDF. There is no editing or quality control; you can be published, just like that.

### **How do you know what is good?**

Here we have a real problem. With the prospect of millions of awful ten-volume fantasy trilogies available in print-on-demand format, how is the good stuff

going to be noticed? It is all very well for Big Engine to publish the likes of Stableford, Arden, Langford and Brown, but who will know if they are any good, and will you be able to buy them? Molly Brown reports that Amazon are now refusing to list any print-on-demand books on their site, regardless of quality, because that is easier than trying to find out which ones are worth stocking. Ben Jeapes retorts, how would they know? Big Engine books have ISBNs, and have full bibliographic data registered with various industry lists. A bookshop going through catalogues of books in print would have no idea if a book were PoD or not. But then iUniverse also promises authors ISBNs. What is to stop them getting their stuff in catalogues too? Either the booksellers will be overwhelmed, or they will learn to recognise publisher names and only deal with those that they trust.

### **The future?**

All of which does not bode well for rescuing SF. It is all very well for companies like Big Engine to publish out of print books and works by new authors, but if people don't buy the books the company won't last long. In the long run, I suspect, the future of the genre is going to be down to us, the readers. We are going to have to watch the industry much more closely, and remember to tell each other when we find good new stuff. Publishing will get easier, but finding the good stuff amongst the flood of published material will get harder.

I guess this means more work for me. Having set myself up as a recommender of good SF, I'm going to have to seek out companies like Big Engine and let you folks know what their stuff is like. I'm not sure that I am looking forward to that, because I have enough trouble keeping up with traditional publishers, but there are other sites out there, and I'm sure that you folks

can help. In the meantime, I have ordered the Stableford and Arden books from Big Engine. They are due out in June and July respectively. I'll let you know more when they arrive.

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## Final Release

Exhaustion.

Well, that's not really fair, because it implies that slogging your way through another 1000 pages of Tad Williams' epic fantasy, *Otherland*, is somehow hard work. Well it is, but only because I didn't get much sleep last night because I couldn't put the book down.

Exhaustion too because even though I knew darn well that the book would have a fairly happy ending I have still been put through the wringer along with the characters. Tad had managed to simplify the multiple plot lines down to half a dozen major viewpoints. But bringing that all together and resolving all of the situations he had set up in the previous three volumes took a lot of work, and a lot of pain and heartache for the characters.

The feeling of exhaustion also comes from having cried my way through the last five chapters or so. I'm not sure if it was because I was happy, because I was relieved, or because I felt I was in the presence of something very beautiful. Whatever, Tad knows how to do endings. The book is epic fantasy and therefore much of what happens is predictable and a touch trite, but there were also plenty of surprises along the way.

So what can I say about this book? Firstly, if you include the three previous volumes, it is about 4000 pages long. Tad has always

maintained that the story is one single, very long novel, so I will continue to think of *Otherland* as the novel and the four individual volumes as components of it. If you are interested you can go back and read my reviews of the earlier three volumes. They are in issues #17, #35 and #49.

Alternatively, of course, I could summarise things for you. After all, *Sea of Silver Light* contains some 20+ pages of synopsis of the previous volumes: very useful for bringing you up to date after two years waiting. How can I not do the same? Here goes.

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Otherland is a gigantic and fabulously detailed virtual reality world. It has been created by a consortium of some of the world's richest businessmen, The Grail Brotherhood. These charming fellows seek nothing less than godhood. They are very old, and wish to preserve their lives by transferring their consciousness into a virtual world in which, by virtue of their control over the system, they will rule as gods.

Although the Grail project is being conducted in utmost secrecy, word of Otherland begins to seep out. An alliance of religious groups known as The Circle campaigns in secret against it. A mysterious and aged hacker known only as Mr. Sellars (who happens to look rather like Dr. Strangelove) is recruiting agents to investigate the system for him. Worst of all, however, children all over the world have begun to fall into mysterious comas whilst online. It appears that they are somehow unable to disconnect from the Net. Some of those investigating the mystery believe that the lost children are somehow trapped inside Otherland.

The story revolves around Sellars' agents, some of whom become trapped in

Otherland itself, and others who are on the outside desperately trying to fathom the mystery and get their friends back. Along the way, the bad guys come to bad ends, and the heroes encounter an enemy of mythic proportions whose evil far outstrips the simple greed and arrogance of the Brotherhood. In the end they find themselves quite literally fighting to save the world. That the world they are defending is a dying virtual simulation in which they, and the missing children, are trapped, makes their plight no less dire. For the people of Otherland, constructs and humans alike, quite literally, the stars are going out, and for once no one can say that it this is scientific nonsense.

