

EMERALD CITY #78

Issue 78

February 2002

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Introduction

OK, so I didn't manage to get this issue out in time for Potlatch. Instead I am writing it at the convention. The good news is that you get a con report in this issue.

Most of the rest of the issue is devoted to discussing this year's nominees for the Philip K. Dick Award. This award (and here I quote from the very useful Locus Online) "is presented annually for distinguished science fiction published in paperback original form in the United States. The award is sponsored by the Philadelphia Science Fiction Society and the award ceremony is sponsored by the NorthWest Science Fiction Society."

What makes the award interesting is that it is only up and coming authors who get published as paperback originals. All the big names get a hardcover first. So the Dick is effectively an award for new, or newly recognised authors. And I am pleased to say that it has given me new heart on the subject of the state of American science fiction writing. We have some very promising talent here.

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Heatless in Seattle

Friday

So, here I am, almost at the end of the month, and no fanzine written. But I am spending the weekend at a convention, and hopefully that will give me time to do something. It does, however, mean that this con report is getting written on the fly, more like a web log than a report. Hopefully the results will be interesting.

It is early on Friday afternoon. Kevin and I got up ridiculously early to get a 9:00 am flight out of San José. The day started very well, because we called into the post office on the way to the airport and I found a review copy of the new China Miéville novel waiting for me. More of that next issue, once I have had a chance to read it.

Things very nearly took a turn for the worse because I had forgotten to sweep my handbag for Dangerous Terrorist Weapons. Thankfully I remembered while we were at check-in and was able to offload the offending nail clippers, tweezers and so on into the checked luggage. Travelling by air in the US is now very dangerous indeed, because there are very many ridiculous regulations in place and far too many frightened, badly paid and poorly educated people in charge of enforcing them. Give me terrorists any day.

The con hotel, a Best Western, turned out to be almost at the base of the Space Needle. Sadly we got a typical Seattle day: cold, damp and overcast. When we arrived here cloudbase was not very far above the top of the Needle, and there was a type of rain falling that would be depressingly familiar to any inhabitant of Manchester. It has cleared up a bit since, and hopefully I'll get a decent day to go sightsee later in the weekend.

Bad weather, of course, does not deter Kevin from riding trains, so the first thing we had to do on arrival (after making sure we had email connectivity) was to ride the monorail. It only takes a short trip, from the Needle into Downtown, but it does drop you right at the door of an excellent food court in the Westlake shopping mall. We had lunch, which turned out to be a vast pile of food, probably sufficient to last the rest of the day. That's America for you. I suspect that in the UK we would have got about a third of the amount of food and the

price would have been the same in pounds as we paid in dollars.

Then it was back to the hotel. Right now Kevin is off schmoozing and selling ConJosé memberships, while I am typing this.

Saturday Morning

I spent most of yesterday afternoon writing book reviews, shivering and going through tissues at a ridiculous rate. Most American hotels are either over-heated or over-cooled. This one is just chilly. I'm wearing a jumper and a leather jacket indoors. Thankfully I'm feeling less miserable today, and I have the promise of a whisky tasting this evening which I am sure will make me feel a lot better.

This morning's project was the Dealers' Room. One of the reasons why I love Potlatch is they don't have a Dealers' Room as such, they have a Book Room: nothing but book dealers. I know it isn't everyone's cup of tea, but it is definitely my sort of convention. Eight new books so far. Will doubtless buy more tomorrow.

Sunday Morning

Hmm, it was a busier day yesterday than I had anticipated. The book total is now up to 14, all of them good stuff. I have no idea when I am going to get around to reading them all.

Of course I haven't managed to get to any of the program items. I've been far too busy doing other things (including writing this 'zine). I did put time aside to go and listen to Suzy McKee Charnas on the subject of writing about a social revolution, but sadly Suzy had a family emergency and had to pull out. I bought more books instead.

