

EMERALD CITY #80

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Introduction

I'm going to start this issue with a plea to all of you who read this 'zine online, or who download a printable version from the web site. I know that you don't need me to tell you that a new issue will appear like clockwork around the end of each month. We are up to 80 issues now, and I haven't missed that target by more than a week or so before now.

However, this regularity means that people are not signing up for the mailing list that sends you a notification when a new issue is published. That might seem a small thing to you, but to me it is quite important. I am fairly sure that I have a lot more readers than I have subscribers. Indeed, if people only visit the site once a month to read the current issue then on the basis of hit counts I have over 900 readers, but only 200 subscribers. Besides, I keep meeting people who say that they read the 'zine regularly but who are not on the subscription list.

Now, for any magazine, subscription levels are a vital statistic. I'm not planning to solicit advertising any time now, but it would be nice to sound vaguely respectable when I talk to publishers. So if you are one of those who just reads the 'zine on the web, please subscribe to the notification list. Your email address does not get stored on the site, and I promise that I will not sell it to anyone, ever. I don't ask much in return

for producing this 'zine, but if you can do this small thing for me I would be very grateful. Thank you.

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And Now for the Rocket

The Send a Hugo to China Campaign proudly announces that *Perdido Street Station* is amongst the six nominees for this year's Best Novel Hugo Award. The rest of the Hugo news is as follows:

Best Novel (486 ballots cast): *The Curse of Chalion* by Lois McMaster Bujold (HarperCollins/Eos); *American Gods* by Neil Gaiman (Morrow); *Perdido Street Station* by China Miéville (Macmillan (UK)(2000); Del Rey); *Cosmonaut Keep* by Ken MacLeod (Orbit (UK)(2000); Tor); *Passage* by Connie Willis (Bantam); *The Chronoliths* by Robert Charles Wilson (Tor).

Best Novella (300 ballots cast): "May Be Some Time" by Brenda W. Clough (*Analog* 4/01); "The Diamond Pit" by Jack Dann (*Jubilee*, HarperCollins/Voyager Australia; *F&SF* 6/01); "The Chief Designer" by Andy Duncan (*Asimov's* 6/01); "Stealing Alabama" by Allen Steele (*Asimov's* 1/01); "Fast Times at Fairmont High" by Vernor Vinge (*The Collected Stories of Vernor Vinge*, Tor).

Best Novelette (292 ballots cast): "Hell Is the Absence of God" by Ted Chiang (*Starlight* 3, Tor); "Undone" by James Patrick Kelly (*Asimov's* 6/01); "The Days Between" by Allen Steele (*Asimov's* 3/01); "Lobsters" by Charles Stross (*Asimov's* 6/01); "The Return of Spring" by Shane Tourtellotte (*Analog* 11/01).

Best Short Story (331 ballots cast): "The Ghost Pit" by Stephen Baxter (*Asimov's* 7/01); "Spaceships" by Michael A. Burstein (*Analog* 6/01); "The Bones of the Earth" by Ursula K. Le Guin (*Tales from Earthsea*, Harcourt); "Old MacDonald Had a Farm" by Mike Resnick (*Asimov's* 9/01); "The Dog

Said Bow-Wow" by Michael Swanwick (*Asimov's* 10-11/01).

Best Related Book (252 ballots cast): *The Art of Richard Powers* by Jane Frank (Paper Tiger); *Meditations on Middle-Earth* by Karen Haber, ed. (St. Martin's Press/A Byron Preiss Book); *The Art of Chesley Bonestell* by Ron Miller & Frederick C. Durant III with Melvin H. Schuetz (Paper Tiger); *I Have This Nifty Idea...Now What Do I Do With It?* by Mike Resnick (Wildside Press); *J. R. R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* by Tom Shippey (HarperCollins (UK) (2000); Houghton Mifflin); *Being Gardner Dozois* by Michael Swanwick (Old Earth Books).

Best Dramatic Presentation (452 ballots cast):

Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone (1492 Pictures/Heyday Films/Warner Bros.) Directed by Chris Columbus; Screenplay by Steven Kloves; David Heyman, Producer; Michael Barthan, Chris Columbus, Duncan Henderson & Mark Radcliff, Executive Producers.

The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring (New Line Cinema/The Saul Zaentz Company/WingNut Films) Directed by Peter Jackson; Screenplay by Fran Walsh & Phillipa Boyens & Peter Jackson; Peter Jackson, Barrie M. Osborne and Tim Sanders, Producers; Michael Lynne, Mark Ordesky, Robert Shaye, Bob Weinstein and Harvey Weinstein, Executive Producers.

