

EMERALD CITY #70

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

Introduction

First up an apology. This issue will probably have more typos and grammatical errors than usual. However, there is a good reason for this. My ever so wonderful proof-reader, Anne K. Gay, is busy getting married this month. So, congratulations and all best wishes to Anne and William. In the meantime Kevin and I will do our best to get this issue right by ourselves.

If you pick up this issue at the SF Foundation conference in Liverpool then apologies are probably due because there is a good chance that you are an author whose work I have been less than totally enthusiastic about at some point. What can I say? Except that if I were nice about every book I reviewed people would no longer trust what I said. Come and find me in the bar and I'll buy you a drink, OK?

There are two themes for this issue. Because of the SF Foundation conference I am trying to feature a lot of British authors. However, I also seem to have got into books about American society. In the case of the new Neil Gaiman novel, those two themes conveniently overlap, which is one of the many reasons why this issue opens with Neil's book.

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Spirits of the Ancestors

"'This is the only country in the world,' said Wednesday, into the stillness, 'that worries about what it is.'"

When you move to a new country that has a similar culture to yours it often takes a little time to realise just how different it actually is. After two years in Australia I was finally starting to understand how little I had originally understood about Australians when I first arrived. Equally, after four years on and off in the USA I am beginning to get a grip on the basics of American culture. If you have any intellectual curiosity this probably leads you into wanting to go off and discover this strange new country you have found yourself in, and to work out why it is so different when, on the surface, it seemed so similar.

Neil Gaiman has been living in the USA rather longer than me, and like many writers before him he has been bitten by the urge to make this voyage of discovery. Being Neil, he has tried to understand the country in terms of mythology. After all, what better way to understand a country than to look into its soul? And so we have *American Gods*, Neil's personal contribution to the great game of Looking for America.

There are basically two types of god in America. The old gods came to the country in the hearts and minds of their worshippers in successive waves of immigration. They have names such as Odin, Eoster, Anansi, Papa Legba and Kali. Even Anubis and Thoth have a toe-hold. The new gods were born in the slipstream of American culture as it grew and blossomed. They drive fast cars, appear in films and television, and do magic in silicon and code.

America is a good place for gods. America is a bad place for gods.

Cheryl, with apologies to Max's Diners

America is a good place for gods because it has so many and makes them so easily. It is a huge melting pot of different cultures, each of which has its own beliefs and folk memories. It has invented Hollywood, the most efficient god-making machine ever devised. But the density of gods means that none of them can command much in the way of a following, and those that are made can go out of fashion again very quickly.

Neil's search for the American soul is two-pronged. The first avenue of approach gives a classic, conflict-driven plot. A group of old gods, led by the devious Mr. Wednesday (and if you don't know who he is you are not trying) band together to defend themselves against the aggression of the new gods. There will be a war in heaven: on the one side, swords and magic, on the other, technology and public relations.

The hero of the book, an ex-con known as Shadow, is recruited by Wednesday as a driver and enforcer. Even gods need a little help occasionally, especially when they are short on worshippers. It quickly becomes obvious that Shadow will play a major part in the coming conflict.

The second avenue of approach is more circumstantial. In his work for Wednesday Shadow travels America, from conservative small-town Illinois to wildly non-conformist San Francisco. In particular he settles in Lakeside, a tiny community where motherhood and apple pie still reign supreme, where good old folks help each other and traditions are strong. Such places are, of course, an enduring American myth.

There is humour too. The brief interlude when Shadow stays with Anubis and Thoth and helps out with their funeral parlour business is wonderfully dry and quirky. The bookish Mr. Ibis with his passion for stories is one of my favourite

characters, along with the newsreader goddess, Media, whose artificially sincere speech patterns Neil has done perfectly.

"Media. I think I have heard of her. Isn't she the one who killed her children?"

'Different woman,' said Mr Nancy. 'Same deal.'"

Followers of Neil's work, in particular the Sandman series, will recognise three things of relevance to this book. Firstly, that Neil handles mythological beings very well indeed. Secondly, that there will be a twist in the tale. And thirdly, that gods demand sacrifices. Whatever else you might expect, *American Gods* will not be comfort reading. But it will be, and is, intelligent, insightful and caring. And it is a great read.

Long time readers of *Emerald City* might like to know that you have a small connection the creation of this book. When I met Neil at Wiscon in 1999 he was in Madison at least in part to visit the House on the Rock, a bizarre tourist attraction that features in the book. The brief aside on the sad fate of Tasmania's aboriginal population comes, of course, from our tour of the Hobart museum during Thylacon 2. And there is indeed a rambling coffee shop in Madison, full of comfortable old couches and copies of *The Onion*. It is called Michaelangelo's, it serves the most wonderful cheesecake, and you can find it just out the back of the Madison Concourse Hotel. Neil recommended it to me. I had a part in all this, and I wrote about it, so you are part of it too.

Not that any of that is a reason to buy the book. My connection with it is very tangential indeed. You should buy the book because it is good, because it poses

interesting questions and is not afraid to give honest answers. If you liked Sandman and were disappointed by *Stardust*, this will make you a lot happier. If you liked *Stardust* because it was sweet and comforting, bear in mind that it was a charming fairy story and *American Gods* is not.

