

EMERALD CITY #69

Issue 69

May 2001

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Introduction

Ahem. Apology time, folks. Last issue I promised you a review of the new Neil Gaiman novel. I had planned to read it while I was away on a business trip last week. But I forgot to take it with me. More precisely, I accidentally deleted it from my laptop when getting ready to go. I should have read it earlier, but I only have the novel in eBook form and I really dislike reading books on a computer, so I had kept putting it off. Sorry folks. Fortunately there is, I think, lots of good stuff in this issue.

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At the Clarke Award

Thanks to a convenient business trip I happened to be near London around the time that the Arthur C. Clarke Award was due to be presented. Never one to refuse free wine, nor indeed an opportunity to visit the wonderful London Science Museum, I trotted along to see what went down.

In order to make the event something more than just speeches and boozing, Pat Cadigan had organised a day of events at the Science Museum prior to the actual award presentation. The best part of this was that it was open to everyone. Any SF fan could turn up and mingle with Britain's

SF gliterati. The downside was that you had to pay for entry to the Science Museum to get into the programme. Of course you also got free run of the Museum, so in fact the marginal cost of the entertainment was zero.

The programme that Pat had sketched out involved a series of readings by the nominated authors punctuated by panel discussions. Pretty much like a convention, in fact. The Science Museum had provided a curtained off area for the programme. It was rather too small for the crowd that turned up, but the sound baffles that had been used to create it were seriously impressive. Al Reynolds, who was standing just outside the area, said he could not hear much of the discussion, but inside the microphones were very loud.

There was just one small problem with all this. The chap who was hosting the day's entertainment, David Green I think his name was, seemed to have a desperate desire to emulate Alan Partridge. For non-UK readers (and Dave Langford, who manages to cocoon himself from the TV), Partridge is a creation of comedian Steve Coogan. The joke is that Partridge is the ultimate bad TV presenter. Everything he says is inappropriate, if not downright insulting to someone. SF folks, of course, do not stand for this sort of thing, and the poor guy ended up being heckled by both audience and panellists. The conversation would go something like this:

Partridge: "Now my next question might seem trivial, but it is actually very clever and deep..."

China Miéville: "Where do you get your ideas from?"

Probably the best heckling of all was done by Mike Harrison who said very little but sat there in his panel with a stunned expression on his face and conveyed with

his eyebrows everything that the audience was thinking.

Many of Partridge's most banal questions centred around trying to get the panellists to talk about their work in the context of 2001 (the book, the movie or whatever). For example, he asked everyone to pretend that they could look forward from the release of the movie to the real 2001 and to say what would most astonish them about how the world turned out. China had a good answer to this: he would be amazed to see anything because he hadn't been born in 1968.

Of course the real answer to this involves rugby. It was quite unthinkable in 1968 that Wales could be beaten at rugby by anyone other than New Zealand, or that the English rugby team would ever be anything other than a joke. How times change.

Despite Partridge's earnest attempts to reduce the afternoon to a farce we did occasionally touch on something interesting. Partridge made much mention of 2001 being a Utopia, which led to a fairly serious discussion of what it means for a book to be Utopian. Enter Adam Roberts who, as a literature academic of a post-modernist bent, held that no book can be Utopian because no book has ever managed to describe an ideal society. Post-modernists, you see, deny the validity of out-moded concepts such as the author's intentions.

Speaking as a humble book reviewer rather than an exalted academic I have to confess that I find much of post-modernism very silly indeed. Doubtless that shows what an ignorant hick I am. However, I do have friends. Trotskyists don't like post-modernists either. Later in the evening Ken MacLeod gently reminded Roberts that if he continued in propounding such anti-revolutionary concepts it would be

necessary for Ken and China to take him aside and convince him of the error of his ways, yelling things like, "die, po-mo scum" as they did so. (Yes, American readers, that was a joke.)

The program ended just late enough for there not to be time to get anything to eat and therefore to force everyone to go to the pub for a swift pint or two. Then we all trooped back to join up with the tight-fisted lot who had come only for the free booze and did not have to pay to get into the by-then closed museum. It was time to find out who had won.

Discussion beforehand had been somewhat nervous on account of the judges having taken an extremely long time to make up their mind. It was apparently the second longest judging session in the history of the Clarke. Pessimists amongst us were convinced that would mean a compromise winner.

The actual ceremony didn't take long. Paul Kincaid said nice things about all of the people involved. Angie Edwards, Sir Arthur's niece, said nice things about Paul. Sir Arthur himself appeared in video and encouraged us all to go and look at the museum's Babbage Engine. And then it was left to Pat Cadigan to open the envelope. "I'm sorry, I can't do that, Paul" she quipped, making perhaps the most pre-meditated joke in the history of science fiction. But open it she did, and we all cheered.