Monsters, Inc. (Pixar Animation Studios/Walt Disney Pictures) Directed by Peter Docter, David Silverman and Lee Unkrich. Story by Jill Culton, Peter Docter, Ralph Eggleston and Jeff Pidgeon. Darla K. Anderson, Producer. John Lasseter and Andrew Stanton, Executive Producers.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer "Once More, With Feeling" (Fox Television Studios/Mutant Enemy, Inc.) Written & Directed by Joss

Whedon. Joss Whedon and Marti Noxon, Executive Producers.

Shrek (DreamWorks SKG/Pacific Data Images). Directed by Andrew Adamson and Vicky Jenson. Written by Ted Elliott & Terry Rossio and Joe Stillman and Roger S. H. Schulman. Jeffrey Katzenberg, Aron Warner and John H. Williams, Producers. Penney Finkelman Cox and Sandra Rabins, Executive Producers.

Best Professional Editor (382 ballots cast): Ellen Datlow (*SCI FICTION* and anthologies); Gardner Dozois (*Asimov's*); Patrick Nielsen Hayden (Tor Books; *Starlight* anthology series); Stanley Schmidt (*Analog*); Gordon Van Gelder (*F&SF*).

Best Professional Artist (323 ballots cast): Jim Burns; Bob Eggleton; Frank Kelly Freas; Donato Giancola; Michael Whelan

Best Semi-Prozine (283 ballots cast): *Absolute Magnitude*, edited by Warren Lapine; *Interzone*, edited by David Pringle; *Locus*, edited by Charles N. Brown; *The New York Review of Science Fiction*, edited by Kathryn Cramer, David Hartwell & Kevin J. Maroney; *Speculations*, edited by Susan Fry, published by Kent Brewster.

Best Fanzine (237 ballots cast): *File 770*, edited by Mike Glycer; *Ansible*, edited by Dave Langford; *Challenger*, edited by Guy Lillian III; *Mimosa*, edited by Richard & Nicki Lynch; *Plokta*, edited by Alison Scott, Steve Davies & Mike Scott.

Best Fan Writer (248 ballots cast): Jeff Berkwits; Bob Devney; John L. Flynn; Mike Glycer; Dave Langford; Steven H Silver.

Best Fan Artist (177 ballots cast): Sheryl Birkhead; Brad Foster; Teddy Harvia; Sue Mason; Frank Wu.

Best Web Site (365 ballots cast): *Locus Online*, Mark R. Kelly editor/webmaster (www.locusmag.com); *SciFi.com*, Craig Engler, general manager (www.scifi.com);

SF Site, Rodger Turner, publisher/managing editor (www.sfsite.com); *Strange Horizons*, Mary Anne Mohanraj, editor-in-chief (www.strangehorizons.com); *Tangent Online*, Dave Truesdale, senior editor; Tobias Buckell, webmaster (www.tangentonline.com).

John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer of 2000/2001 (272 ballots cast): Tobias S. Buckell (second year of eligibility); Alexander C. Irvine (second year of eligibility); Wen Spencer (first year of eligibility); Jo Walton (second year of eligibility); Ken Wharton (first year of eligibility)

Analysis – Best Novel

Happy as I am that *Perdido Street Station* has made it to the final ballot, I have to confess that I am doubtful of its chances of winning, even if it is the best book in the lists. We do, however, have a fascinating battle for Best Novel this year. Let's look at the other contenders.

Lois McMaster Bujold and Connie Willis are both past winners and thus must be in with a good chance. However, both of their entrants this year are handicapped. Unlike Bujold's earlier winners, *The Curse of Chalion* is fantasy rather than SF; *Passage* is in part a hospital romance and likely to be seen as "not really SF" by many voters. Neither of these things bodes well for their chances.

That then brings us to the SF books on the list. *Cosmonaut Keep* is a delightful piece of space opera. Which leaves *The Chronoliths* as the only hard SF book up for the award this year. If there is any sort of backlash following the Harry Potter win last year (and I think it is highly likely that there will be) then Robert Charles Wilson may be a surprise winner.

That leaves Neil Gaiman, and the interesting thing here is that Gaiman probably has more hard-core fans than all of the other contenders put together. If the ballot were open to the general public then he'd win easily. But most of those vast legions of Gaiman fans do not traditionally attend Worldcon, or if they do they don't vote. (Typically only about 20% of the Worldcon membership votes in the final Hugo ballot.)