So what is it? Well, it is another one of Neil's penetrating gazes into the human condition. It is a statement that it is an ugly old world out there, and that our persistent attempts to sanitise it are generally futile. And it is a reminder that this doesn't mean that we shouldn't try to be good, only that we shouldn't expect endings to be wholly happy and devoid of consequences. Does it find America? Well partly, but it is a big country and putting all of it into one book would be an enormous task. But of course the usual result of such journeys of discovery is that you end up finding yourself. Finally, it is a large and positive step forward in Neil's evolution as a writer of novels. In short, it is a good book.

You can find out more about American Gods, including a sample chapter and the date's for Neil's signing tour (USA, UK and Canada) at Neil's new official web site, <http://www.neilgaiman.com/>.

If you are thinking of buying the book, please consider doing so through the *Emerald City* web site (click through below if you are reading this on the web). Mostly I only get a 5% commission for books sold through *Emerald City*. But *American Gods* is likely to be a best seller and that means I'll get a whopping 15%. It isn't a fortune, but it does help keep *Emerald City* online and free.

American Gods - Neil Gaiman - HarperCollins - hardcover

Turkish Delight

Jon Courtenay Grimwood is an enigma to me: still.

You may remember that this began when the short-list for the BSFA Award came out. I had been trying to find a copy of *redRobe*, Jon's nominated book, but could only find the older *Remix*, the cover of which described his work as being like a mixture of Gibson and Tarantino. This put me off at once, but Farah Mendlesohn assured me that Jon's books were not all blood and guts, and when I met Jon at the Clark Award ceremony he told me that he had been haunted by that piece of blurb ever since. He promised me that the new novel, *Pashazade*, didn't involve much killing, and he started talking about food instead.

Actually he lied. I counted at least seven corpses in *Pashazade*, some of them very messily terminated, and there wasn't quite as much about food as Jon made out. On the other hand, I certainly would not describe the book as Tarantino-like. If it was going to be a cross between Gibson and anyone it should probably be Gibson and Ian Fleming. The proliferation of gadgetry, vast wealth and an obsession amongst the characters for idiotic face-to-face confrontations reminded me very much of a Bond story. *Pashazade* is cyberpunk for the Thatcher generation. It has designer clothes, designer shades, designer drugs, designer vehicles, designer weapons and designer cyborgization. Its characters live their lives in a constant cocktail of gin and tonics, espresso and fashionable brands of cigarettes. Only the latter are not familiar.

And there is a reason for the cigarette brands being strange, because *Pashazade* is set in an alternate future, a world in which

Germany won WWI and the Ottoman Empire is still very much a going concern. It is set in the Egyptian city of Iskander (Alexandria to you and me) and the hero is, possibly, if other people are to be believed, an actual genuine Bey, son of the Emir of Tunis no less. This is interesting, and it is more than anything, what got me to check the book out. Unfortunately Jon doesn't make much use of it. It is an excuse for some neat architectural descriptions, some unusual food, lots of strong coffee, and some extremely conservative social attitudes. But because most of the lead characters are American, or have spent a lot of time in America, the book doesn't really have an Arabic feel. *Pashazade* is on holiday in Egypt, not rooted there.

All of which leaves me wondering what *Pashazade* is all about. To a large extent it is simply a cyberpunk thriller. It doesn't need the Arabic background at all. But if that is the case, how come the hero ends up looking after his 9-year-old niece? It isn't the sort of thing you can imagine Bond doing, even if the kid does turn out to be useful in the end. Indeed I had this awful suspicion that Jon decided he had to make the kid useful to justify including her. *Pashazade* gave me the impression of an author who wanted to do something interesting with the social background, and who wanted to do stuff with his characters. But in the end he seems to have fought shy of doing so because he thinks his readers are really only interested in people getting killed and the labels on all of the various consumer goods mentioned.

I gather that at least two more books featuring Ashraf Bey, the hero of *Pashazade*, are planned. I'm hoping that Jon will use these to stretch things a little. He has given us a potentially interesting setting, and some promising characters. Now he needs to do something with them. He is a good writer, so I think all he needs is the

confidence to challenge his readers a bit. Um, if I have understood him correctly.

Pashazade - Jon Courtenay Grimwood - Earthlight - hardcover

New World A-Comin'

"The title refers to a future place, on earth, at sea, or in the air, where there will be no war, no greed, no categorization, and where love is unconditional, and where there is no pronoun good enough for God."

Duke Ellington

Kathleen Ann Goonan's most recent novel is, I think, even more ambitious than *Mississippi Blues*. From the point of view of the message, that doesn't matter too much this time because she is writing a Utopian novel: something that large numbers of authors, many far more famous than she, have also failed at. From the stylistic point of view, I'm not sure that I am even qualified to judge.

Ask someone what "rhapsody" means to them these days and you might get something like, "wasn't she one of the Angels in Captain Scarlet?" A less fannish audience might remember a certain well-known piece of music by Gershwin. But the original word is Greek and relates to a single sitting of the recitation of an epic poem (Homer didn't get through all that lot in one night, you know). From there it has gone on to mean a stringing together of poems, and thence an irregular form of musical composition. My copy of Chambers also has an obsolete definition meaning "an orderless, unconnected composition", But I'll not throw that one at

Goonan because she does far better than that.