One job I had to make time for was the whisky-shopping trip. Jack Bell's whisky tasting has now become a Potlatch tradition ("anything we run three times is a tradition") and being a lover of single malts myself I wanted to do my bit. Unfortunately I didn't get my act in gear in time back in California and had to go and buy my contribution while I was in Seattle. Now the state of Washington is one of those places where "hard liquor" can only be bought through official government-run stores. Having had experience of this sort of thing in Sweden, I was rather nervous. I suspect things are better there these days (I haven't been to Sweden in over 10 years), but when I did try one of their government liquor stores I found everything behind bars and the staff having the uniforms and demeanour of prison warders. Thankfully Washington State is a lot better than that. The place Jack took Matt Austern and I even had a good variety of single malts, and we came away with a fine selection.

Later in the day I met up with Nicola Griffith and Kelley Eskridge whom I hadn't seen since Liverpool last year. Several pints of beer got consumed and much general gossip was exchanged. Not much of the conversation touched science fiction at all, but we did get onto the subject of the Winter Olympics. Janet Lafler explained how she felt that cats ought to get their chance at Olympic medals too, and that watching them rush around on ice should be good fun. However, cats would not agree to do such a thing unless an opportunity was provided for them to engage in violence. Therefore some sort of target would be needed. We could call the resulting sport Mice Dancing.

Yes, OK, we had got very silly.

Dinner was provided by Chutneys, one of the best Indian restaurants I have been to. Last time Potlatch was in Seattle we found

a branch of this chain to eat at and were very impressed. Surprise, they have a branch near the Space Needle as well, and the food is every bit as good as I remembered. If you are in Seattle, try this place.

The whisky tasting went very well. Of course it helps that Jack and I are thoroughly in agreement that Balvenie is the best whisky in the universe.

Sunday Lunchtime

Hooray! This morning there were blue skies over Seattle. This, of course, meant that it was windy and biting cold outside, but Kevin and I took the opportunity to go up the Space Needle. It costs \$11 to go up, which is not inconsiderable, but I think it was well worth it. You get a fine view out over the city. Sadly Mount Rainier was still swathed in clouds.

I then offered to go for another ride on the monorail on the grounds that, seeing that it wasn't raining, we could go shopping. Unfortunately it seems that most of downtown Seattle is shut on Sundays, so my deviousness came to nothing. Kevin, of course, got two more rides on the monorail, one of which was free of kids so he could ride right up the front.

Back at the hotel, the Clarion West auction is in process. Tom Whitmore has just auctioned a hat and scarf knitted by Vonda Macintyre. It fetched \$90. This is how promising young writers get to learn their trade. Successful authors knit stuff. This is sold to fans for vast sums of money. And thus we can afford to run writers' workshops. You had no idea that the science fiction business was on such a sound footing, did you.

Sunday Evening

Back home safely. On the way to the airport we found that the clouds had cleared completely and we got fabulous views of Mount Rainier. No trouble with “security” in Seattle, other than it took over an hour to get checked in and through to the gate. The weather in San José was warmer at 10:00pm than it was in Seattle in the middle of the day. Seattle is a lovely city, and I’d really like a chance to go back there and play tourist sometime, but at this time of year I am very glad that I live in California.

As for the con, I love Potlatch and I have already bought my membership for next year (when it will be back in San Francisco). I know that a con where the program and dealers’ room are focussed solely on books is not for everyone, but it is my sort of convention and I will keep on going back. Many thanks to the Seattle crew who put on this year’s event.

Tunnel of Death

OK, I’m sorry, I missed this one. Connie Willis has, after all, won Hugos before. A new novel by her should be a contender, and I didn’t pick it up until it came out in paperback. Fortunately I got to it in time.

The new novel is not a continuation of Connie’s *Domesday Book* time travel series. Instead it is an entirely new departure that takes a somewhat sideways look at Near Death Experiences (NDEs). The title, *Passage*, is of course a pun. This is Connie we are talking about here, after all. It refers both to passing from this life to the next, and to the tunnel with a light at the end that appears to be a common component of almost all NDEs.