China was stunned, and very, very humble. He spoke eloquently about the honour of being on the same shortlist as Octavia Butler and Mary Gentle. He gave special thanks to Mike Harrison for being such a wonderful inspiration. Clearly his political career is doing him good, because he made an excellent speech. There are a few photos on the web site.

So there it is. *Perdido Street Station* is the Arthur C. Clarke Best Novel of 2000. China is a very happy chap. I'm pleased to see the two best novels of the year win the two major UK awards. Of course if I am any judge of quality this means that Nalo Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber* must win an award too. Possibly the World Fantasy Award as this year's World Fantasy Con is in Canada. We shall see.

The other highlight of the evening was getting to talk to Jon Courtenay Grimwood and discovering that he is a foodie. He says he went round every Turkish restaurant he could find doing the research for his latest book, and that he never mentions a meal in a book unless he has cooked it first to see what it tastes like. Now I'm going to have to eat, I mean read, all of his books. Gosh, what an imposition.

E-Book Road Test

May is the month of the Brighton Festival. Last year you may remember my going to see Karen Armstrong and Rosalind Miles. This year the closest they had to an SF&F speaker was Margaret Atwood, and of course that sold out very quickly. But I did notice that the local Waterstones was promising a demonstration of eBooks. That certainly perked my interest and I went along to see what I could find.

First up I have to say that I was very disappointed to find that there were no actual eBook machines available. The lady from Waterstones said that you can't buy them in the UK yet. Technically that might be true, but you can buy several machines that run Windows CE, and you can download the Microsoft Reader free from the Web. However, they did have a couple

of PCs with flat screens running the Adobe eBook Reader so I did get to look at the software in action.

The important point obviously with any eBook software is the quality of print. In an earlier article I explained how clever tricks with pixels allow for much clearer text than a standard PC. I was reasonably impressed with what I saw, especially because the software came complete with a calibration system that enabled you to chose from an array of different text display options. It looked good, but I still found looking at a brightly backlit screen wearing.

Functionality-wise the software seems to do the sort of things you would expect. You can highlight, you can annotate the text, you can bookmark and you can skip easily from place to place. You can zoom in or out, which is great for those with poor eyesight. I wasn't able to do a feature comparison between the Adobe and Microsoft products, but I know that the principal difference is that Adobe's offering is page-based (just like PDF from which it descends) whereas the Microsoft product is based on the Open eBook standard (OEB) which reformats the page to fit the size of screen available.

Where Waterstones were very good is on the economics of eBook marketing. The public, it seems, is not prepared to pay as much for an eBook as for a paper copy. Some, of course, expect all downloaded products to be free, but clearly that doesn't work. Unlike printed books, eBooks in the UK are liable for VAT, and this wipes out much of the price advantage that you get from not having to print and distribute the book. There is a definite case for buying your eBooks from an Internet company based in Delaware.

Although Waterstones have their own web site and do sell some eBooks, they are of the opinion that the current proliferation of

formats (add Palm and Rocket to the two mentioned above) mean that the product may be better sold through software retailers, who will understand compatibility issues, rather than through traditional bookshops.

One very interesting comment was on the type of book that sells best in eBook format. Clearly there are definite advantages for frequently updated factual books such as travel guides and software manuals to be issued in eBook format. The industry also had a view that science fiction would do well because it is read by the very sort of geeks who are also early adopters of technological gadgets. In practice, however, the most popular subject for eBooks today is romance fiction. Look at any eBook retailer on the web and that is what you will see most of. Depressing, isn't it.

I think the main thing that I learned from the presentation is that, as usual, the UK is well behind the US, and much of the rest of the developed world, on digital technology. I still don't like reading off a screen, but I am convinced that it is something I am going to have to do more and more of in future. Given the amount of work-related material I get in PDF format, the Adobe product sounds very attractive. It will certainly make my work-based reading easier on the eye. I'll investigate more when I get back to the US.

Spreading the Word

One of the worst things about reviewing books is that you know darn well that if you ever produce a book of your own it is going to be expected to stand up to the very high standards that you have set for other people. That's one of the many reasons why

I don't write fiction myself. How much worse then, must it be for John Clute. Not only is he probably the foremost SF critic in the world, but he has a fondness for the elegant and eloquent execution: less deconstruction, more devastation. Clute has a habit of slicing and dicing his victims with the merciless efficiency of a katana-like wit. How then might such a man essay to produce fiction?