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I said earlier that the *Otherland* series is epic fantasy. Despite the obvious cyberpunk trappings I stand by that. The books use the mechanisms of virtual reality, but they have many of the tropes of fantasy and few of those of SF. As I said in a previous review, there is no obsession with technology, drugs, or violence for its own sake as you would find in true cyberpunk. There is, however, a lot of emphasis on heroism, and the plot structure is mythic rather than logical.

Earlier reviews have also talked a lot about how the story makes comment on the nature of reality and I have postulated that this will become a central theme of the book. I was, of course, thinking SF at the time. In fact, although this is an issue that Tad continues to invite us to think about, it is not central to the story. Possibly Tad just ran out of room. There was too much story, and not enough space for philosophy. But I suspect that he always intended the series to be character-driven from the start.

So yes, once things have died down, the heroes have to consider the future of the beings that live within the incredibly

detailed simulation. But the climax of the book is about Otherland itself. It is about the mad dreams of Felix Jongleur, the head of the Brotherhood, about the savage brutality of Johnny Wulgaru. It is about an entire world full of lost children. And it is about a little boy called Daniel who deserved a far better life than the one he got.

One of these days critics will look back on *Otherland* and describe it as the book that Tad wrote when he became a father. One day also, Connor and Devon, his sons, will read it for themselves and say something like, "Jeez Dad, you have some real sicko ideas". But mainly it will be read by people who have children themselves and recognise the awful dilemma of having to raise and care for the little lunatics while simultaneously accepting that they are independent beings whom you can never truly understand, and never mould to your desires.

I have said many times in the past that I don't nominate part-works for the Hugo because how can you give an award to a story that plainly isn't finished? Equally I cannot nominate *Otherland* because its publication was spread over many years. I can, however, nominate *Sea of Silver Light*, because it does have an ending. It even contains within it a synopsis of all that has gone before.

It strikes me as a little ironic that the first time I'm putting Tad on my Hugo list it will be for a year in which he is fronting up the award ceremony, and that is to a large extent my fault. But so it goes; we'll manage somehow. He's not on the Hugo Administration committee, so he is eligible.

So there it is, a wonderful book (all 4000 pages of it), and a story I think will remain with me for a long time. It will be hard to find characters who are as heroic as Orlando Gardiner, as tragic as Olga

Pirofsky, as despicable as Kaylene Soresen or as evil as Johnny Wulgaru. My first Hugo recommendation of the year. Yes, it is huge, but it is an epic and you can't tell them any other way. Thank you, Tad.

*Sea of Silver Light* - Tad Williams - Orbit - hardcover

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## Right on Track

*"Caution humans. This is ROTECH Real-systems Repair Monitor eleven thirty-eight. You are in peril. There has been a reality dysfunction in this sector. You are advised to leave forthwith."*

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Leave? Leave! Not a chance. Fasten your safety-belts, dear reader, and gape in astonishment as Ian McDonald cranks up the fusion motor and eases the Ares Express out across the red Martian sands. Sure reality has slipped a bit, but you have merely entered the familiar realm of story. All you need now is a bit of rock 'n' roll.

There was a panel at Eastercon on what makes a good space opera. I maintained, without any intention of punning, that one absolute essential is a good soundtrack. *Revelation Space*, you will remember, rang with the sound of King Crimson, although Al Reynolds tells me that there are a lot of other rock references in there too. *Ares Express* contains a bunch of bad guys known as the Church of the Ever-Circling Spiritual Family, which suggests to me that David Bowie's *Diamond Dogs* cannot have been too far from McDonald's mind when he wrote it. Besides, this is a sort of sequel to *Desolation Road*, a book that included a substantial, if incognito, walk-on part for Jim Steinman. And it is a book about fusion

powered steam trains: you don't get metal much heavier than that.

It is, of course, stretching things a bit to pin the tag of space opera on a book that barely gets off the ground save for an occasional jaunt (with passing nod of appreciation to Sean McMullen) in a pedal-powered aerial cathedral. But the book is set on the Mars of *Desolation Road*, and that means a world orbited by a glittering ring of celestial guardians of unimaginable processing power. Philip Pullman isn't the only writer who can conceive of a war against the angels, and McDonald isn't afraid to pull out all the stops. Eat your heart out, Wagner.