Having chosen a medical theme for the book, Connie cannot resist turning it in part into a hospital romance. The heroine, Joanna Lander, a psychologist investigating NDEs, ends up working with the overly obviously named Dr. Richard Wright. Although this allows him to be Mr. Right, those of us of similar age of Connie will immediately recognise that his surname is not Wright but Chamberlain. Thankfully Connie has far too much sense to give us a hideously sugary happy-ever-after ending, so I’m happy to forgive her the indulgence.

Anyone who has seen Connie perform at a convention will have some idea of what her books are like. As we know, Connie can talk. Endlessly. And *Passage* is a book filled with Connie-like characters. Joanna is trying to get reliable testimony from people who have experienced NDEs, but she ends up with a whole bunch of people who either don’t talk at all, or talk even more than Connie herself and are deeply unreliable. For example, there is Mrs Davenport who is absolutely certain that she has had an NDE because she met her poor, dear departed Uncle Alvin who introduced her to Jesus, to Elvis and a whole bunch of other people, the list of whom got longer and longer each time Mrs. Davenport recalled it. Then there is Mr. Wojakowski, who can’t remember seeing much at all during his NDE, but who takes every opportunity to tell Joanna, Richard and everyone else he can corner vast numbers of incredibly detailed anecdotes about his time on the good old Yorktown in the Pacific Theatre during WWII, all of which involve many unlikely characters with silly Navy-style nicknames, dastardly duplicity by the cunning Japanese, hairsbreadth escapes from deadly danger and noble sacrifice of life for one’s buddies. Was that sentence long enough? Probably not, Connie can sustain Mr.

Wojakowski's monologues for pages on end.

Joanna's life is further complicated by the presence in the hospital where she works of Mr. Maurice Mandrake, the world's greatest authority on NAEs – that's Near Afterlife Experiences, because Mr. Mandrake is firmly convinced that the experiences of people like Mrs. Davenport are absolute proof of the existence of the afterlife. He has written best selling books on the subject. His idea of scientific proof is an anecdote told 20 years after the event by someone who was a friend of a cousin of the person who is the subject of the story. Mr. Mandrake is sure that Joanna's work will provide further proof of his theories. Joanna knows that any involvement with Mandrake will ruin her credibility.

The science fiction element of all this is that Richard believes that he has a biochemical explanation for NDEs. Indeed he has a means of inducing them, fortunately without the need to put people's lives in danger. He needs Joanna's help to relate what his subjects are experiencing to the chemical changes in the subjects' brains during the experience. But with so few reliable subjects, Joanna elects to volunteer for the procedure herself. And the more NDEs she has, the more convinced she becomes that the other subjects are right, NDEs are not just visions induced by changes in brain chemistry, they are something real.

Although Connie must have written the book well before the event, *Passage* is in some ways an ideal 9/11 book. Much of the subtext of the novel is about safety and comfort. Maurice Mandrake's works are popular because he tells people that there is nothing to be afraid of in death. We will all go to somewhere warm and pleasant and full of loving people when we die. In particular we will be reunited with loved

ones whom we have lost. Connie knows this is a lie, just as much a public relations exercise as the supposed "security" measures at airports. It is an excuse for failing to face up to reality, and she hates it.

Mandrake's palliatives are contrasted with the amazing Maisie Nellis. Maisie is a little girl with serious heart problems. The chances are she will die soon. Her mother is a devotee of another popular American head-in-the-sand philosophy: positive thinking. Mrs. Nellis refuses to even consider that Maisie is anything worse than mildly sick, and she is convinced that the only way to save Maisie is to continue to pretend that she is about to get well. Maisie, to her credit, recognises this as typical adult nonsense, and deals with the problem in her own way, by reading books about famous disasters. Because Connie firmly believes in facing up to reality rather than pretending it doesn't exist, it is Maisie who is proved right in the end, rather than Mrs. Nellis and Mandrake.