"Every word is a special-effects firecracker"

Stephen Baxter

"A glorious explosion of language and thought"

Joe Haldeman

Ah, by producing such a riot of literary lasciviousness that your fellow scribblers are struck dumb with admiration. Very clever, why didn't I think of that?

OK, so *Appleseed* is not a book for the fainthearted. Clute uses long words. He uses "palimpsest" and "sussurus" with the sort of frequency with which lesser minds use "book" and "whisper". Even the fairly short words sometimes pull you up.

"The heresiologue stewed in its solitude, eyes swivelling. It tried a homily.

'It is written', it mused aloud, 'that the God eats only a single word, but that word is pleroma'."

Oh, go look it up! I had to. Besides, it will give you a certain buzz to be able to use words that the Microsoft spelling checker has never heard of.

Not that the book is all pretension, of course, there is humour as well.

"Freer carefully avoided eye contact at this point, even though they were only actors, not human beings."

Now of course Clute had deliberately prepared us for this by making clear that the creatures on the stage were homunculi, but I have this sneaking suspicion that he did so purely so he could write that line.

The above also brings us to some of the neat science fictional ideas deployed in the book. Our hero, Nathaniel Freer ("Stinky" to his AI friends), avoids eye contact because since the dawn of the digital age it has become impolite for humans to expose each other to the emotional intensity of face-to-face communication. One can, with utter propriety, go naked on all parts of the body excepting only the face.

Freer is, of course, known as Stinky because of the pheromone smog that constantly attends the creatures known as homo sapiens. The inability to control their olfactory emissions has made them persona non grata throughout much of the civilised galaxy. Except of course amongst those perverts who enjoy being able to "watch" what humans get up to in moments of excitement even though they might not be open to the visual senses.

Then there is the question of the bad guys, the Harpe. Through their company, the Insort Geront, they provide interstellar retirement arks. Gated communities in the sky, where the aged are able to indulge in virtual passions for endless holiday cruises and perfect golf courses while their otherwise inactive brains are harnessed for their processing power and put to use in pursuit of grander schemes such as galactic conquest. Laugh? I emitted enough pheromones to start a minor interstellar war amongst sensitive species.

There are, of course, parts of the text that give me cause for concern. No book is perfect. While I am not the sort to be put off by an excess of Tantric mysticism, it does seem to me that at times the book takes the concepts of both space craft and plot as phallic objects and dances with them outrageously. I love the idea of a heroine named Ferocity, and you can't do Tantra without some female presence somewhere along the line, but even so...

"...no human being could understand a Great Yoni species, whose deepest urgency was to embrace and by embracing to heal."

Speak for yourself, testosterone junkie, for are we not men? No, nor Devo, but women also.

There are also some strange philosophical contradictions in the text, which I have an awful feeling means I have misunderstood something somewhere, but here goes anyway. The main thrust of the story is concerned with the war against Thanatos: death expressed as absence of being which in turn becomes plaque, a data virus that produces total corruption, an infinite state of entropy. Weighed against this is the lens (oh, did I forget to mention that the book is full of references to SF classics), a device that is capable of maintaining total data purity. So far, so good.

Yet the book is named after, and co-stars, the American mythic figure, Johnny Appleseed, who can be seen as spreading civilisation but these days is more likely to be viewed as an environmental terrorist. Planting apple trees throughout the pristine wilderness of North America is hardly an act of preserving data purity. Besides, without corruption, without mutation, there can be no evolution. Ultimate purity means ultimate stagnation.

God is change. All of which (I tremble as I write), Clute seems to have missed.

Still, let not such minor quibbles distract you from a book that rings joyously with the glory of words well used, that revels affectionately in the shared history of the genre, and bulges brightly with a surfeit of good humour and good sex. Yes, it is a hard read for those of you who are not used to such literary gymnastics, but for those of us with a love of the art it is like watching dolphins cavort in the waves and wishing desperately that we might only learn to swim.

Appleseed - John Clute - Orbit - hardcover

Deep and Dark

The plethora of good SF that came out of the UK in 2000 is going to be a hard act to follow. John Clute has made a good start, but his novel is a first attempt. The interesting part will be seeing how the big names from last year fare. Al Reynolds has been the first to toss his hat in the ring with *Chasm City*. The book is not a sequel to *Revelation Space*, but it is set in the same universe and, to a certain extent, it can be said to be a prequel. It is also quite different in feel.

Where *Revelation Space* dealt with mysterious alien races, planet-busting weapons and massive lighthuggers hurtling through the vast reaches of interstellar space, *Chasm City* is mostly planet bound. It does have a mysterious alien race, but they are used so briefly and so strangely that I'm sure that Reynolds is simply setting things up for a later book. Certainly *Chasm City* could have been written without them, and might have been better that way. The book also spends some

time in deep space, but far in the past on a slow, ponderous generation ship, part of mankind's first ever foray to the stars. The rest of the book is much more up close and personal.