Structurally, then, *Crescent City Rhapsody* is a collection of apparently unconnected themes, a tale of disparate people spread around a deconstructing world. It is a collection of brief lives set in a time of rapid social change. But, because we are talking music here (and in particular Ellington, for whom Goonan has a special fondness), the themes are brought neatly together at the end for a satisfying conclusion, if not perhaps an ending.

More specifically, the book is a prequel to *Queen City Jazz* and *Mississippi Blues*. It tells of the time when the Silence first struck Earth, when the massive electromagnetic pulse (EMP) from outer space put mankind's computers and communications infrastructure out of action, bringing civilisation to the brink of collapse. It is the time when research into nanotechnology and bioscience bloomed as governments desperately searched for an alternative to the silicon economy. It is the time of the rise of the Flower Cities.

We know from the previous books that New Orleans did convert, but it is also suggested that it did so differently. That while the other Flower Cities failed, or became autocratic, enslaving their inhabitants, New Orleans became a beacon of freedom. Or at least that is what we would believe if we had been infected with the New Orleans nano-plague. *Crescent City Rhapsody* tells us what actually happened back then and therefore gives us some idea of what Verity and Blaze might find at the end of the rainbow.

The book covers a vast canvas: 27 years of world history and the lives of several characters. There are many books that could have been written in the interstices of this novel. But this means that the rhapsodic structure fits it rather well. It

might even be why it was chosen. Goonan takes us on an extensive tour: Haiti, Kathmandu, Berlin, Prague, Paris; but most of her attention is, as usual, focused on America: its hopes, dreams and foibles. There is little mention this time of fundamentalist religion, but Goonan takes time to consider Hippiedom (slightly mockingly) and Survivalism (approvingly). She also can't resist the temptation to take another swipe at the hapless Angelinos.

"It must have been like this when the pioneers came," she said, her voice breathless. "You know, back in the 1920s. When they started Hollywood and all. When it was nothing but orange groves. It's hard to believe how primitive it was. Hardly any shopping."

All of this trawling through American culture is, of course, because Goonan is creating a Utopia. If New Orleans is to become the city at the end of the rainbow, then it must embody all that is good about America, and reject all that is bad. At this juncture Goonan displays her complete immersion in American political mythology, and consequently falls down mightily on the job.

Only in America do you find people with a distrust of government so deep-seated as to lead them to claim that a country ruled by a philanthropic dictator who pays for social services out of her own pocket is politically preferable to a democracy. This is so, Goonan says, because it avoids the evil of having to pay taxes. Equally, only an American could believe that the United Nations is sufficiently organised to infiltrate the Pentagon, run an international ring of terrorist groups, and eventually use foreign armies to invade the USA under the pretext of public safety. Gosh but those New World Order chaps are well organised. Creating a Utopia requires a

little more understanding of politics that the worldview gained from a bunker in Montana.

All of this, however, I am prepared to forgive. Firstly because it is a darn good book: a good story, well told. But also because Goonan's message is fundamentally one of hope. She might have no idea how to organise a functioning society, but she believes fervently in mankind and has faith that if we put our minds to it we can and will find our way out of any sort of pit we dig ourselves into. In a world where the fashionably acceptable solution to global problems has become a retreat from science and technology, it is a pleasure to see a science fiction writer who still believes that we can make a better world if only we get our heads screwed on right.

The tragedy, of course, is that Goonan cares but doesn't think. Her view that Government is the source of all evil, and that a world without Government will inevitably be free from greed and hatred, is simply a counterpoint to those who believe exactly the same of a world without Capitalism. It is a hard thing to accept that we have only ourselves to blame for our inability to live together in peace, that smashing some scapegoat ideology will not put everything right. But no one ever said that Utopias were easy to create. And given that, the best that we can ask is that they be good novels. In that department Goonan delivers in spades.

I suspect, also, that there may be more to come. Throughout the book, Goonan plays with the idea that the EMP attack is the work of aliens. There is a constant sub-thread about children conceived at the time of the first pulse being deliberately mutated. *Crescent City Rhapsody* never gives a clear answer to this question, though it hints that at least one of the characters does

know the truth. Presumably there will be another book. If so, it may well look at the future life of New Orleans. Examining your own Utopia and finding it wanting is one of the braver things that an author can attempt. I hope that Goonan is up for it.

Crescent City Rhapsody - Kathleen Ann Goonan - Avon-Eos - hardcover

New Life for Old

Sometimes my big mouth gets me into trouble. Farah Mendlesohn asked me if I had any ideas for panels at the SF Foundation conference. I noticed that we had Gwyneth Jones and Nicola Griffith as GoHs, so I suggested we do something on gender. "OK", said Farah, "you chair it". So here I am revising my knowledge of British SF with a gender theme. I have, of course, reviewed Gwyneth and Nicola's work in previous issues, but I figured I should go back and look at the classic of the genre, *The Passion of New Eve*, by Angela Carter.