So there we have it: lots of delightful Connie-esque silliness, something of an SF theme, perhaps a bit of dark fantasy, and some sound sociology. And it is good, because Connie is good. But is it Hugo material? Sadly no, because Connie can't resist being Connie. The end of the book is like one of her Hugo presentation speeches. You know, the ones where she takes 10 minutes to get to "and the winner is", but almost gets to it once a minute on her way there. The book is just like that. Chapter after chapter you think you should be getting to the end, but Connie finds yet another reason to put it off. There is a time and a place for everything. One Connie presentation in a Hugo ceremony is funny. If everyone did it, the Hugo ceremony would be a disaster. And in a novel, well, the book ends up at least 100 pages longer than it needs to be. Shame.

Small Gods

Here is a book I was very much looking forward to reading. Ken Wharton is a local boy – a professor of physics at San José State University. *Divine Intervention* is his first novel, and he's one of the hot favourites for this year's Campbell Award. The fact that the book is on the shortlist for the Phil Dick Award is a very good sign.

The book is set on Mandala, a human colony world that is about to receive its second wave of settlement. The original Mandalans came through in the days when inter-stellar travel was very dangerous. Indeed, they almost didn't make it at all, and when they did find a planet to settle they adopted a new religion based around the writings of the seemingly inspired captain who got them there. Now, getting there is much easier, and a new ship full of rich, cryogenically suspended settlers are on their way. There are enough of them to completely swamp the culture of the young Mandalan community. Some of the existing settlers are not too pleased by this prospect, in particular those who have achieved political power in the settlement.

Enter Drew Randall, a young boy whose father is a minister in the church of Symmology founded by The Captain. Drew is a mutant, one of the many unfortunate victims of the settlement ship's inadvertent exposure to its own fusion motors. He can't speak, but with appropriate electronic enhancement he can create speech by thinking it. His mother has the same mutation, and they have discovered that they can speak mentally to each other. Now Drew's father has always

encouraged the boy to pray. "Speak to God", he says, "and God will answer". Drew, being a sensible boy, didn't think much of this. He tried praying a lot, and God never once answered. But then one evening he pointed the antenna of his speech system at the sky, and lo, God did answer.

He wasn't aware that he was God at first. Indeed, he seemed rather like another kid, albeit one with very little experience of life. But eventually Drew and God became firm friends. Drew quickly learned that telling his father what God was saying was not a good idea. After all, his father was still talking to that imaginary God who never talked back to Drew. But hey, kids need friends, yeah? And Drew had a friend in God.

None of this, of course, would matter, except that the Earth ship was running ahead of schedule. Prime Minister Channing, who happens to control all inter-stellar communications, sees this as an ideal opportunity to do something about it before his subjects even know the settlers have arrived. Little did he know that God was watching the skies, and was able to tell Drew the moment that the Earth ship entered orbit.

There are three main SF elements to the book. The first is simply space travel itself. Ken is a physicist, and he's more than convincing enough for me. Then there is God. Ken gives much of that one away right at the beginning, which is a bit of a shame, but it is an interesting idea. The most well developed concept, however, is Symmology, the religion founded by The Captain. It is a strange kind of religion. Much of it simply involves having reverence for science. Drew's father spends most of his time telling parables about The Captain that help educate people about science. However, The Captain does have

his own unique theory of God, and it is based on fundamental physics.

In Ken's world the wave-particle duality theory on which modern quantum physics is based has been discredited. This in turn is based on ideas involving the symmetry of universe in time. According to *The Captain*, temporal symmetry is true and God is the racial consciousness of mankind travelling backwards from the end of the universe. Ken spends a considerable amount of time explaining the theoretical basis of Symmology, much of which I didn't feel confident to follow without reading a few science textbooks (or at least popular science books such as *The Arrow of Time* by Peter Coveney and Roger Highfield). However, one of the more important tenets of the faith is that mankind must be the only intelligent species in the universe. If we were not, then, come the end of time, there would be competition for which species would become God, and mankind might not triumph. If that were the case, then the God who moves backwards through time would not be human and would not care about us in the way a post-human God would. This, believe me, is important, although I can't tell you why.