Chasm City is about personal violence. It is about snipers and assassins and biomodifications for hand-to-hand combat. It is about grudges and blood feuds. There are lots of scenes where everyone is pointing guns at everyone else: very Tarantino, but without much actual bloodshed. Much of the book is given over to trying to work out who is double-crossing whom, and given that many of the characters seem to be bored postmortals from *Chasm City* whose sole motivation is to find some way of making life interesting, this is a rather difficult prospect. I think I prefer my books to have characters who behave rationally than ones who seem to change sides because it might be fun.

You may have noticed that I used the term "postmortals" there. Brian Stableford would have used the term "emortals", but he and Reynolds mean the same things and are exploring the same issues. Stableford, I think, does it rather better in *Fountains of Youth*, but Reynolds does a creditable job. Both men ask the question, what effect will extreme wealth and extreme longevity have on the human psyche? What will we do, if we are rich enough and long-lived enough to do anything we want? Both agree that we are likely to get bored, and that some will develop a fascination with death. Reynolds also asks an interesting question that Stableford missed. Given a long enough life, can even the most evil of men redeem himself?

My overall impression is that *Chasm City* is good, but not in the same league as *Revelation Space*. There are two reasons for this. Firstly Reynolds has attempted a story in which the psychology of his characters is

vital to the plot. That is a hard thing to do, and I'm not sure he is quite up to it yet. Second, the book doesn't have a single likeable character. Ana Khouri from *Revelation Space* (who makes a brief cameo appearance at the end of *Chasm City*) might have been a professional assassin, but she is basically a good person. The characters in *Chasm City* include a ruthless aristocrat, a trained killer with a string of murders to his name, one of the most hated criminals in the history of human space exploration, and a bunch of bored dilettantes. There are a couple of pretty and vacuous women that people rush round protecting in a very Neanderthal way, but no one I could really identify with.

None of which is to say that this is a bad book. Indeed, if I had not read *Revelation Space* I would probably be saying that this was a very promising start and that I looked forward to Al's next book. I'm also pleased to see Al trying to stretch himself as a writer. Most people in his position would probably have stuck safely to writing about space ships. It is to his great credit that he has tried to do much more than that. I'm sure that Al will go on from here and produce more great books, but *Chasm City* is merely a good one.

Chasm City - Al Reynolds - Gollancz - softcover

Once and Future Lives

Sometimes our own past can be every bit as strange as any alternative world we create. Sometimes too we forget just how driven we are by past obsessions, by passions and grudges that have long since outlived their usefulness. Eugene Byrne understands both of these things, and in the understanding has created a fascinating novel.

The basic concept of *Things Unborn* is highly unusual. It is a science fiction novel (i.e. set in the future) based on an alternate history (i.e. deriving from a past different from our own). The set-up goes like this. Some time in 1962 President Kennedy manages to engineer a nuclear war. The Atom War, it is called. Throughout Europe, Northern Asia and North America people die in their millions, if not directly from bomb strikes, then slowly and painfully from radiation sickness. Much of the civilised world is plunged into barbarism. Petty warlords fight for control of tiny corners of once great nations.

Into this devastated world come the re-born. They arrive naked and helpless as the day that they died. They are aged between about 5 and 40: old enough to have had a chance at life, but not so old as to have hoped for something better. They lived once before, and they live once again. God, it seems, has chosen to repopulate the world with those who deserve a second chance.

There seems little rhyme or reason to these re-appearances. They are accompanied by a brief whirlwind as if the matter to make their bodies is being gathered. And they always appear at exactly the spot at which they died. If you drowned at sea, tough. But as to who comes back, or when they come back, no one knows. They just do.

Naturally these "retreads", as they become known, get involved in the petty wars of the post-nuclear world. After all, many of them have solid military experience. In Britain the conflict boils down to a struggle between the Nationalists, led by the staunchly Protestant Duke of Monmouth, and the Liberal Coalition, led by General T.E. Lawrence and a duly humble and penitent King Richard III (Catholic). In the end, thanks to military aid from President Carter, Lawrence wins. Richard is restored

to the throne, albeit as a Constitutional Monarch with little actual power. The Liberal Settlement is drafted by Parliament to guarantee freedom of religious expression.