So, where does that leave us? Miéville has the best book. Bujold probably has the largest fan base amongst regular voters. Gaiman has the largest overall fan base. And Wilson is the flag bearer for the SF cause. It looks wide open.

Something else worth noting is that three of the six nominees are British. The other three are American, although Wilson has lived most of his life in Canada. I'm not sure that we have ever had three British nominees before. This shows two things. Firstly we can see that the eligibility extension is working: if Americans (who make up the vast majority of voters) have time to notice British writers, they will vote for them. And secondly that we now have some evidence for the much hyped renaissance of British SF.

Analysis – The Rest

If Best Novel is a tough category to call, Best Dramatic Presentation should be almost impossible. *Harry Potter*, *Lord of the Rings* and *Buffy* all have huge fan bases; *Shrek* and *Monsters Inc.* have both received rave reviews. But there is one small clue. According to the data released by ConJosé's Hugo Administrators, at least one of those nominees has set a new record for the most nominations in any category, ever. I wonder what that could be.

I'm delighted with the results of the Best Web Site ballot. I was hoping that it would be the third most popular category. In fact it was just beaten to that by Best Professional Editor, but it has clearly resulted in a lot of interest. Also the five nominees are all very worthy (especially *Strange Horizons*, but I write for them so I'm biased). Those two things prove that it is a viable category. I think that the Torcon III committee now has to think very hard about continuing the category under the same optional rules that ConJosé used, and I expect to see a constitutional amendment to make the category a permanent fixture submitted to the ConJosé business meeting.

Anyway, I have gone on long enough. There is some more data about the voting on the Hugo section of the *Emerald City* web site. Now I need to read a few more of the nominees.

Anything but Hel

Easter has come round once again, and that means it is time for the annual British Science Fiction Convention, otherwise known as Eastercon. This year the convention returned once more to the island of Jersey, scene of much merriment in times past, and consequently the event was known as Helicon 2 (a tribute to the town of St. Helier where it took place, and perhaps too to Brian Aldiss' Helliconia trilogy).

I had not been able to attend the previous Helicon and was very much looking forward to the event. Much of British fandom, however, was deeply unhappy. Jersey is not a cheap or easy place to get to, and the Hotel de France is exceedingly luxurious and correspondingly expensive.

Add to this a time of economic decline, and membership was down to just over 500 souls. Those who attended, however, had a whale of a time.

The Hotel

Any discussion of a Jersey Eastercon has to start with the venue. The Hotel de France is a seriously splendid establishment. The rooms are spacious and comfortable. The staff are friendly and helpful, and there is plenty of good function space and relaxing space. Indeed, when the weather is fine, which surprisingly it was for much of the holiday weekend, you can sit on the lawn in the sunshine and watch the world go by.

Of course this does mean expense. If it were not for the fact that Jersey still takes religious holidays seriously, and that consequently many of the shops and places of interest – even some of the restaurants – on the island are closed over Easter, we would not be able to afford to go there. If ever the island gets a fit of commercialism and decides to encourage tourists over Easter we are sunk. Even so, the hotel cost significantly more than the Hinckley Horror that we used last year.

Then again, however, a little luxury is good for us every once in a while. One con-goer said to me that the Hotel de France has the best food of any Eastercon venue, and I can't see anyone arguing with that. Besides, what can one say about a hotel that has its own resident chocolatier, except perhaps, "yum"!

Now you may well ask why, given that Jersey is so expensive, was Eastercon going back there. Fun is of course part of the equation, but lack of suitable facilities is another. In the first progress report for next year's Eastercon, Rog Peyton provided a long and depressing justification for returning to Hinckley, which basically

boiled down to lack of choice. There are very few hotels in the UK that have space over Easter and can cope with something the size of an Eastercon.

The Programme

The one place where the convention did fall down rather badly was in the programme. This was one of those unfortunately circumstances things. The original programme director was John Richards, and he put together a reasonable outline. There wasn't a lot there that I was hugely interested in, but it was clear that John had thought quite a bit about the content. He had, for example, planned a whole stream of panels on alternative history in honour of the convention's overseas GoH, Harry Turtledove.

So far so good, but shortly before the convention took place John's work situation exploded. His management came to him and explained that the company was in a financial crisis and that if the new product he was working on didn't get to market very soon indeed then John, and most of the rest of the staff as well, would be picking up P45s (that's pink slips, American readers). Naturally all Helicon activity had to stop.