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*The AI wars began. Fleets of light-sail battle-yachts swept down out of the sun; suicide crews of grim-eyed teenagers readied their brain-bombs and logic lasers and fingered their rosaries. Most knew they would never make it back to this reality. The angels, which had already begun to rank themselves into orders and sub-orders according to processing power, met them with point defence lasers and tight-focus reality warps that dropped ships and crews into a far distant, prematurely nova-ed sun. [...] The lads loved it, though it ate them like sugar.*

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Well, boys do tend to be like that, but that was in the distant past, and only background to our story. Enter Sweetness Octave Glorious Honey-Bun Asiim Engineer 12<sup>th</sup>, the star of the show. She is the rebel rebel daughter of the chief engineer of the Bethlehem Ares Railroad's Class 22 Heavy Fusion Hauler, *Catherine of Tharsis*, a gutsy girl in a world where women do not drive trains. Instead they get married off in exchange for a sack full of dollars and the not inconsiderable status of a Stuard husband who has his very own Stainless Steel Kitchen. Unless, of course,

said female happens to become part of a story. Unless she happens to be a Feisty and Resourceful (But Cute With It) Heroine destined to save the world from Devastation Harx and his band of mindlessly loyal acolytes.

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*What is it about young people today, she thought as the purple-clad faithful rushed beneath her, that fun and dancing and drinking and sex aren't enough for them? Why do they want to be going and joining religions and dressing up all the same and getting dreadful dreadful haircuts?*

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And if you think that by this point things are getting a little silly, and that fusion powered steam locomotives and pedal-powered aerial cathedrals are a bit beyond the pale, hang in there. You ain't seen nothing yet. Did I forget to mention the group of anarchist secret agents dedicated to maintaining Mars's lack of government by means of elaborate practical jokes? The end of the world show starts here. It is wild, and it is irreverent, and it thumbs its nose at all suggestion of coherent plot development save that required by the Gods of Narrative and the imperative of a rollicking good story. This, dear reader, is what opera is all about.

There are few books without fault, and I suspect that the magnificent over-reliance on convenient plot devices of this one will irritate some people. Nor does it have the scientific coherence of *Revelation Space* to appease the world-builder instinct amongst readers. Also in places the book suffers from McDonald's obsession with the idea that all evil doers must, by definition, be addicted to lewd and filthy sexual perversions (i.e. anything other than heterosexual and missionary position). But the book is nowhere near as offensive in that regard as *Sacrifice of Fools*, and the fact

that it is hugely entertaining would cover up far more flaws than it actually has. *Ares Express*, I submit, is McDonald's best book since *Desolation Road*. Stick on those headphones, turn up the volume, and get reading.

*Ares Express* - Ian McDonald - Earthlight - hardcover

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## Tales of Woe

The latest instalment in Brian Stableford's Third Millennium series is now available in the USA. It is called *The Cassandra Complex*, and I think it is the best yet. While *The Fountains of Youth* may have included rather more intellectual debate, its far-future, Utopian vision is necessarily much removed from every day concerns. *The Cassandra Complex*, on the other hand, is set in the very near future and deals with issues that are very relevant now.

Ostensibly the book is a police thriller about the kidnap of a famous genetic scientist, Morgan Miller. The heroine of the book, Lisa Frieman, is a police forensic scientist who, in her university days, was Miller's research assistant and lover. However, as those of you who have read my interview with Brian in *Strange Horizons* will know, plots are simply a convenient excuse on which Brian seeks to hang his philosophical debate. The real story of the book is a variation on a theme by Malthus.

Population growth is an issue that affects most countries in the world today. I note from the newspapers that I get over the Internet that the Australian government is considering offering women a bounty to bear children. This is presumably in the hope that this would result in more white

children, whereas letting in more immigrants would result in the population decline being reversed by adding people that John Howard would not want to shake hands with. The UK, on the other hand, has a booming population and space is at a premium. House prices are ridiculous. The same is true of the Bay Area, despite the dot.com collapse.

What interests biologists about this is the question of how populations respond to massive overcrowding. Some species - rats for example - become extremely violent, doing everything that they can to secure living space and access to food. Mice, on the other hand, tend to adapt, becoming more meek and tolerant of their neighbours. Which path, we must ask ourselves, will humans follow?

The issue is further complicated by the fact that humans are living longer than ever before. Stableford's heroine is 61, still fit and sprightly and fighting hard against attempts to force her to retire from her job. Meanwhile medical science continues to advance, with the prospect in sight that we may one day manage to find a cure for ageing.