Years later, Britain is at peace once more. President Garfield (himself taking a second crack at office) has declared it a safe tourist destination and money is beginning to flow into the country. For Inspector Scipio Africanus of the Metropolitan Police life revolves primarily around watching out for people coming back near Tyburn, and stopping pickpockets from fleecing visiting yanks. Some people, however, have not forgotten the past. To some the ideas of religious freedom, of equality between the sexes and races, of a Catholic on the throne (especially one accused of murdering children), are anathema. Cromwell might not have come back, but his legacy lives on.

There are many things that Eugene might have done with this book. He could, for example, have focussed on the process of rebirth and created a traditional SF novel. He could have focussed on the trauma of rebirth, and indeed does so briefly in the case of hurricane pilot Guy Boswell, who is sufficiently recently deceased that his former fiancée might just still be alive. He could have focussed on the religious question of rebirth. But he did none of these. Instead he chose to write a political satire.

In many ways *Things Unborn* is as quintessentially British as Kathleen Ann Goonan's *Mississippi Blues* is quintessentially American. You have to understand the obsessions of the British people in order to understand the book. Eugene, of course, is Irish, and thus comes from a country that continues to suffer from the grudges of times past.

There are other elements to the book as well. Scipio, for example, is not a

resurrected Roman general. He is an African slave, brought to Britain as a child and whimsically renamed by his owners. His grave, in Bristol, is one of the oldest known burials of an African in Britain. He is a wonderful character, full of humility and wisdom.

"No, I do not hate them. They were acting according to their nature. You cannot hate the cat for hunting mice. You cannot hate the big fish that eats smaller ones. These people were money-loving men who managed to convince themselves that enslaving fellow human beings was a proper and fair thing to do. There are people like that in every land at every time. Aye, they live in Africa, too. It ain't useful to hate 'em. Distrust them, be on your guard against them, watch them like hawks, and fight them if you have to, but don't hate, John. Hate will eat you up and destroy your health and happiness - it will enslave you - just as surely as a merchant with a gun and whip will."

It took me quite a while to get into this book, but from about halfway onwards I was loving it. The idea is wonderfully whacky and the politics are spot on. It is also an ideal use of SF. Writing a book about Ian Paisley is probably a waste of time. Writing a book about a resurrected Puritan rabble-rouser who happens to express many of the same sentiments as Paisley and his cronies, not to mention much of the Conservative Party, is entirely a different matter. Nice one, Eugene mate, keep up the good work.

Things Unborn - Eugene Byrne - Earthlight - softcover

Ultimate Fantasy

Regular readers will remember my being very impressed with Guy Gavriel Kay's *Sarantine Mosaic* series (EmCit #58). Whenever I find a new author that I particularly like I always try to track down other work by the same person in case there is other good stuff that I have missed. With Kay I had been warned that his work had been getting better all the time, so I wasn't in a great hurry to look at his early material. But then I read an interview with him that Peter Halasz did for the *New York Review of Science Fiction*. In it Halasz asked Kay why he had not written any more traditional fantasy after his first series, preferring instead to concentrate on fantasy-tinged alternate histories. Kay replied that in writing *The Fionavar Tapestry* he felt that he had said everything there was to say about traditional fantasy, and that no further books were necessary. And this too from a man who co-edited much of the posthumous Tolkien canon. Clearly I had to read the series.

In format *The Fionavar Tapestry* is very much in the classic *Lord of the Rings* mould of three volumes telling a single story. The first book (*The Summer Tree*) sets the scene, the second (*The Wandering Fire*) develops the plot and the third (*The Darkest Road*) works up to the final climax. It also has the classic plot of apparently ordinary people becoming involved in a world-shattering combat against a source of ultimate evil and discovering hidden strengths along the way. From that point of view the series is very predictable and little different from the plethora of Tol-clone series that has so discredited fantasy as a genre.

However, in reading the series I began to understand what Kay meant when he said that he had addressed the whole of the epic fantasy genre. This wasn't just another *LotR* rip-off. It had everything else in it as well.

For example, the heroes are people from our world (a technique used by Lewis and Donaldson). They are dragged mercilessly through some impossible moral decisions (Donaldson again). Much of the background mythology draws freely on *The Mabinogion* and on Fraser's *Golden Bough*. And there is Arthur, but not simply the Arthur of Malory, but rather Arthur as the warrior cursed to return and fight in the hour of need: Arthur as the Eternal Champion (Moorcock). What Kay seems to have done is set out to include every worthwhile idea he can think of from every major fantasy epic there has ever been. And that in his first published novels.