After a little hunting around for a suitable victim, Giulia de Cesare was persuaded to take over. She had just a few weeks in which to finalise matters, and the last of those weeks she was due to spend in Barcelona on a business trip. These are not ideal circumstances for doing the job. Consequently, while the programme outline was there in advance, the panellists were often pulled together at the last minute, and the choices were not always good.

To my mind one of the best things about John's programme was the introduction of

Kaffleklatsches, a tradition begun at the Dutch Worldcon in 1990 and eagerly copied by the Americans. Unfortunately most of them were a flop. Much of the reason for this is that only the Guests of Honour were actually scheduled in the programme. All of the other events were marked as author to be announced. There were sign-up sheets at Registration from Saturday, but very few members seemed to know who was on when, or that almost all of the events were woefully under-subscribed and that you could just turn up and get in.

Of course the other conclusion that you might draw from this is that British science fiction fans are not actually much interested in science fiction writers and don't see any value in having a chance to chat with them. More on this later.

Meanwhile we need to make a short digression onto the subject of the one panel that really interested me. This was about SF and politics. It was, in many ways, a typical Eastercon panel, in that its basic presumption was that SF is rubbish. Last year we had a bunch of panels whose descriptions were along the lines of, "shall we talk about xxx, or is it all too boring". This one was similar, in that it started out by asking why science fiction is so bad at handling political issues and inventing new types of society.

Now let's stop there a minute and think. How many political systems that we use now were not already invented at the time of the ancient Greeks? And if a science fiction writer actually came up with a radically new means of organising society that actually worked, how long would s/he remain just a science fiction writer? The idea that SF should come up with new ideas for political systems in the same way that it comes up with new types of gun or species of alien is frankly absurd.

Furthermore, one of the great things about SF is that it is the one genre of literature that is absolutely free to discuss new types of society. Can you imagine, for example, a romance novel or a murder mystery in which a central element of the plot is that it takes place in a society with radically different politics to those that we are used to? Of course not. They may be placed in historical settings, but never something new. And what is a utopian novel if not a piece of science fiction? Now name some of the great political novels of the 20th Century: *Brave New World*, *1984*, *Animal Farm*, *The Dispossessed*, *The Female Man*. Guess what, they are all science fiction.

Now of course there are a lot of science fiction books (and huge numbers of fantasy books) that either don't consider politics at all or do so in such a naïve way that you have to conclude that the authors haven't thought much about the values that are subconsciously being poured into their writing. However, page for page, there is probably more intelligent treatment of politics in SF than in every other form of literature put together. So what on Earth was the Helicon programme committee thinking about when it came up with this panel topic?

Then there was the question of getting a panel together. I had to suggest China Miéville, probably the only experienced Parliamentary candidate amongst the membership. Also available were Justina Robson, Jon Courtenay Grimwood and Guest of Honour Brian Stableford, all of whose recent works are deeply political. None of them were on the panel.

It is hard to criticise the Helicon committee here because their programming staff were operating under very difficult circumstances. But they seemed to make very poor use of the many excellent writers who were attending the convention. And

this takes me back to comments made to me by Kim Newman after the 1999 Eastercon. When I asked him why he hadn't been there he said it was because British fans simply were not interested in science fiction any more, so there was no point in writers attending conventions. I had hoped that the recent boom in high quality SF being produced in Britain these days might have changed all that, but Helicon showed every sign of slipping back into the bad old ways.

I'm not sure that next year will be any better either. The committee for Seacon 03 says that it intends to put on a "Programming Led Convention". They have even set up an email discussion group to let members discuss what they would like to see on the programme. And they do intend to talk about science fiction and fantasy literature. But when, in the first progress report, they listed the sort of people that would be on those panels, they didn't say, "writers", they said, "filthy pros".

OK, so maybe that was just that good old British sense of humour. Maybe I have been too long in America and don't know a joke when I see it any more. But I wonder what message that comment sent to Britain's SF writers. The current president of the Science Fiction Writers of America, Norman Spinrad, is on record as saying that the worst thing that ever happened to SF is fandom. Sometimes when I go to British conventions I think he might be right. There is no doubt that the UK is currently producing by far the best SF in the world, and if British conventions fail to recognise that and celebrate it that will be a tragedy of monumental proportions.

The Clarke Panel

The one panel that you can guarantee will be about books at an Eastercon is the traditional discussion of the Clarke Award. The BSFA Awards are voted on and presented at Eastercon, but the Clarke results come in May so the convention is ideally timed for pundits to get together and discuss the nominees.