Those of you familiar with Carter's work will know to expect something highly symbolic with lots of mythological overtones. You won't be disappointed. Carter does that sort of stuff very well indeed. Politically, however, *New Eve* is very much a book of its time. It was first published in 1977, an era in which we still believed in revolutionary war and the prospect of feminist commandos, marching under the sign of the toothed vagina to liberate us from male domination. Gwyneth Jones, in her Aleutian Trilogy, gave us a horrific glimpse of what such a war would actually be like. But in 1977 it was still something that people might hope for. Carter at least accepts that the casualties might be enormous (in '77 we

still believed that nuclear war was imminent too), so she considers the need to start anew.

"Don't you think," asked Sophia, that the domination of man has caused us all too much pain? Were you ever happy, when you were a man, since you left the womb, unless you were trying to get back into it?"

Enter Evelyn, the hero(ine) of our story. He is a self-centred English academic who has just got himself a job in New York. Arriving in America, he discovers the USA in the midst of massive civil unrest. Black militias take over the university where he was to teach and blow it up. Without a job, Evelyn decides to see a bit of America before going home.

Unfortunately for him, he hasn't gone far when he is captured by a group of feminist insurgents. Their leader, known only as Mother, is a surgical genius who has altered herself to obtain the many-breasted appearance of an ancient fertility goddess. Now she intends to alter Evelyn as well, and make him the parent of a new race.

Digression: for years archaeologists believed that the multifariously bulbous chest of the statue of Diana at Ephesus was intended to represent her many breasts. Now some believe that the lumps actually represent the testicles of animals that were sacrificed to the goddess, or perhaps even those of her priests who were required to castrate themselves. Fortunately for Carter, Mother would have been happy with either interpretation.

The plan, then, is for Mother to transform Evelyn into an ideal woman, the New Eve of the title. Eve will then be impregnated

with sperm taken from her old body, and this symbolic virgin birth will somehow spark the transformation of the world. Of course this mad plan doesn't quite come off, and consequently Eve ends up having to fend for herself in an America that is rapidly falling into anarchy. It is a hard way to learn what it is like to be a woman.

"Although I was a woman, I was now also passing for a woman, but, then, many women born spend their whole lives in such imitations."

I have to say that from an SF point of view the book is pretty sloppy. Like Robert Anton Wilson in *Schrodinger's Cat*, Carter failed to research the details of transsexual surgery and thereby misses an opportunity for some quite delicious irony. As for things like people being able to get into a helicopter and fly it safely with no previous training, well, I suppose the plot required it.

But none of that is really germane to the point of the book. *New Eve* is about politics and mythology, not about correct science. There are a number of issues that Carter asks us to consider. The first is very straightforward. She illustrates very clearly both man's inhumanity to woman, and also, with the story of Zero's wives, how women are often complicit in their own subjugation.

Theme two is about the nature and wisdom of the gender war. Although Carter shows that women have every right to be angry, Mother and her followers are not painted in a very attractive light. In the end Eve, who is after all half male, chooses not to side with them, but to find her own way in the world. In doing so she is creating a faint precursor of the second half of Suzy McKee Charnas's superb Holdfast series, and

warning us that separatism is not necessarily the obvious solution.

The final theme is the most complex of all and involves the nature of gender and gender roles. Although Mother tries to brainwash Eve into thinking like a woman, the process is by no means wholly successful. Life experiences help, but by the end it is still not clear what gender Eve sees herself as. Furthermore, her story is woven in with that of Tristessa St. Ange, a Garbo-esque film star, the queen of tragedy and most beautiful woman in the world.

In *The Female Man* Joanna Russ claims that the vision of the sexy woman is a male creation, and hence holds that women should do away with make-up, pretty clothes and so on. Carter's argument is much more complex. Yes, Tristessa turns out to be a male creation as well, one man's ideal made real on celluloid, but Eve too is an ideal woman, created by Mother. And Evelyn is seduced into Mother's plans by the actions of Leila who uses every trick in the harlot's book.

Because of the dense mythological treatment it is hard to discern exactly what message Carter wants us to take away from all this. Clearly her ideas are not as simplistic and confrontational as those of Russ are, but I'm not at all sure what direction she intends us to take. The best I can do is to suggest that perhaps we are to conclude that relations between the sexes can only improve when we partake of each other's nature. Yes, we are different, but we are also both human, and we can learn to understand each other.

Well, anyway, that is what I hope she meant. It is at least a positive interpretation, and hopefully it will encourage people to read the book rather than discard it as shrill ranting. After all, Carter is head and shoulders above most writers, of any sort, that Britain has produced. The

mythological stuff is hard work in places, but it is very well done. At the least, every fan of feminist SF should read this book.

The Passion of New Eve - Angela Carter - Virago - softcover

Gods on Tour

There is such an impressive crop of new, young SF writers in the UK at the moment that it is very hard to keep up. This issue sees my first review of Jon Courtenay Grimwood. Someone else I have been unjustly ignoring is James Lovegrove. His second novel, *Days*, was a Clarke nominee, but the book I have been able to find to review is his latest novel, *The Foreigners*.

They are tall, well over six-foot, and garbed entirely in gold. Despite their stooped, slightly shambling gait, they move serenely through our world, turning their sightless eyes of their masks upon us and subjecting us to their judgement. Will we, who have almost destroyed our own planet through global warming, prove worthy of the attentions of these lordly creatures? Will they stay and watch us try to live our lives as adult creatures? Or will they lose patience with our childish greed and violence, and leave as suddenly as they came?