This then, is the subject of Brian's discourse. Genetic science may help us work out how mice adapt to overcrowding but rats don't. It may also help us to become emortal (that is, infinitely long lived, as opposed to immortal which means unable to die). Those like Morgan Miller who are at the forefront of such research may be able to tell us whether or not their work will benefit mankind. But, just like the famous Trojan princess after whom the book is named, any words of warning they give are unlikely to be heeded. Mankind will continue to pursue the dream of emortality regardless of the consequences.

The Cassandra Complex (the phenomenon, not the book) is something that we should

all be familiar with. We probably all know someone who is convinced that the world is going to Hell in a hand basket, and that we have never had it so bad. Many of these people are impervious to rational argument and are convinced that this is all the fault of Satan, Big Business, the New World Order, electronic fanzines or whoever their favourite bogeyman is. Many of them, however, are prominent scientists, and it is not necessarily true that they are doing it to get on television or to increase their research budgets. Some of them might be right.

And suppose someone like Morgan Miller makes a discovery of world-shattering importance. Suppose he reaches a conclusion that, if it became widely known, could set the human race at war with itself. Might that perhaps be the reason that he has been kidnapped? Could that also explain why the kidnappers all appear to be female, and why someone spray-painted the word "traitor" on Lisa Frieman's apartment door?

I worry a little when Brian starts writing about feminism. He has these occasional lapses into chauvinism. This time, however, I think only the most extreme feminists could be offended. It is, after all, the extreme end of the movement that he has chosen to caricature. And even then some of them are painted in a good light. I think I would like the character Arachne West, even though she would probably thoroughly disapprove of me.

Of course if you are an animal liberationist you are going to hate this book. But then you probably hate everything else that Brian has written as well, and he probably doesn't have a very high opinion of you. Books on bio-science and animal liberation do not go together.

For the rest of us, however, *The Cassandra Complex* is a fast-paced thriller with a



decent mystery and a lot of interesting asides about the human condition. It is high quality science fiction, written by someone who knows the scientific issues well, and thoroughly relevant to today's world. It continues to amaze me that Brian was unable to find a UK publisher for these books. Perhaps they were all afraid of being mail-bombed. David Hartwell - if you are reading this - keep up the good work. This is what science fiction is all about, and you and Tor should be proud to be publishing such work.

*The Cassandra Complex* - Brian Stableford - Tor - hardcover

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## Ship of Fools

Kathleen Ann Goonan's sequel to *Queen City Jazz* is quite possibly too complex and ambitious for its own good. Certainly to understand *Mississippi Blues* properly you need to be very well versed in American culture in general, and the life and works of Mark Twain in particular. I suspect that it also helps if you are not actually an American, because that gives you a perspective that will allow you to step back and see where Goonan starts drowning in her own cultural obsessions. I don't think I really fit the bill. I haven't read *Huckleberry Finn* or *Tom Sawyer* since school, and at the time they were presented solely as adventure stories to get the boys reading. But I promised you all that I would review this book, so I'm going to give it a try.

At the end of *Queen City Jazz* Verity has liberated the citizens of Cincinnati from the repeating nanotech program that has been loaded into their minds, but she has not quite returned their free will. The only way

that she could break their programming was to infect them all with the New Orleans Plague, the most virulent nanovirus known. For the most part the Plague leaves minds and bodies free, but it invests its victim with a burning desire to travel down river to New Orleans and freedom. Verity builds them a couple of nanotech paddle-steamers. The Plaguers copy Huck and build a bunch of rafts. Between these two efforts, the people of Cincinnati get on their way.

For the benefit of those of you who haven't read *Huckleberry Finn* (or who can't remember the story), it tells of the journey down the Mississippi of Huck, a rebellious white boy who hasn't yet learned to question his society's racism, and Jim, an escaped slave. During the journey, Huck learns a lot about humanity, and Jim, despite the professed help of his supposed white friends, ends up back in slavery. The memetic imagery of the New Orleans Plague draws heavily on the book in a variety of ways, and the novel layers the process.

To this heady mix Goonan adds The Blues. No silly, not the Auckland rugby team, the music. Cincinnati's theme music was jazz, symbolic of the vast creative complexity of the nanotech flower city. The Mississippi, on the other hand, flows through the dark history of man's inhumanity to man, a tale that is given voice in the tragic folk songs that have made Memphis their home.