Now that might sound like something of a horrible mish-mash, but actually it works rather well because what Kay has tried to do is to synthesise a Platonic Ideal of a fantasy epic. If, as the likes of Fraser and Joseph Campbell maintain, it is all one story, then it must be possible to tell it as one story. I don't think that Kay would be so arrogant as to claim that he had discovered the archetypal fantasy novel, but he has tried to draw all the threads together and include everything he thinks would have been in such an archetype.

Now that is clearly a very ambitious thing to do, and I think Kay would be happy to admit that he has learned a lot about writing since *Fionavar*. I was particularly disappointed in his five our-world viewpoint characters, whom I found rather sketchy and difficult to identify with. That is probably a bit cruel because I read the parts of *Fionavar* around the Tad Williams epic that I reviewed last issue. Tad is very good at characters. But from what I remember of the *Sarantine Mosaic* Kay can do a lot better now.

Nevertheless, the series is still an impressive achievement. Kay has a firm grasp on the tropes of mythic fantasy and

what is supposed to happen does happen. He even manages to drop in a few surprises that, with hindsight, were clearly meant to happen, but were not obvious as the story developed. The book jerks the emotions in all of the right places and sacrifices just the right amount of lead characters to keep the ending happy (and that number should never be zero). It even has a reasonable sprinkling of humour. I don't think it is possible to write a Tolkien novel without it seeming both racist and classist, so I won't fault Kay on that one.

In summary then, if you are a fan of epic fantasy series you should read *Fionavar* because it is one of the most intelligent series of its type. If you hate Hobbits and jolly, happy elves and all of the other standard *LotR* trappings then I can happily report that *Fionavar* has absolutely no Hobbits in it whatsoever. But if you are looking at Guy Gavriel Kay as a writer, read *Fionavar* to see that he has always been clever, but look to his later work for the serious quality. Having seen how big his ideas were, I rather wish that he could write the series again now when he could do it so much better.

The Summer Tree - Guy Gavriel Kay - Voyager - softcover

The Wandering Fire - Guy Gavriel Kay - Voyager - softcover

The Darkest Road - Guy Gavriel Kay - Voyager - softcover

Bombs Away!

Wow, there you go. I have gone up in the world. This is the first book that I have ever received two free copies of. Dave Langford gave me a copy of *The Leaky Establishment* back in 1984 when it was first published.

Now Ben Jeapes has just sent me a review copy of the new Big Engine edition so that I can assure you all that it looks just like a real book even if it is print-on-demand (which indeed it does). Kevin has a copy too, so I promise to loan this latest freebie to friends.

The Leaky Establishment is the book that should have made Dave Langford's career. It should have made him as big a star as those other British comedy writers: the late and much lamented Douglas Adams, that Pratchett fellow, Tom Holt, Sue Townsend. The book is clearly funny enough. It is spot on in its satire of life in the scientific civil service. It could have been the Bridget Jones of its day. But it happened to be blessed with a publisher who, having printed the book, could not see any point in actually trying to sell copies. Consequently it languished in remainder bins until Dave could get the rights back and Big Engine could give the book a second lease of life.

The British SF scene owes a great debt to the local nuclear industry. It seems that working with radiation causes people to become so psychotic that they turn into brilliant comedy writers. Mr. Pratchett was employed as a PR consultant whose job it was to convince people that power stations full of uranium are not going to go bang, litter the countryside with radiation, give us all three heads and make us think that the world swims through space on the back of a giant turtle. Dave, on the other hand, worked at the Atomic Weapons Research Establishment. He worked with things that were supposed to go bang. It was his job to make sure that the Russians, Chinese and Americans treated the glorious British Empire with due respect, and to make sure that Johnny Foreigner did not win any Hugo Awards.

And so, with due respect to the Official Secrets Act, we are introduced to Mr. Roy

Tappen, a senior scientific officer at the Nuclear-Utilisation Technology Centre (NUTC to you) on Robinson Heath. Mr. Tappen does interesting experiments with warheads. Sometimes he has to play with live ones. And one day, when liberating an ancient filing cabinet from the office for personal use, he accidentally takes one home with him.

That is the set up. The rest of the book tells the hilarious story of Tappen's attempts to return the missing warhead to its rightful place in Britain's nuclear armoury. Unfortunately for him, the NUTC security personnel are much better at preventing bombs being smuggled into the establishment than out of it. Besides, it is much easier to smuggle a nuclear warhead if you don't know that you are doing it.

The sad thing is that Dave did not have to make much of it up. In his introduction to the Big Engine edition Terry Pratchett (who should know) says, "the book is practically a documentary. I read it in horror, in between laughing." I have lived in Britain too long, and known far too many people who worked for the civil service or nationalised industries to feel anything but terror at the thought of such people playing with nuclear warheads. The Americans are fond of attributing all sorts of magnificent feats to their government. Uncle Sam, we are led to believe, has held aliens in secret at underground bases in New Mexico, has faked the Moon landings, developed the AIDS and Ebola viruses, and has cloned Elvis Presley. We British know better. It is not that government cannot organise a piss-up in a brewery, they couldn't even find a brewery in the first place, and wouldn't know what one was for if they found it.