The Foreigners is a strange and ambitious SF novel. Superficially, it is a simple murder mystery, but the imaginative setting that Lovegrove creates allows him to do what SF does best: ask questions about our world. The creatures after whom the book is named are aliens: there seems little doubt about that, unless you admit that they are

gods. Their presence in the world has been an amazing boon. They are, it seems, genuine tourists. They are unable to communicate save for a simple language of hand gestures, but it is quite clear what makes them happy. It is also clear that selfish, violent behaviour turns them off. More often than not, such actions cause them to leave. Human society, anxious to be considered worthy of the regard of these angelic creatures, has learned to adapt.

There is more to it than that, of course. The Foreigners have given us devices which, when analysed, have allowed great leaps forward in safe and sustainable science. We, in turn, have built beautiful "resort cities", seaside visions of architectural grace that prove a magnet to our visitors. And of course we sing, for singing is what the Foreigners like best. It moves them to a strange unearthly passion. They pay very well for it too. So no one remarks that the traditional evening market in the resort cities, where human so-called Sirens compete to win the right to entertain a Foreigner for the evening, is remarkably similar to a much older tradition involving red lights and very human forms of passion.

Unsurprisingly, not all humans agree that the Foreigners are a good thing. The Xenophobes, and their militant wing, Triple-X, want no truck with the newcomers. These political activists draw their ranks mainly from native cultures: Polynesians, Aboriginals, Native Americans, all people who know what it is to have lost their own culture under the superior gaze of strange visitors from a foreign land. "Don't let Our World become the New World" is their slogan. They might be right. So far the Foreigners have done nothing to overtly harm mankind, but there is no doubt that humans have adapted to please them, not the other way round. And

who knows what they might do if we angered them.

I hope that you can see from that build-up to the story that Lovegrove is dealing with some very complex ideas. And that is not all either. I said earlier that the novel was a murder mystery. So it is, and Captain Jack Parry, on whose desk the case lands, is an old fashioned British Bobby struggling to survive in the Foreign Policy Police of New Venice. For a present-day equivalent, try the Tourist Police of Egypt whose job it is to persuade the locals to not hassle rich western visitors.

Parry believes in virtues such as straight talking and honesty. He has little time for the spin doctoring of his Commissioner, nor the back-stabbing office politics of his rival, Raymond van Wyk. Parry believes that the *Foreigners* will usher in a new era of decency amongst humans. That is why he is in the business of protecting them. But is it really possible for humans to live up to such ideals? Can Parry honestly say that he has never broken anyone's trust?

As a crime novel, *The Foreigners* is fairly average. I sussed the bad guys fairly early on (thanks to a lot of telegraphing by Lovegrove). The how had been nagging at me, and I twigged when the final clue came out. The why was particularly clever, which makes for an interesting and unexpected ending. On the other hand there is one part of the plot that relies on senior officers in the 21st Century police not having mobile phones. Possibly Lovegrove mentioned somewhere that they were something that had been discontinued because the *Foreigners* didn't like them, but that would still have been a bit lame.

As sociological SF, however, the book is fascinating. It is, perhaps, a little obvious in the questions it asks, but I see no harm in

that. Far too many SF writers ask no questions at all. Lovegrove makes valuable comment on the nature of mankind and the state of our society. He also answers those questions in the best and bravest way possible. I can see I am going to have to read more of his books.

The Foreigners - James Lovegrove - Gollancz - hardcover

On the Border

A couple of years ago I persuaded Tad Williams to come and talk to the Bay Area Science Fiction Association. As usual, he gave a wonderful speech and, being in an expansive mood, he described some of the things he was working on. There was, he said, a possibility that he would end up scripting a fantasy-based TV series. That could have been very interesting, but as is always the case with TV, the very best ideas end up in the bin because the marketing people are morons. Tad's project got the chop because, he was told, it was "like *Xena*". The fact that it was about as much like *Xena* as *The Rockford Files* is like *Hill Street Blues* mattered little in TV land. So Tad, in a fit of frustration, decided to turn the idea into a web-based novel instead.

This is either a very brave or a very foolhardy thing to do, and given the experience of Stephen King with *Riding the Bullet* the odds have to be on the latter. But Tad does have a few things on his side. Firstly (and I hope he'll forgive me for this) he is not quite in the same league as King. He won't attract quite so much attention from hackers. Also he says that he feels his natural audience is one that believes in the technology and wants to see it succeed. As

a result, he hopes they'll try not to wreck the project.

There are three things that Tad needs to make a success of this: a good story, a good web site, and a good business plan. The story, I think, goes without saying. Tad is one of the very best fantasy authors around today. Whatever he does, it is going to be good. The story was originally designed for American television, so it might be a bit painful for hardcore fantasy fans. So far, and please note that only a prologue and two chapters have been published, we have seen rather a lot of two potentially hugely irritating royal children. On the other hand there is a good background and Tad has already started subverting traditional fantasy tropes.

Shadowmarch is a land on the border of Faerie. It is a land directly threatened by the evil sorceries of the Qar, as Tad has chosen to call his elves. But we already know from the history that the adversarial relationship between humankind and the Qar is not as simplistic as most fantasy books would have it. The story is set in a time of change, and I can confidently predict that the outcome won't involve the humans wiping out the bad guys.