Goonan gets thoroughly carried away here, both in her wallowing in guilt over the actions of her forebears and in her clumsy allegory about big business trying to steal the music from Memphis. Her heart is in the right place, but her mind is elsewhere entirely and she allows it to overrule her good judgement as a writer. This is a shame, because she is trying to do good, but it is hard to convince people of the

rightness of your cause through self-flagellation.

The strength of the message also seems to get in the way of the plot at times. There is a definite air of characters behaving in a certain way because they need to rather than for any reasons of their own. Verity's boyfriend, Blaize, goes wandering off twice simply to pick up plot tokens, and I was endlessly irritated by the inept mysteriousness of the new characters, Jack and Lil. If they really didn't want to tell Verity who they were the least they could have done was spin a story; and if I were Verity I would have been much less patient with them.

For all its faults, however, *Mississippi Blues* is a powerful book. It is a book that dives straight into the corrupt heart of the American Dream and asks questions that many Americans probably don't want asked. In particular it poses the most difficult question of all: what will become of us if, after all that travel and hardship, we find that New Orleans isn't there after all? What if there is no Oz at the end of the rainbow? Or, as Sean Stewart said in another book, what if it really doesn't get any better than this? I'll have to leave you to read the book to answer that one; and that is at least in part because I now need to read *Crescent City Rhapsody*.

*Mississippi Blues* - Kathleen Ann Goonan - Tor - softcover

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## River of Life

When I expressed myself somewhat unimpressed by Nicola Griffith's first novel, *Ammonite* (Emcit #62) several people immediately wrote to me suggesting that I try her second book, *Slow River*. Having

now followed their advice I have to say that it was spot on. Nicola Griffith can write.

As SF goes, *Slow River* is a rather strange offering. On the one hand I am tempted to say that it is not really SF at all: the near future setting isn't really necessary to the plot and the focus of the story is very much on characters. The book is, in effect, a death-and-rebirth story in which a rich girl with little knowledge of the world falls on hard times, gets herself together, and learns to become a decent human being. That's the sort of thing you expect from mainstream fiction.

On the other hand, you could also claim that the book is hard SF. Much of the action is set in a bioremediation plant (that is a sewage processing factory that uses bacteria to clean up the water). The amount of detail that Griffith provides on how the process works, and the awful things that can go wrong, is impressive. She doesn't just talk about bugs and chemicals and spills and firestorms, she goes into detail about precisely what sort of bugs, chemicals and reactions are involved. It is not the sort of hard SF we are normally used to, but it has the same degree of rigour.

You might think that such a mixture would be unworkable. Detail about chemical reactions alongside a character-driven story: surely not? But actually Griffith handles it remarkably well. When she gets to the point where she has to talk science she always finds some means of building it seamlessly into the story. You never get the feeling of being in the middle of an exposition section. A lot of hard SF writers should read this book and learn.

The main thrust of the book, however, is the character angle. Lore van der Oest is the youngest daughter of a family grown rich on the bioremediation businesses. We find

her at the start of the book escaping from kidnappers. Despite being starving, naked and badly injured she is apparently afraid to return to her family. Shortly thereafter we find her, later in her own life, on the road to recovery and about to start her first job. These two timelines are interwoven with a third depicting incidents from Lore's life before the kidnap. It is a complex structure, but Griffith handles it well, illustrating both the corruption of Lore's family life and the depths to which she has to sink in order to survive. The point, I think, is to compare and contrast the "civilised" immorality of the van der Oests with the street life to which Lore has to adapt. Both environments are shown as needing to be rejected in favour of honesty in both work and relationships.

If I have a problem with this book it is in the ending. Griffith still has a tendency for naïve and romantic views of the world. *Slow River* is nowhere near as immature as *Ammonite*, but the last few chapters still left me with a feeling of, "I don't believe that, it will all end in tears". I guess that some readers may be put off by the unpleasantness of the story (which includes child abuse and prostitution) but I was very impressed by the way in which Griffith handled such emotive subjects. There's lots of enthusiastic lesbian sex too, but hopefully none of you would be put off by that.

So, there you go, great book, and it is a Nebula winner as well so I'm not the only one who thinks so. (It won in 1996, beating *The Diamond Age* amongst others.) Griffith has written two SF novels. One won a Tiptree and the other a Nebula. What a shame she hasn't written more.

One small quibble to finish with. Nicola does introduce a little SF social speculation when commenting on how the old have difficulty adapting to the fast pace of

modern, electronic life. I was a little shocked to discover that she counts me amongst the generation who are too old to cope with computers. Now let me tell you, young lady...