Overall I was pretty impressed with Ken's book. I read it immediately after the Connie Willis and I wasn't disappointed in the quality of the language. The characterisation certainly wasn't up to Connie's standards, but I am sure Ken will get better at that. The main problem I had was that there is a glaring hole in the plot. If Croll, Channing's strong arm man, is as nasty as he is made out, then he would have killed Drew at the first convenient opportunity and disposed of the body. Then, of course, there would have been no story. Shame really, because the book is full of interesting ideas, and it is still well worth reading.

Divine Intervention – Ken Wharton – Ace – softcover

Travelling Blind

Next up in the Dick Award stakes is a book by someone who has already won the award. Richard Paul Russo, then, is someone who has won a major award but has not graduated to hardcover publication. For the life of me I cannot understand why.

His latest novel, *Ship of Fools*, charts the ongoing voyages of the starship, Argonos. It is a generation ship, and it has been travelling for hundreds of years. Bishop Soldano maintains that the ship has always existed. Perhaps it has, but some of the passengers still cling to legends of Earth. One version of the ship's history claims that they once found the home planet, and discovered it laid waste. Other habitable planets are rare indeed, and the last time the Argonos found one the Bishop tried to forcibly convert the locals to Christianity, causing the starship to be driven off under heavy fire.

Of course there are reasons for the Argonos to keep going. The ship has a rigid class structure. Those who are on top stay on top, and they are terrified that if they settled on a planet they might lose that power. The lower classes would love to escape, but the highly regimented life necessary to maintain a safe lifestyle in deep space also helps those in charge to stay in charge. Also life on a starship provides a built in resource shortage and thus naturally facilitates economic hierarchies.

The discovery of an inhabited planet, then, is a major political event on board the

Argonos. Captain Costa sees it as his duty to explore potential contacts with civilisation. The Bishop sees it as another possibility for making converts. So there is pressure to make contact. A radio signal is a clear sign of settlement, but a single, unvarying signal is a sign of something wrong. Costa cautiously sends down a landing party headed by his right hand man, Bartolomeo Aguilera. What Bartolomeo finds there will change life on the Argonos forever.

In essence, *Ship of Fools* is a horror story. Whatever happened on the planet the Bishop named Antioch must have been done by beings so alien that human concepts such as pity and compassion are unknown to them. Indeed, those beings probably thrived on the terror of their victims. But can Costa simply ignore the discovery, especially when he finds a clue to what happened? Can the Bishop ignore the possibility that other human souls are still captive of whatever destroyed the Antioch colony? Can anyone on the Argonos resist the lure of mankind's first contact with an alien species?

Russo, I think, has the best prose of any of the writers on the Dick short list. He has been writing longer than any of the others so he should do. He handles the slowly mounting suspense as the Argonos discovers and explores the abandoned alien spaceship expertly. He also does a fine job of portraying the Byzantine politics of shipboard life. Because of the great age of the Argonos, much of the technology on board is decayed or no longer understood. The book thus has something of a dark fantasy feel to it. *Ship of Fools* is a book that is squarely centred on that conjunction of SF, horror and fantasy occupied by China Miéville.

Unfortunately this book is also let down by the plot. For most of the book's length

things are fine, but when we get to the end a whole bunch of things happen purely because it is necessary for the plot for them to happen that way. It shouldn't be that way. In a well-written novel the development of the plot should be inevitable, not artificial. I was sufficiently impressed by Russo's writing to want to investigate his other books (especially as they are set in San Francisco), but I was disappointed to see such a promising book as *Ship of Fools* let down by a poor ending.