The web site is, for the most part, very good. The navigation is excellent. It uses frames in places, but not in areas where you are likely to want deep linking. Despite the attractive graphics it is easily accessible on my 56k modem. And there was no problem downloading the material so that I could print it out and read it in comfort. There has been some dispute about the site being hard to read on a 480x640 pixel screen, and the designers could have avoided that by not using frames, but only about 5% of *Emerald City's* readers have a screen that small so it isn't a huge problem. Sometimes in web design you just have to upset a few people.

The web site also gives Tad latitude to do things that he could not normally do in a novel. He can include a lot more artwork, piles of background information and potentially even things like music. When you log on to read *Shadowmarch* the novel, you will have access to the sort of material you might expect to find for *Shadowmarch* the role-playing game. Not that it is all there yet, but that is the plan. And readers can be involved. If people want to contribute, Tad is happy to hear from them, issues of copyright notwithstanding. There's a bulletin board where fans can give their opinions on all aspects of the project.

And so to the business plan, which is the hard bit. Right now, *Shadowmarch* is free. In a few months time, once people have got interested in it and a critical mass of people have signed up, Tad hopes to be able to charge for it. But quite how that will be done is another matter. As usual with web sites, if it is an honour system people may just not pay, and if he uses any sort of security then it will be cracked. Right now there are no technological fixes for this, and if Tad manages to come up with an idea for getting round it he'll make far more money by flogging the concept to the world's leading book and music publishers than he will by using it himself.

Some of the issues have already been aired on the bulletin board. For example, we were asked whether we would mind having the chapters posted in eBook reader format. There is an argument that if you are going to read a book on screen you might as well do so in the most comfortable format available. But many people saw this as a means of locking the material into an inflexible format that would, amongst other things, prevent them from printing it out. On the one hand people have a fair point. I hate reading off screens too. But on the

gripping hand the vehemence of the reaction was worrying.

Anyway, there is a long way to go yet, both in terms of story and business plan development. I'll keep you informed, but of course you could always go and sign up yourself: <http://www.shadowmarch.com>. If you do, please drop into the bulletin board, find the "Buzzmongering" thread, and let Tad know that you heard about Shadowmarch through *Emerald City*. No, I don't get commission, but Tad currently believes that word of mouth is the right way to promote this venture, and I want him to see the evidence when it works.

Shadowmarch - Tad Williams -
<http://www.shadowmarch.com>

Guilty as Charged

The Hugo ballots have now been released and the voting deadline is fast approaching. I am assuming that all you good people have excellent taste and will be voting for Nalo Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber* for best novel. However, there are many other award categories to consider, not least of which is Best Related Book. So it is about time I got round to looking at the leading British contender.

Of course this isn't easy for me, as I am possibly unique in the world in finding Terry Pratchett unreadable. This is not to say that he is a bad writer, simply that his particular style of humour seems to leave me unmoved. People keep telling me that I should try some of his later books, and doubtless I will in due course. But in the meantime, how am I to review a book of literary criticism about Pratchett's work? (The person who said "very badly" can go to the back of the class.)

Fortunately, for the most part, in depth knowledge of Pratchett's work is not necessary to follow the argument. This is a good thing. After all, the writers are attempting to convince the readership that Pratchett is a quality writer. Given that we must assume that readership to be unconvinced of this fact, it must also be assumed that they are unlikely to have read the novels in question. The only real question with the book is whether the readership it is attempting to convince comprises fellow critics or the public at large.

This issue is brought into focus by Dave Langford's introduction which, in typically witty Langfordian style, tells the tale of how the British Council once came close to granting Pratchett distinguished status. Some academics were clearly in favour of the idea, but it was torpedoed by a political appointee on the British Council whose idea of quality writing is probably a *Daily Telegraph* editorial on the evils of immigration.

Dave also regales us with choice titbits about the breadth of allusion within Pratchett's work. I am ashamed to say that I had no idea that Rincewind was actually the name of one of the twelve red-bearded dwarfs whose antics so tormented the unfortunate Mr. Justice Cocklecarrot in the writings of the excellent 'Beachcomber'.

Langford is followed by John Clute who, in typically erudite style, takes us on a whistle-stop tour of the origins of Discworld in Pratchett's earlier science fiction work. Few people reading Pratchett's current work would guess that Discworld has its roots in Nivenesque ideas of constructed worlds. Clute, being Clute, cannot resist going off at a tangent of his own occasionally, and I particularly enjoyed his heaping of opprobrium on what he calls 'Christian fantasists' (though I

would be surprised if many of them realised that they were writing fantasy within a Christian tradition).

There then follows a series of articles dealing with different aspects of the Pratchett corpus of work. These are all by different academics and are of varying quality. The weakest is Andy Butler's piece on Theories of Humour, which is little more than a guided tour of various cock-eyed attempts to systematise what is funny and tells us little about Pratchett's work beyond that fact that his books contain a few jokes. Some of the theories described are so redolent of Gruyere that it is difficult to understand why any respectable academic continues to take them seriously.

The one entry that left me wishing I was more of an expert of Pratchett's work was Karen Sayer's piece on The Witches. It came over as if Sayer was simply expounding some pet theory of her own on feminism and picking a few examples from Pratchett where it was convenient to do so. This may be unfair, but without more research I can't back up or disprove the impression I got from reading the essay.