*Slow River* - Nicola Griffith - Del Rey - softcover

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## Divine Tails

Sequel time again folks. When last we left them, Tag and Ragnar had successfully protected Pertelot from the evil Alchemist and her children had been born in safety. However, there were three kids, and no one was quite sure which, if any, was the supposed saviour. Furthermore, though Majicou and the Alchemist had been seen to vanish, locked in a death grip, no one was quite sure whether they were dead. It is all set up, isn't it?

So in book two we see Tag struggling to come to terms with the burden of the mantle of chief wizard after Majicou's disappearance. We see the heartbroken Delta Queen return home to New Orleans after her lover's death only to find her hometown sadly changed and voodoo in the air. And, of course, the kids start to vanish, and Tag must find them.

The second book in the series is a little more on the mythic fantasy side, as one might expect with two of the kids called Odin and Isis. It also ventures further afield, adding Pertelot's ancestral Egypt to the travelogue. But mainly it is once again about characters, about strength in adversity, and about man's inhumanity to felines, which is the point at which the book has to be about cats rather than just another fantasy novel.

It is interesting to compare this book with the Brian Stableford novel reviewed elsewhere in this issue. Brian rails against animal liberationists who attempt to prevent biologists from doing any work. Gabriel King, on the other hand, complains about scientists keeping cats in cages so small that they hardly have space to move and cutting out parts of their brains just to see what happens. King, of course, presents his cats with all the intelligence and feelings of human beings, which I'm sure Stableford will regard as cheating. On the other hand, there are scientists who treat human experimental subjects badly enough, without worrying about what they do to animals. This isn't a debate that can have a clear-cut winner, and I suspect that neither author is much inclined to see the other's point of view. This is especially so because Stableford's argument is entirely logical whereas King's is entirely emotional. The rest of us should doubtless watch this impossible collision of views and try to learn from it.

But to get back to the book, *The Golden Cat* is the second in Gabriel King's cat series. It is pretty much everything that you would expect from a talking animal book: sentimental, anthropomorphic and disparaging of mankind. It also tends towards a Tepperesque desire for some form of divine intervention to fix up the world. But it is also Gabriel King, which means stunningly good writing, powerful characters (even if they are cats) and a driving plot. It is a must for cat lovers everywhere, a valuable lesson to all budding fantasy writers, and doubtless a crashing bore to all you dog-people out there.

Mrraoww...?

*The Golden Cat* - Gabriel King - Arrow - softcover

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## Here Come the Hugos

The nominations for the 2001 Hugo Awards, and the 1951 Retro Hugos, are now available. Here they are.

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### 2001 Hugo Awards

**Best Novel:** *A Storm of Swords* by George R.R. Martin; *Calculating God* by Robert J. Sawyer; *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* by J.K. Rowling; *Midnight Robber* by Nalo Hopkinson; *The Sky Road* by Ken MacLeod.

**Best Novella:** *A Roll of the Dice* by Catherine Asaro (*Analog* Jul/Aug 2000); *Oracle* by Greg Egan (*Asimov's* Jul 2000); *Radiant Green Star* by Lucius Shepard (*Asimov's* Aug 2000); *Seventy-Two Letters* by Ted Chiang (*Vanishing Acts: A Science Fiction Anthology*, Tor Jul 2000); *The Retrieval Artist* by Kristine Kathryn Rusch (*Analog* Jun 2000); *The Ultimate Earth* by Jack Williamson (*Analog* Dec 2000).

**Best Novelette:** *Agape Among the Robots* by Allen Steele (*Analog* May 2000; *Imagination Fully Dilated*, Vol. 2, IFD Publishing May 2000); *Generation Gap* by Stanley Schmidt (*Artemis Spring 2000*); *Millennium Babies* by Kristine Kathryn Rusch (*Asimov's* Jan 2000); *On the Orion Line* by Stephen Baxter (*Asimov's* Oct/Nov 2000); *Redchapel* by Mike Resnick (*Asimov's* Dec 2000).

**Best Short Story:** *Different Kinds of Darkness* by David Langford (*F&SF* Jan 2000); *Kaddish for the Last Survivor* by Michael A. Burstein (*Analog* Nov 2000); *Moon Dogs* by Michael Swanwick (*Moon Dogs*, NESFA Press Feb 2000; *Asimov's* Mar 2000); *The Elephants on Neptune* by Mike Resnick (*Asimov's* May 2000); *The Gravity Mine* by Stephen Baxter (*Asimov's* Apr 2000).