Ship of Fools – Richard Paul Russo – Ace – softcover

Emotional Ties

Another Dick finalist that has First Contact overtones is *In the Company of Others* by Julie E. Czerneda. But whereas Russo's aliens are no more clearly drawn than Lovecraft's, all the better to maintain the air of horror, Czerneda is firmly in the territory of hard SF.

When the animals (plants? organisms?) known as Quill were first discovered, by human terraforming crews busy opening up new worlds for Earth's burgeoning billions, it seems that they were a tremendous boon. By wrapping the multi-coloured Quill filaments round their wrists, the scientists obtained a feeling of peace and calm. Indeed, the very name "Quill" is an abbreviation of "tranquilliser". But with time the friendly Quill turned bad. Somehow the little filaments found a way to kill humans, and as the Quill organisms multiplied, so the new colony worlds became quarantined.

Years later, Earth's would-be colonists are crammed onto overcrowded space stations, kept from their expected new homes by the

deadly Quill plague, and banned from returning home to Earth least they accidentally be carrying Quill filaments with them. Faced with an alien species that can kill instantly, is small enough to hide anywhere, and has Earth's finest scientists baffled, humanity will blow its own people out of the skies rather than let danger anywhere near the home world.

The paranoia about the Quill is so great that most scientists are afraid to study them. Who, after all, would risk instant death if their research failed and banishment from Earth unless it was provably 100% successful? Everyone, it seems, except someone with such all consuming self-confidence and ambition that she believes she can save the universe from the Quill plague: someone like Gail Veronika Ashton Smith.

Gail, of course, is anything but stupid. She won't risk her career on any crackpot theory. But she happens to have very good reason to believe that there is one human who has survived the Quill. On Thromberg Station there lives a man called Aaron Pardell, the great grandson of Susan Witts, leader of the terraforming team that first discovered the Quill. Aaron, it seems, was born on a Quill-infested world and blasted into space and safety by his parents before they died. If he could be studied, perhaps the secret of the Quill could be unravelled.

A lesser writer would leave it at that. Gail would go to Thromberg, Aaron would be persuaded to help, and the Quill mystery would be solved. But Czerneda is not a lesser writer. For her, simply finding Aaron is only the start of a whole host of problems. Fully the first third of the book is given over to Gail's disastrous attempts to reach her test subject and a thorough exploration of the sociology of life on a space station that is massively over-populated and effectively a prison for its

inhabitants. Even when our hero and heroine finally get to confront the aliens, the difficulties of the science pale into insignificance besides the difficulties of human politics.

Julie's writing style reminds me very much of George R.R. Martin's *Song of Fire and Ice*. Like George, she has many short chapters and switches viewpoints between them. She doesn't quite have George's habit of ending almost every chapter on a cliff-hanger, but she has been experimenting with Alan Moore's run-on style. Moore, of course, became famous for ending the final panel of one page of a comic with a half sentence, and having the first panel of the next page finish, or at least complement, that sentence, even though the new page starts a completely different scene with different characters.

All of that is perhaps a bit esoteric, but the important point to take away is that Czerneda keeps the action going. *In the Company of Others* is a long book, and many long books drag interminably as the action builds up slowly. Czerneda keeps the action going all the way through. The pace changes, but you'll find bits of frenetic activity spread throughout the book. This is not a book you will get bored with.

Also, as I intimated earlier, Czerneda is well aware of how humans work. No one in the book is totally nice. No one is totally nasty. All of the opposition do what they do for reasons that they think are good. Sometimes their understanding of the situation is wrong, often it is informed by suspicion and paranoia. And by far the worst things that are done by any creatures in the book are done because those creatures are deeply afraid.

Unfortunately, *In the Company of Others* is unlikely to gain the recognition it deserves because it also contains a fair amount of romance. Male readers are going to hate it.

Even I found it a bit hard going at times. Sure people do fall in love, but are they really quite that irrational about it? Maybe they are. But really this is a very fine book, and I thoroughly recommend it.