Dave Langford, on the other hand, knows exactly how to find a brewery, and has drunk many of them dry. He has also

written a very funny book that has been unjustifiably ignored by the great book-buying public. Let's not make that mistake a second time, OK?

The Leaky Establishment - Dave Langford - Big Engine - softcover

Political Fantasies

OK, I know, this is unforgivable. The number of people reading *Emerald City* who will actually be interested in a book on economics can probably be counted on the fingers of one hand (hello China, Danny...). But I do have an excuse, honest. You see we hear an awful lot about how science fiction novels do or do not reflect sensible science. For all that we know faster than light travel to be impossible according to current technology, many of us still get worked up over astronomical inaccuracies. I have met people who claimed that Mary Doria Russell's *The Sparrow* was unreadable because Mary took a few small liberties with astrophysics in order to make the book work. And yet when it comes to economics we seem happy to put up with the most cursory attempts at accuracy. If we wrote science with the same rigour that Kim Stanley Robinson applies to his economics we'd be lapping up tales of men flying to the stars by flapping their arms.

Now one of the pervading themes of science fiction literature is that in the future the world will be run, not by governments, but by all-powerful, multinational companies. This is pretty much taken for granted. And why not? Are we not told every day by newspapers and politicians that this is exactly what is happening to the world? At the Clarke Award, when asked to predict what the future will be like, most

of the authors present came out with the standard line. It must be true, mustn't it?

Actually, no. Despite the newspaper articles, the political speeches, the anti-globalisation riots, there is little evidence of the supposed growth in international trade and consequent reduction in the ability of governments to run their own countries. And that is why books like *Just Capital* by Adair Turner are so valuable. If we want to predict how the world will look in the future, we need to understand how it works now.

Before you can make any sweeping generalisations about the nature of the world it is, of course, necessary to start with some definitions. Globalisation supposedly represents the movement of jobs and capital around the world at an ever increasing pace, such that national governments are no longer in control of their own economies because companies can just up and go if they don't like particular laws. A reasonable definition of the level of globalisation might therefore be the proportion of the national economy (Gross Domestic Product or GDP) that is dependent on international trade. If globalisation is the threat that everyone claims we might expect to see that proportion increasing rapidly in recent years.

But of course it hasn't. Ignoring trade within the EU (which was, after all, deliberately fostered by the governments concerned) the amount of trade by developed countries outside their own borders is around 10-12%, and only around half of that is with the underdeveloped countries that globalisation is supposed to exploit. Furthermore, this level of trade has been roughly constant for several decades (in Britain it has been constant for a century).

Of course this is contrary to everyone's apparent experience of what goes on, but it actually makes perfect sense once you consider what is actually happening. Firstly one of the primary effects of globalisation is to create competition. That forces down prices, and even if the volume of international trade goes up, the value of it still goes down. Second, as we become richer we buy different things. There isn't a lot of point in owning more than one car or TV per person, but rich people have an increasing demand for things like restaurant meals, and a seemingly insatiable desire for better healthcare. The richer a country becomes, the more of its GDP its people spend on local services. As Turner puts it, you can't globalise a haircut.

Another way that this is counter-intuitive is that many of the companies we view as multi-national are not greatly involved in international trade. McDonalds, for example, might import raw foodstuffs if they are cheaper than local ones, but only if they are cheaper, and crucially it sells locally. It makes no sense for McDonalds to up and leave France because the French have strong employment protection legislation. All they would be doing is ceding the French market to a rival. So although McDonalds is multi-national, its power to influence government policy is minimal.

So why does everyone go on about globalisation as if it were a rapidly increasing and dangerous phenomenon? As it turns out it is because of a remarkable coincidence in political requirements. The far right claims to believe in globalisation because it allows them to state, falsely, that There Is No Alternative (to use a famous Thatcher catch phrase) to lower taxes and decreased regulation; otherwise companies will simply go elsewhere. The political centre, at least in Europe, is currently in retreat from Socialist ideals. It finds the

myth of globalisation a useful excuse for not engaging in the sort of obsessive intervention that its former supporters would like. It is easier to say, "we can't do this because of the threat of globalisation" than to say, "we won't do this because it is bad management of the economy". And finally the far left wants us to believe in globalisation so that we will despair and vote in a Socialist government to save us from this imagined threat. It is all very cosy, and all very much untrue.