**Best Related Book:** *Concordance to Cordwainer Smith, Third Edition* by Anthony R. Lewis; *Greetings from Earth: The Art of Bob Eggleton* by Bob Eggleton and Nigel Suckling; *Putting It Together: Turning Sow's Ear Drafts Into Silk Purse Stories* by Mike Resnick; *Robert A. Heinlein: A Reader's Companion* by James Gifford; *Terry Pratchett: Guilty of Literature* ed. by Andrew M. Butler, Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn.

**Best Dramatic Presentation:** *Chicken Run*, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, *Frank Herbert's Dune*, *Frequency*, *X-Men*.

**Best Professional Editor:** Ellen Datlow; Gardner Dozois; David G. Hartwell; Stanley Schmidt; Gordon Van Gelder.

**Best Professional Artist:** Jim Burns; Bob Eggleton; Frank Kelly Freas; Donato Giancola; Michael Whelan

**Best Semiprozine:** *Interzone*, *Locus*, *New York Review of Science Fiction*, *Science Fiction Chronicle*, *Speculations*.

**Best Fanzine:** *Challenger*, *File 770*, *Mimosa*, *Plokta*, *Stet*.

**Best Fan Writer:** Bob Devney; Mike Glycer; Dave Langford; Evelyn C. Leeper; Steven H Silver.

**Best Fan Artist:** Sheryl Birkhead; Brad Foster; Teddy Harvia; Sue Mason; Taral Wayne.

**John W. Campbell Award:** James L. Cambias; Thomas Harlan; Douglas Smith; Kristine Smith; Jo Walton.

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### 1951 Retro Hugo Awards

**Best Novel:** *The Dying Earth* by Jack Vance; *Farmer in the Sky* by Robert A. Heinlein; *First Lensman* by Edward E. Smith, Ph.D.; *Pebble in the Sky* by Isaac Asimov; *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* by C.S. Lewis.

**Best Novella:** *...And Now You Don't* by Isaac Asimov (*Astounding Science Fiction* Nov 1949 - Jan 1950); *The Dreaming Jewels* by Theodore Sturgeon (*Fantastic Adventures* Feb 1950); *The Last Enemy* by H Beam Piper (*Astounding Science Fiction* Aug 1950); *The Man Who Sold the Moon* by Robert A. Heinlein (*The Man Who Sold the Moon*, Shasta Publishers); *To the Stars* by L. Ron Hubbard (*Astounding Science Fiction* Feb-Mar 1950).

**Best Novelette:** *Dear Devil* by Eric Frank Russell (*Other Worlds* May 1950); *Okie* by James Blish (*Astounding Science Fiction* Apr 1950); *Scanners Live in Vain* by Cordwainer Smith (*Fantasy Book #6*); *The Helping Hand* by Poul Anderson (*Astounding Science Fiction* May 1950); *The Little Black Bag* by C.M. Kornbluth (*Astounding Science Fiction* Jul 1950).

**Best Short Story:** *A Subway Named Mobius* by A.J. Deutsch (*Astounding Science Fiction* Dec 1950); *Born of Man and Woman* by Richard Matheson (*F&SF* Summer 1950); *Coming Attractions* by Fritz Leiber (*Galaxy* Nov 1950); *The Gnurrs Come from the VoodVork Out* by Richard Bretnor (*F&SF* Winter-Spring 1950); *To Serve Man* by Damon Knight (*Galaxy* Nov 1950).

**Best Related Book:** insufficient nominations.

**Best Dramatic Presentation:** *Cinderella*; *Destination Moon*; *Harvey*; *Rabbit of Seville*; *Rocketship X-M*.

**Best Professional Editor:** Anthony Boucher; John W. Campbell, Jr.; Groff Conklin; H.L. Gold; J. Francis McComas.

**Best Professional Artist:** Hannes Bok; Chesley Bonestell; Edd Cartier; Virgil Finlay; Frank Kelly Freas.

**Best Semiprozine:** insufficient nominations

**Best Fanzine:** *Quandry*; *Science Fiction Newsletter*; *Skyhook*; *Slant*; *Spacewarp*; *The Fanscient*.

**Best Fan Writer:** Lee Hoffman; Bob Silverberg; Robert "Bob" Wilson Tucker; James White; Walt Willis.

**Best Fan Artist:** Jack Gaughan; Lee Hoffman; Ray Nelson; Bill Rotsler; James White

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### Commentary

Firstly I must say how delighted I am to see Nalo Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber* in the Best Novel list. The category is really open this year. George Martin's book is great, but it is a fantasy and part of an ongoing series, both of which will count against it. Harry Potter you either love or hate. It is also worth noting that George is the only American in the Best Novel list.