In contrast Andy Sawyer spends a lot of time talking about library theory in his piece on the Librarian, but he is well aware of what he is doing and apologises for it.

"This leads us to further terms such as 'Dublin Core' and 'Encoded Archival Description', but at this point it is probably better to turn to librarianship on the Discworld, which involves fewer electronic resources, an almost equally complex system of relationships, and more jokes."

In fact, though, Sawyer has a good point. Pratchett's "L-Space" does bear remarkable similarities to the World Wide Web, and the ability of the Librarian to travel through

L-Space is a Discworld analogue to web surfing. In other words, Pratchett doesn't just have a librarian (and a library) as a character, he understands how libraries work.

The book shows a wide variation of style from fairly dense academese to highly approachable English. I suspect that it is no accident that the two essays I found least impressive (those by Butler and Sawyer) were also the most obtuse. Perhaps I simply didn't understand what they were trying to say. Elsewhere Matthew Hills expends an awful lot of verbiage expounding the relatively simple concept that the more books Pratchett writes, the more he becomes confined by precedent, and by his fans desire for consistency, and the less artistic freedom he has. Hills' essay is, however, fairly readable, and where he quotes other people's gobbledegook he makes a point of explaining it, which at least shows he is aware of the problem.

(It is worth noting also that Pratchett may, to some extent, have been backed into this position. Penelope Hill's piece on the Unseen University suggests that the Discworld was far more mutable early on in the series and that some novels can only be explained by assuming that they take place in a parallel universe. Quotes from Pratchett suggest that, as an author, he dislikes being required to display internal consistency.)

Farah Mendlesohn's piece on Faith and Ethics treads a careful middle ground. Because it is necessary to discuss Pratchett's work within the context of ethical theory there are considerable references to academic sources. However, Mendlesohn manages to keep the material understandable and easy to read. Edward James is more fortunate. His piece on The City Watch spends a lot of time explaining how Pratchett successfully parodies

various types of police drama, and thus requires much quoting of popular culture rather than academic theory.

The depth of Pratchett's knowledge of popular culture, as explained primarily by Langford, Clute and James, is impressive. However, the authors' case is made most compellingly when they focus on philosophical issues. Nickianne Moody shows how the Death books draw heavily on political satire about Thatcherite Britain. It does appear at times that Moody is trying to claim Pratchett for Marxism, which is a highly dubious claim given that Mendlesohn shows that Pratchett's morality is individualist and that he regards a primary source of evil as subjugation to an ideology. However, Moody doesn't let her politics get in the way of honestly illustrating the cleverness of Pratchett's satire.

Elsewhere Edward James touches on issues of politics and racism discussed in the City Watch books. Mendlesohn demonstrates that Pratchett has a consistent and honest approach to ethics in his work. And Cherith Baldry provides a wonderful essay on Pratchett's children's books which shows conclusively that he assumes higher standards of intelligence from his young readers than many fantasy writers assume of adults. Pratchett clearly has an excellent understanding of political issues and a healthy cynicism about ideologues.

"It is significant that the only person who expresses a Utopian view in the City Watch novels is the unscrupulous Supreme Grand Master of the Elucidated Brethren, who thinks

'we will overthrow the cold tyrant and we will usher in a new age of enlightenment and fraternity and humanism and Ankh-Morpork will become a Utopia and people like Brother Plasterer will be roasted over slow fires if I have any say in the matter, which I will.'"

With a few exceptions, then, the book provides a fascinating insight into the Discworld corpus. Pratchett is demonstrated to be a writer of prodigious knowledge and remarkable intelligence. Above all, the book left me wanting to take another stab at reading Pratchett's work. As such, it must have done its job. I have to say that it is in dire need of a good copy-editor, but other than that it is a fine contribution to SF literary criticism, and a long overdue acclamation of an extraordinarily talented writer.

This book is not available through Amazon. For purchase details go to: <http://www.sf-foundation.org/publications/specials/guilt.html>. Bay Area readers should talk to Dave Clark. I suspect that NESFA will have the book available as well.

Terry Pratchett: Guilty of Literature - Ed. Andrew M. Butler, Edward James & Farah Mendlesohn - The Science Fiction Foundation - softcover

Miscellany

Word of Mouth Spawns

In previous issues of *Emerald City* I have mentioned the book review e-zine, *Word of Mouth*. I was interested to note that it has recently spawned a speculative fiction spin-off.

Whilst it is great to see things like *Word of Mouth* exist, it has always worried me that it relied entirely on reader input. Each issue contains three book reviews, and you never know from one issue to the next who the reviewers are going to be, or what sort of quality of reviews you will get. I'm pleased to say that the speculative fiction version is

different. The reviews will be written solely by David McKinlay, one of the best and most regular of the original newsletter's contributors.

McKinlay certainly knows his stuff. The first edition contains a review of Clifford D. Simak's Hugo-winning *Way Station* and a brief article signing the praises of Cordwainer Smith. McKinlay does imaginative reviews as well. For example, he describes Ben Bova as for: "middle of the road science fiction fans who, like Goldilocks, do not like it too hard or too soft." And of course I'll always have a soft spot for someone who says that the latest David Eddings left him "bored witless".