This year I found myself drafted onto the panel. The indefatigable Farah Mendlesohn decided to step in where Helicon's program people were faltering and ensure a good group of panellists who had actually read the books. Of course finding people who have read all six is hard, but I confessed to having read four. "Good", says Farah, "the panel isn't until Monday, you have plenty of time to read the other two". Fortunately I found the Peter Hamilton unreadable, so it wasn't too great an imposition.

The panel is organised in the form of a balloon debate. That is, we pretend that the books are all passengers in a balloon that is losing altitude, and we have to vote which ones we want to throw out to prevent it crashing. The process continues until only one book remains. Apparently this is also how the Clarke judges make their deliberations.

This year's nominees are: *Bold as Love* – Gwyneth Jones; *Fallen Dragon* – Peter F. Hamilton; - *Mappa Mundi* – Justina Robson; *Pashazade* – Jon Courtenay Grimwood; *Passage* – Connie Willis; and *The Secret of Life* – Paul McAuley. The panellists were Farah Mendlesohn, Caroline Mullan, Charlie Stross, Tanya Brown, Claire Brialey and me.

One of the more interesting things about this shortlist is the number of really good books that are not on it. Adam Roberts wrote an article about this for Locus Online. I'm not sure that his comments about a sad

decline in the perceived nature of what is SF are entirely valid, but he is quite right that some very good books were left out. Three that come immediately to mind are *Applesseed* – John Clute; *Chasm City* – Al Reynolds; and *Ares Express* – Ian MacDonald. On the other hand, while last year it was obvious that one out of *Perdido Street Station* and *Ash* would win, this year there is nowhere near an obvious winner. The panel was entirely unanimous that *Fallen Dragon* would be first out of the balloon, but beyond that it was anyone's guess which book would win.

The BSFA Awards

I missed the BSFA Award presentation (and the masquerade) this year, thanks to over-indulgence in a particularly good restaurant, of which more later. Here, however, are the results.

Best Novel: *Chasm City*, Alastair Reynolds.

Best Short Story: "Children in Winter", Eric Brown (*Interzone* #163).

Best Artwork: Cover of Stephen Baxter's *Omegatropic*, Colin Odell.

Best Non-Fiction: *Omegatropic*, Stephen Baxter.

Congratulations to the winners, commiserations to the losers, and now we start wondering whether anything will be able to challenge *The Scar* for next year.

The Island

Of course you can't spend a long weekend on Jersey without seeing some of the island. (Well, I can't anyway.) As I mentioned earlier, most of the shops and some of the tourist attractions were closed for much of our stay, but restaurants were another

matter. Most of my restaurant review material is going to find its way into a journal in IgoUgo, but I have to mention the excellent El Cabala, which managed to keep me away from the masquerade and BSFA Award presentation. I should also say thank you to my regular Eastercon dining partners, Peter G. Hamilton and Anne Shepherd. Next year will seem very lonely when they are back home in New Zealand.

There is a lot more I could write about, but this issue is rapidly getting out of hand so I'll stop here. Next year we are back at Hinckley, which is survivable now we know about The Bell Inn. I'm hoping I can lure Kevin over for that one. The 2004 Eastercon will apparently be in Blackpool. I've bought a membership, but I think if I go to that one I'll hide in the con hotel all weekend.

Purple Haze

There is little doubt that Brian Stableford is one of the cleverest and most thoughtful science fiction writers around. The only question is whether he can translate that cleverness into sales by making his work equally approachable, exciting and (dare I say it) commercial. His last book, *The Fountains of Youth*, was a fascinating study of mankind's search for immortality, and what we might do with it when we found it. It was, however, probably a little too cerebral to achieve mass acclaim. However, the latest volume in his Third Millennium series has all of the attributes it needs to succeed on every front.

Let us recap for a moment. *The Fountains of Youth* took us on a sweeping tour of the latter half of the Third Millennium thanks

to the advent of emortality. As we followed the life of its hero, Mortimer Gray, and his efforts to document humanity's relationship with death, we also got snippets of news from elsewhere. One of those snippets involved the ark ship, *Hope*, which had set off from earth early in the millennium in search of inhabitable planets. As Grey learned, it eventually found one, but just how much did the news that filtered back to Earth, 58 years in the journey, reflect what was actually happening so far from home? *Dark Ararat* tells the story of what really happened to the *Hope*.

As a novel, *Dark Ararat* fulfils three requirements at once. Firstly it is a murder mystery. Ecologist Matthew Fleury is roused from cryosleep following the mysterious death of his friend and colleague, Bernal Delgado. Alongside Fleury in the revival ward is Police Inspector Vince Solari, suggesting that foul play was involved. But before they can solve the mystery of the murder, Fleury and Solari must first find out what has happened on board *Hope* and on the colony world, tentatively named Ararat, and why after 3 years only a handful of the would-be colonists have been revived.