*The Sky Road* got in on the back of the extended eligibility rule that we introduced as a test last year to try to help novels published outside the US. Obviously the rule worked. *The Sky Road* was published in the USA in 2000 and, thanks to the eligibility extension, made the ballot. If we can get the same sort of rule passed next year things should look good for *Perdido Street Station*, *Revelation Space* and *Cosmonaut Keep*.

Other nominations I am very pleased about include the Pratchett book, Jo Walton and Sue Mason. It is also the first time in recorded history (well, almost) that *Ansible* has failed to make the ballot for Best Fanzine. However, Dave Langford has got a nomination for a short story so Martin Hoare may still have two rockets to carry home. Of course in the short story category Dave is up against Michael Swanwick who is going for a hat trick of Hugos. Hmm.

Anyway, that's quite enough from me. The nominations will also be posted on the Awards section of the *Emerald City* web site. I'm hoping that Alexandria Digital Literature will once again publish many of the short fiction nominees in electronic format. I'll let you know if I hear anything.

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### Miscellany

As many of you will know, Neil Gaiman's new novel, *American Gods*, is due out very shortly. I happen to have had a copy for some time, but I promised Neil that I would not talk about it until it was more widely available. Sadly not all of the people who got hold of advance copies have the same scruples, and one bright spark has already auctioned a proof copy on eBay. Personally I don't see a lot of point in doing a full review until the book is due out. After all, you may forget about it while you are waiting. The book is due out in June, so I'll be doing my review in the next issue. In the meantime, however, here is a brief teaser.

The basic concept of *American Gods* is that European Settlers in America will have brought their Gods with them. They may not openly believe in them any more, but you can't shake off such concepts that easily. Nor will those pagan Gods be happy at being ignored. Some of them will want to do something about it. If I tell you that the hero of the book encounters a mysterious Mr. Wednesday early on in the story you should have some inkling of likely events.

I suspect that *American Gods* will upset people who bought *Stardust* just as much as *Stardust* upset people who had been fans of *Sandman*. Neil, thankfully, doesn't have to

produce "what the readers want"; he can write what he wants. If that means a very different style of book each time, so be it. Hopefully most of you guys will be receptive to a good book regardless of whether the atmosphere is light or dark. Just how dark *American Gods* gets I have yet to find out. Watch this space.

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My travelogue this month on IgoUGo.com is all about San José. I confess to having a dual purpose for this. As webmistress for ConJosé I have to be able to tell people a lot about tourist attractions, restaurants and so on in the San José area. Given that I have to do the job anyway, why not make a travelogue out of it as well? Once I get back there Kevin and I will investigate a few more restaurants, and you can expect this journal to grow over time. So, if you are coming to ConJosé, or even just considering it, check out the con web site (<http://www.conjose.org/>), and check out my journals on IgoUGo (<http://www.igougo.com/>). I think you will be pleasantly surprised by what San José has to offer.

Next month there will probably be some further musing on the architectural horrors of the Hanover International Hotel at Hinckley.

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*Emerald City's* subscription list continues to grow steadily, which makes me very happy. Most of the time this growth is very slow, but just before Easter I got 11 new subscriptions in within a week. This suggests to me that someone out there was very kind to me and gave me some good PR, but I have no idea who. If you are one of those people, please let me know how you heard about *Emerald City* so that I can give the appropriate thanks.

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While I was at Eastercon I did interviews with Tom Arden and China Miéville, both of whom are very nice guys and great fun to talk to. These interviews won't appear in *Emerald City*. The one with Tom is destined for Wavelengths (<http://www.wavelengthsonline.com/>), and the one with China is going to Strange Horizons (<http://www.strangehorizons.com/>). They should both go up sometime in May, but I'm not sure exactly when. Keep your eyes peeled.

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## Footnote

For the benefit of all those of you who have been kind enough to ask I have no idea when I am starting my new job. The American immigration service takes quite a while to process visa applications, and you can't hurry them. When I know something I'll let you know too.

Next issue, the promised *American Gods* review, plus new novels from Eugene Byrne and master critic, John Clute. Novels are also due out soon from Al Reynolds and Gwyneth Jones, though I may not get them in time for next issue.

And that, I think, is another issue done.

Ciao,

Love 'n' hugs,

Cheryl