The new newsletter does still use the question and answer format of the original, which leaves it sounding rather like a teen magazine ("so, Britney Spears, what is your favourite breakfast cereal, and which astrologer do you read most regularly?"). Xina Marie Uhl, the editor, maintains that this forces reviewers to consider all the salient issues, and I think she's right when relying on untested reader feedback. But I think the format is limiting for someone as capable as McKinlay.

Having said that, I'm pretty certain that if you like what I write about SF&F, you will like what McKinlay writes too. You can subscribe by sending email to WOMSpecFic-subscribe@yahoogroups.com.

As does Diverse Books

Still on the book reviews front, I'm not sure if I have mentioned Alex McLintock's Diverse Books web site. I should have done, because through some miracles of XML technology you can actually get a contents listing for the current *Emerald City* there. Go to <http://www.diversebooks.com> and click

on SF Sites and you'll see it there. The same technology is used to index other sites, including SF Site and Amazon UK. Alex does his own reviews too.

What prompted me to write this, however, is that Alex has just launched a news site. Given that the latest *Ansible* gleefully reported that the *Plokta News Network* has been inactive for a whole year (doubtless Mike Scott got bored with it), this is very timely. You can find it at <http://news.diversebooks.com> (no www). An email digest of headlines is available.

Merge-Matic Mirth

A friend in the US (thank you Simon) reports on a competition run by the *Washington Post* for the best "merge-matic" book titles. This is a great parlour game. The idea is to create a book that is an amusing combination of two famous works. I was delighted to see a large SF presence in the finalists. The winner was the very cleverly dry:

Fahrenheit 451 of the Vanities: An '80s yuppie is denied books. He does not object, or even notice.

However, for more side-splitting examples try these runners up:

Planet of the Grapes of Wrath: Astronaut lands on mysterious planet, only to discover that it is his very own home planet of Earth, which has been taken over by the Joads, a race of dirt-poor corn farmers who miraculously developed rudimentary technology and evolved the ability to speak after exposure to nuclear radiation.

Paradise Lost in Space: Satan, Moloch, and Belial are sentenced to spend eternity in a flying saucer with a goofy robot, an evil scientist and two annoying children.

So, next time you are looking for a light entertainment panel at a con...

This month on IGoUGo

My latest piece of travel writing concerns the Brighton Festival (the largest arts festival in England, as the locals like to say to tease the Scots). It includes a visit to an artists' open house hosted by Deirdre Counihan who is the house cover artist for SF publisher, Big Engine.

Revolution postponed

For those of you following China Miéville's political career, he almost managed to get to the magic 500 votes. That's pretty good for a minor party in a general election, especially for a Trotskyist in a constituency that includes Regent's Park, Marylebone and St. John's Wood. Besides, if China had got elected, it might have interfered with his writing career, and that would have been a disaster. He's too good for Parliament.

Kay Misquoted

Friends of Guy Gavriel Kay have written to point out that I misquoted his interview in the *New York Review of Science Fiction*. Kay did not state that the *Fionavar Tapestry* said all that there was to say about fantasy, just that it said all he had to say. Sorry folks, Guy especially.

Back in the ghetto

Recently a British TV station (Channel 5 for those interested) ran a special "sci-fi night". The listing paper I get had a fetching Jane Fonda cover in recognition of this. But when I looked to see what was on I got something of a shock. Yes, there were two SF films; though neither of them was the wonderful *Barbarella*. The rest of the evening's programming was given over to

documentaries on UFOlogy and conspiracy theory.

You know it used to be that being a science fiction fan was a brave and lonely occupation. People poked fun at us for it, and we had to band together in clubs and at conventions for mutual support. Then came *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*, and suddenly everyone was into "sci-fi". Being a fan was no longer special. Now things have come full circle, because as far as the general public, and in particular the media, is concerned, a "science fiction fan" is someone with a religious belief that everything from von Daniken through Velikovsky, Streiber and the *X-Files* is All True. Sure, it is OK to watch *Star Wars*, but only those nutcase fans believe that it is real. The fact that we are actually the least likely people to believe such nonsense is, apparently, irrelevant.

So, ladies and gentlemen, we are back in the ghetto. Put brown paper covers on your David Brin novels. Paint out the "M" on your Iain Banks books, and pretend that Ken MacLeod writes political thrillers. You don't want to be laughed at on the train, do you? There are people who have blamed the mass popularity of *Star Trek* for the decline of membership of SF clubs (or at least the lack of young recruits). It remains to be seen whether this new ghettoization will reverse the trend.

Footnote

And that, as they say, is that. Next month may well be a bit strange. I am expecting my visa for the US to come through sometime before the end of July. When it does there will probably be a short period of panic, followed by a painful period of

getting used to the old 9-to-5 once again. I'm also thinking that I need to work my way through some of the pile of books I have in the UK that are as yet unread, so that I'm not wanting to take them all with me straight away. Anyway, if things turn out a little disorganised, I apologise in advance.

There will, however, be a report on the SF Foundation conference, which has a stellar attendance list. Expect lots of sickening name-dropping. Sorry folks, but there are not many fans going and I have to go to dinner with someone.

Until then,

Ciao,

Love 'n' hugs,

Cheryl