Alongside this story is some excellent hard SF. Stableford is a biologist by training, and it shows. Whereas most SF writers make their imaginary worlds seem alien by populating them with talking cats or people with lumps on their heads, Stableford creates from the ground up. No, that's not fair, he starts from a more basic level than that, with biochemistry. There are two basic theories of how life might develop in the universe. One holds that the solution developed on Earth is so unique and sophisticated that should life exist elsewhere it will be based on the same pattern. The alternative is that many biochemical systems are capable of

evolving life, and thus life on other planets might be utterly unlike that of Earth. Stableford opts for the interesting route.

Thus the creation of Ararat's ecosphere starts from the most basic of building blocks. The local life fauna do not use chlorophyll — their photosynthetic chemical is quite different, and purple. What is more, it isn't only plants that use it. Ararat's mobile life forms are purple too, even though most of them spend the day hiding out from predators. Why? Nor do Ararat's life forms use DNA to reproduce. Indeed, as far as the colonists can see, Ararat has no young animals at all. For Fleury, the ecologist, solving the mysteries of Ararat's biology are rather more interesting, and perhaps more important, than finding out who killed his friend. After all, finding the answer to the biological mystery may help him solve the biggest problem of all, the question of the future of the colony itself.

Stableford, being an incorrigible thinker, cannot simply accept that colonisation will proceed. There will be political questions, disagreements, perhaps even conflict. For example, after 700 years in flight (and consequently around 10 generations), would the crew of the *Hope* still hold fast to their duty to their frozen human cargo? If the biochemistry of Ararat is so utterly alien, should humans even attempt to colonise it? And what if it should turn out that Ararat supports not just life, but intelligent life? What if Bernal Delgado was killed, not by a fellow settler, but by one of the indigenous people of Ararat? Do the humans on board *Hope* have any right to take the planet for themselves?

As with *The Fountains of Youth*, Stableford's primary purpose in writing *Dark Ararat* is to explore questions about the future of humanity. In a world in which science, even in science fiction, is increasingly

portrayed as the enemy of mankind, and where technological progress has become synonymous with ecological and humanitarian disaster, Stableford presents a bright beacon of hope. The *Fountains of Youth* illustrates the perversity and folly that will result from giving up on ambition and confining ourselves to a perfectly manicured Garden Earth. *Dark Ararat* goes further, and makes a clarion call for the message of hope to be spread throughout the galaxy. Life, he maintains, is a positive thing that demands that we go forward. And while yes, curiosity can kill us at times it also makes us smarter, fitter, and better able to survive. *Dark Ararat* is science fiction as it was meant to be, not an apology, but a manifesto. It has gone onto my Hugo shortlist for next year.

Dark Ararat – Brian Stableford – Tor – hardcover

Colonization

Sirrubinnin EsMoyshekhhal has been given a great career opportunity. One of the planets seeded by his caste has finally come good. A life form on that world has finally evolved to a state where it is capable of communicating with the orbiting Depth Ship. Now a Mediator has to be appointed to guide the young world into the vast biological empire of *irRas*, and Sirru has been chosen for that signal honour.

There is just one problem. The rival *khaitoi* caste is keen to see Sirru's people fail, and they are prepared to stoop to any depths to achieve their aim. Recently Sirru's friend, IrEthiverris, suffered a major failure with the world of Arakrahali. Things went so badly wrong that the whole planet had to be terminated. Verris was working alongside a *khaitoi* Administrator, and

Sirru too has to work with a colleague who, he expects, does not have the project's best interests at heart. If Sirru can't foil his treacherous aide, the planet in his custody may also have to be sterilized.

Sirru knows the planet by the name that his people gave it: Tekhei. The local natives use a different name. They call it Earth.

Cut to planet Tekhei. The Receiver, the one being on that planet who has evolved sufficiently to be able to communicate with the Depth Ship, goes by the local name of Jaya Nihalani. Her followers call her Jaya Devi, and she is a revolutionary. She is fighting for the rights of the dalit, the untouchables, in a near future India where a right wing government has re-introduced the caste system with ruthless brutality. The government, of course, calls her a terrorist, and there is a price on her head. It is not, perhaps, the most auspicious starting point for Earth's first ambassador to an alien empire.