In the Company of Others – Julie E. Czerneda – DAW – softcover

Reach for the Skies

Last in our list of Dick Award nominees is *Compass Reach* by Mark W. Tiedemann. This too concerns aliens, but ones that are well known and, for many people, well feared. Not that the alien races in Tiedemann's world are deadly, or even antagonistic. They just want to trade. But, humans being what they are, there is a substantial faction that wants to isolate the human economic sphere from potentially dangerous foreigners. "Let's just close our borders and have nothing to do with anyone who is different", they say. Hmm, can you say "political satire"?

Some of the most interesting aspects of Tiedemann's book are his views on future economics. Iain Banks' Culture novels postulate that once mankind cracks cheap energy and faster than light travel we will have so much access to resources that everyone will be rich. Tiedemann is not so optimistic. He has a similar set-up, but class politics are everywhere. His lead characters, Fargo and Lis, are Freeriders, effectively homeless folks who exist by scrounging through dustbins and hitching illegal rides on spacecraft. Above them are the Invested, people who have jobs and IDs and are allowed to participate in the economic system, but are not allowed to own anything substantial. And above them are the Vested, who actually own

significant property (companies, real estate and so on).

Yet the Freeriders are neither poor (in our terms) nor hungry. And if you think about it, the homeless in California are not poor in comparison to people in many parts of the world. I've seen people begging in Berkeley who own things like personal stereos. Are they poor? Of course by modern American standards they are. By modern Afghan standards it is a different matter.

Tiedemann, however, has a more sinister explanation for all this. It is clear, he says, that we could get rid of the Freeriders (or the homeless) if we really want to. (Singapore probably does get rid of its homeless, or at least make sure that they are invisible.) But, says Tiedemann, it suits those in power to keep the likes of Freeriders around, because it provides a constant reminder to everyone else of what will happen if they don't toe the line.

But why have a class society at all? Isn't there enough to go around? Tiedemann says that it is all about power. People who have power, whether economic or political, are unwilling to give it up. It doesn't matter how rich the average person is. The Freeriders, for example, pick up technology from garbage bins that would cost millions today. But relative wealth has to be maintained. It is a depressing view of humanity, but I have an awful feeling that he's right.

OK, so what about the book. I think it could be a lot better. I wasn't impressed with the handling of the characters and their emotional interactions. He certainly stretched himself a lot: introducing characters with telepathic powers makes it hard to handle relationships. It also worried me a lot that the aliens seemed to be portrayed as universally nice and the human leaders as almost universally nasty.

The book is only the first part of a series, and I think that later parts will involve the aliens more, so that complaint might go away. Tiedemann has a lot of good ideas, and I'm interested to see how he develops, but I think he does need to develop a bit.

Compass Reach – Mark W. Tiedemann – Meisha Merlin – softcover

Miscellany

Phil Dick Award Summary

There are two other nominees for the Phil Dick Award that I haven't mentioned so far. One is *The Ghost Sister* by Liz Williams, which I reviewed in issue #76. The other is *Meet Me in the Moon Room* by Ray Vukceвич, which is a collection of short stories. As regular readers will know, I'm not good with short stories so I haven't tried to review this one. Leaving aside the Vukceвич, which I have seen getting some highly positive comment elsewhere, my vote would go to Julie Czerneda. I think her book is the best all-round work, and by far the best plotted of the candidates. I suspect that its strong romantic sub-plot may bias some of the judges against it, but you never know. Other than that, Richard Paul Russo, as a past winner, probably stands a very good chance.

Hugo Deadline Nears

Talking of awards, the deadline for the nomination stage of the Hugos (March 31st) is nearing fast. I am delighted to say that I have got a huge response to the Hugo Recommendation page. If you haven't voted yet, check out http://emcit.com/hugo_rec.shtml for some excellent ideas.