Now clearly the above contains a certain amount of simplification. There are lots of things I haven't touched on. For example, in certain sectors of the economy (for example car or electronics manufacturing) globalisation is very much a threat. The point is that it is not a threat to the economy as a whole, and therefore not a threat to national sovereignty.

It is also the case that while international trade is a small fraction of GDP in rich countries, it can be a much larger proportion in developing countries. But, as Turner points out, while a poorly run Nike factory might be bad for many people, its effects are minor compared to the risks that are posed by runaway panics in global capital markets that can wipe out half a nation's prosperity in a day. Some types of trade need regulating much more closely than others. In any case, while it has its risks, direct foreign investment is generally more beneficial to developing countries than the alternatives of enforced poverty (the environmentalist approach) or isolationism and totalitarian government (the Socialist approach). It is rather ironic that alongside demonstrators bewailing the harm that trade does to the Third World you will find French farmers seeking to prevent cheap foreign food being sold into Europe.

It is areas like these where Turner is at his best. He is excellent at pointing out the very many ways in which economics is actually much more complicated than simple political slogans would have us believe. He is clearly someone who has worked with markets, rather than just parroted slogans in political speeches or on radio. One of his favourite nostrums is that our approach to markets should be pragmatic rather than religious.

It is, I am sorry to say a message that is far too complicated for the popular media to bother with. Elections, therefore, will continue to be fought on the basis of slogans and personalities. And that is a shame because Turner's book is one of the most positive books about democracy that I have read in a long time. But if we are writing science fiction it behoves us to try to find out how the world actually works, not just take what newspapers and television tell us for granted. That means that we should study economics as well as physics, biology and so on. If we did perhaps we would be better at predicting the future.

Just Capital - Adair Turner - McMillan - hardcover

Miscellany

First off this issue my profuse apologies to Jon Courtenay Grimwood for thoroughly mangling the spelling of his name in last issue's Eastercon report. I hope it won't happen again, but I have an awful feeling that it might.

It is with great delight that I can report a major honour for IGoUGo, the travel web

site that I write for. They have been nominated for the shortlist of travel sites in this year's Webby Awards. Whilst IGoUGo is a professional company, it is a fraction of the size of fellow nominees such as Expedia. I don't claim to have had much to do with this honour, but I'm very proud all the same.

The Webbys are interesting awards because they have both panel and popular judging. The official Webby winners are decided upon by a group of expert judges, but there are also "people's voice" awards which can be voted on by anyone. If you would like to vote point your browser at <http://www.webbyawards.com/peoplesvoice/index.html>. You will need to register with the site before you can vote, but most of the fields are optional - it is really only to try to ensure one person, one vote. All votes to help IGoUGo against its better-funded rivals would be greatly appreciated. Write-in votes for *Emerald City* in the Print & Zines category would also be a nice idea.

This month on IGoUGo we have some more exciting tales of the fabulous Hannover International Hotel at Hinckley. If you enjoyed my little rant last issue you should enjoy this as well. As usual, go to www.igougo.com and look for journals by Cheryl Morgan.

By the time you get this issue my interview with Tom Arden should soon be available on the Wavelengths Online web site (www.wavelengthsonline.com). Tom has a lot of interesting things to say about writing fantasy so it is well worth a look.

My interview with China Miéville, scheduled for *Strange Horizons*, is drafted but is on hold while China is busy promoting Socialism in south-west

London. Once the election is over we hope to get it finalised and online.

Meanwhile I have been busy doing another web site. This one is for Helicon 2, the 2002 Eastercon. You can find it at www.helicon.org.uk. Check it out, especially if you like chocolate.

As mentioned in a couple of places above, I spent several days this month at the Brighton Festival. There's no more of what I saw there that is really appropriate for *Emerald City*, but a report of some sort will hopefully appear on IGoUGo next month.

Next a quick plug for a new web site. eFanzines.com is an excellent place to find SF fanzines. It provides a home for many editors to post electronic copies of their zines, and it also contains links to the web sites of many online zines. It is a very worthwhile project.

And finally, still on the subject of web sites, people have been writing to ConJosé asking how they can enter their sites for the Best Web Site Hugo Award. Of course they can't, because there is no entry process. However, I have been listing their sites on the *Emerald City* Hugo recommendation page. There is some interesting stuff there. I had no idea that there was a web site devoted to the wonderful but sadly uncommercial role-playing game, Tekumel.

Footnote

OK, that's it for another month. Now I am going to go and read that Neil Gaiman book.

Ciao,

Love 'n' hugs,

Cheryl