It is, however, an ideal character for the purposes of the book. India, after all, was a relatively civilised and highly sophisticated country that suffered badly through colonisation by a more technologically advanced people, the British. Now the whole of Earth is about to find out what India already knows. Colonial rulers come in with smiles and guns, they completely wreck your lives, and they tell you that they are doing you a favour.

Quite how Jaya will go down in America is another matter. There has already been a huge panic at Bantam when someone realised that the back cover blurb used the word "terrorist" to describe the book's heroine. The covers were hastily pulped and new ones printed without the offending word. And in the book Americans are portrayed as a bunch of

militaristic thugs who are peeved that the aliens did not choose to contact them first. The fact that this is precisely the attitude that the current US government would take is unlikely to occur to many people here.

But if the book doesn't sell it would be a real shame. I have written many issues of *Emerald City* in which this would be the star book. It is Williams' bad luck to be in an issue that also includes two brilliant new books and one past Hugo winner. *Empire of Bones* is a fine novel with a fascinating alien civilisation and acute political sensibility. The *irRas* civilisation is biologically based with social control maintained by drugs that quite literally prevent heretical thought. It is also a given in that society that biological mutability is the norm, and that social position may arise from control of particular genotypes. The *irRas* caste system is genuinely based on biological superiority. Contrasting this with the Indian caste system was a stroke of genius by Williams.

I am always a bit nervous when I see books by Westerners that portray non-Western civilisations. However, I know Liz and I'm confident that she will have tried very hard to get things right. I'd still like to get an opinion from an actual Indian (Arun, are you there?), but I'm reasonably confident that the job has been well done.

What I still don't understand is how Williams cannot get a publishing deal in her native Britain. *The Ghost Sister* was a New York Times Notable Book and a Phil Dick Award nominee. *Empire of Bones* is a better book. It is much better than many of the books being published in the UK right now. So, all you British publishers out there reading this: go out and get a copy.

Empire of Bones - Liz Williams - Bantam - softcover

Little Wars

One of those oft-quoted pieces of trivia about Britain's first great science fiction writer is that he was also a keen wargammer. Indeed, H.G. Wells wrote a book, *Little Wars*, setting out the rules by which he and his friends emulated the feats of great generals of the past. Now we have another Brit writing about wars in which the soldiers are somewhat smaller than expected. But this is Jon Courtenay Grimwood, and his subject is no game.

It is currently estimated that some 300,000 persons under the age of 18 are engaged in armed conflicts worldwide. Most of these soldiers are between the ages of 15 and 18, but many are recruited from age 10 upwards, and the use of even younger children has been recorded.

The children of the village were forever asking Mulla Nasruddin to tell them stories. Eventually he got fed up with their nagging and told them a very long tale that took many days to relate. It was a complicated story, involving a man with a fox in his head, a nine-year-old girl who is a computer genius, an oil billionaire, lots of spies and soldiers, and even more guns, fast cars and snazzy sunglasses. The children complained that they didn't understand the moral of the tale. "It is a science fiction story", said the Mulla. "It is about aliens. People from a far-off land who don't think like us and don't behave like us. They are called Westerners, and one day, if we are not careful, they will come here in strange flying machines and rob us blind while claiming that they are doing us a favour." And the children laughed merrily because the Mulla told such wonderfully absurd stories.

OK, so I was a little disappointed with *Pashazade*. I have no such reservations about the sequel, *Effendi*. Partially, I suspect, this is because I am a lot more comfortable with the cast. The likes of Raf, Zara, Hani, Hamzah and Avatar are old friends now rather than strange and exotic creatures. I'm still a little uncomfortable with 9-year-old computer geniuses, but at least I appreciate Hani's place in the structure of things. And structure there most certainly is, because if one thing is abundantly clear from reading *Effendi* it is that the book was carefully planned before *Pashazade* was written. Indeed, it addresses one of the central, unsolved mysteries of the first book, namely why Hamzah was so eager to have his daughter married off to a penniless Bey of dubious background.

In addition the new book treats much more of El Iskandria itself, and of its place in the world. *Effendi* is much more a book set in Egypt rather than a book about an American going to live in Egypt. In a hopefully soon to be published interview I did for *Strange Horizons*, Grimwood explains that this is deliberate: he intended to draw the reader into the Arabic setting gradually over the three books of the series, and bringing Raf in from America was the start of that process.

Another central theme of the book is the struggle of El Iskandria on the one hand to remain free and more or less independent of the machinations of the various world superpowers, and at the same time to hold back the inexorable advance of Islamic fundamentalism that threatens to destroy its civilisation from within. Once again, we are encouraged to see things from the Arabic point of view.