Nit Picking Defined

One of the defining characteristics of fandom seems to be a delight in nit-picking minor details. It doesn't seem to matter what you talk about, you can guarantee that some fan somewhere will find something trivial wrong with what you said and will claim that this refutes your entire thesis. I'm probably just as bad at this in my own areas of expertise as anyone else. But did you know that there is a name for people like us? A doryphore is one who takes excessive delight in correcting the small errors of others.

Deer in the Headlights

Life on the ConJosé committee has been interesting recently, in the mythical ancient Chinese proverb meaning of the word "interesting". Since the last issue of *Emerald City* we have lost two division heads and Kevin and I have been to so many meetings that having a new home doesn't seem to have got us any more sleep. I'm not going to talk much about this because we have a Worldcon to run and we can't afford to spend time bitching. However, I am going to make a few comments on the structure of Worldcons.

At the Chicon 2000 Business Meeting we debated a proposal to reduce the lead-time for voting for Worldcons from 3 years down to 2. The motion failed, but it was very obvious that most of the people who supported it had already run a Worldcon, and most of those opposing it were either about to do so or were bidding for a Worldcon. The most pertinent comment in the debate was made by Seth Briedbart. Every Worldcon, he said, needs an extra year of lead-time. The trouble is that they

need it about 6 months out. That is exactly where ConJosé is right now.

There are many reasons why having 3 years between winning your Worldcon and holding it is a bad idea, but it all boils down to the fact that it really only takes about 18 months to get the job done. The rest of the time is padding, and mostly that padding causes bad things to happen. Like this:

1. Because there isn't anything to do in the first year after winning the bid, the whole process loses momentum. People get out of the habit of working and then find it hard to get going again.
2. Having nothing else to do in the first year, people play politics. This is almost always a bad thing. It tends to result in inappropriate people in important positions, and all sorts of bad feeling amongst the people who ran the bid.
3. Because three years is a long way away, people get tempted to volunteer for things that, had they been faced with the imminent possibility lots of hard work, they would have had serious second thoughts about. As a result they get into the job, and two and a half years down the road they find out that they have bitten off far more than they can chew.
4. And finally, the more time you have to wait, the more likely it is that Real Life will intervene and vital parts of your operation will suffer major disruptive changes to their ability to work on the convention.

I suspect it will be a while before the 2-year lead-time motion is brought up again. But brought up it will be. Those of us who have been through the process know how damaging that extra year can be. We owe it to future Worldcon committees to fix things.

FAAn Award Results

Andy Hooper has just accosted me and given me a copy of his fanzine, *The Jezail* that contains the results of this year's Fan Activity Achievement Awards. The winners are:

Best Fanzine: *Wabe* – Jae Leslie Adams, Tracy Benton and Bill Bodden

Best Fan Writer: Alison Freebairn

Best Fan Artist: Dave P. Hicks

Best Letterhack: Lloyd Penney

Best New Fanzine Fan: Max

Thanks Andy! And congratulations to all the winners.

Footnote

Wow, made it! Haven't come this close to missing a deadline in ages. Short months are a pain. Hopefully next month will be better. I certainly hope so, as if all goes well I'll be off to the UK for a business trip and Eastercon. Unfortunately, if all goes badly I'll be off to the UK in the middle of March and back before Eastercon. Or I may not go at all. We'll see.

In the meantime, we do have some books. To be precise, we have China Miéville, David Brin, Greg Bear, Michael Swanwick, and the latest Mythopoeic Award winner from Midori Snyder.

Just in case you can't wait for next issue, or you are insanely jealous that I have a copy of China's new novel and you don't, here's a sneak preview:

“Everywhere there were cray. They looked up idly as the sub passed above them. They stood

and haggled outside shops festooned with undulating coloured cloth, they bickered in little squares of seaweed topiary, they walked along tangled backstreets. They guided carts pulled by extraordinary beasts of burden: seasnails eight feet high. Their children played games, goading caged bass and colourful blenny.”

Yeah, sure, there's blood and gore aplenty too, and lots of tentacles.

See you next month,

Ciao,

Love 'n' hugs,

Cheryl