More than anything else, however, *Effendi* marks a return to the tight, focused anger about the state of the world that made

redRobe such a brilliant book. Although *Effendi* is ostensibly set in the near future of an alternate history world, it is very much about things that are happening in Ethiopia and the Sudan now in our world. Grimwood is angry, he has every right to be angry, and we should be too.

Which leaves me with just one question. *Effendi* is a wonderful book, and as such has every right to be challenging *The Scar* for honours next year. What it lacks in literary pyrotechnics it makes up for in focus and passion (which is kind of odd because China Miéville is the guy who is supposed to be the political activist). But I keep coming back in my mind to Adam Roberts' comments in *Locus Online* about the nature of science fiction. It is very clear to me that Stableford's *Dark Ararat* is a Hugo contender because it is everything that good science fiction is supposed to be. I'm also happy to defend the likes of *The Scar* as part of the SF/Fantasy uber-genre because it fits very neatly into the definition of Weird Fiction. Now *Pashazade* and *Effendi* are clearly both alternate history and cyberpunk. But both of those things are incidental to the story rather than central to it.

I think that with a bit of ingenuity, Grimwood could have written *Effendi* with the Russians and Chinese as the bad guys rather than the Germans and French. And he could have settled for a James Bond level of gadgetry and sold the book as a spy thriller. It might not have been as good a book, but it might have been marketed as mainstream literature rather than in the SF ghetto. And that might have got more people reading it, which would be a good thing. On the other hand, he might never have been able to get away with such an openly political message if he had not been writing SF. Perhaps publishers will only dare accept that level of brutal honesty

about the world if it is supposedly set in an imaginary place.

Anyway, whether you see *Effendi* as an excellent piece of mainstream literature masquerading as SF, or yet another brilliant SF novel by a British author, there is no question that this is a book to read. If you are allergic to buying from Amazon UK, the good news is that Grimwood has just been taken on by Mic Cheetham (literary agent for the likes of Banks, Miéville, MacLeod and Harrison) and is therefore likely to get a US deal very soon.

Effendi – Jon Courtenay Grimwood – Earthlight
- hardcover

Life on Mars

Many of the people on the Clarke Award panel at Eastercon had this book as their favourite. As long time readers may remember, I had pretty much given up on Paul McAuley after the Confluence series. This was with some regret, because McAuley always seems to be on the verge of writing a really great book, and he always seems to miss for some reason. *The Secret of Life* is, I think, McAuley's best effort in a long time. Sadly, however, it still doesn't quite cut it for me.

The basic premise is that of a biotech thriller. The dastardly Chinese have found life on Mars and have brought it back to Earth in secret, hoping to exploit its biological secrets for themselves. The equally dastardly Americans have attempted a little industrial espionage that went badly wrong, resulting in a small amount of genetically engineered Martian bacteria landing in the Pacific Ocean. Now Earth is faced with a grade one biohazard disaster. The busy little post-Martians have

adapted well to their new home and threaten to obliterate all Earthbound marine life. The Americans hope to save the world by getting samples of the original Martian life (from Mars, where else?) so as to work out how to combat China's mutated version. The Chinese, who already have the original, don't want anyone else to get in on the act.

Enter Mariella Anders, genius biologist and all-round social non-conformist. She is chosen, along with the ambitious and irascible misogynist, Penn Brown, and Chinese-American NASA scientist, Anchee Ye, to undertake the mission to Mars. Brown is, of course, working for the evil American multinationals, and Ye is a government agent, so Mariella has to be the heroine. Besides, she is a true scientist who believes in using knowledge for the good of mankind. Brown is what Ursula Le Guin might describe as a Propertarian, wanting to use knowledge for the good of Penn Brown. And Ye is a loyal but misguided government dupe. Hence we have a set-up for another diatribe against the mis-use of science by big business and government, and the noble scientist-hero rescuing the world.

Structurally the book is fine. With one important exception that I will come to shortly, it flows well and keeps you turning the pages; and the characters are interesting and well defined. It is, of course, a thriller, and is therefore very silly in places. But McAuley does his best to undermine this. The episode in which the two women scientists sit by bemused while Brown and the Chinese make heroic idiots of themselves on Mars was beautifully done. Towards the end things tend to happen because the plot requires it rather than through any intrinsic knowledge of the narrative, but by then we all know what will happen in the end anyway so it hardly matters.

There are, however, a couple of things that irritated me about the book. Firstly there is way too much unnecessary science. The book is supposed to be a thriller, and there is no call for vast swathes of mind-numbing detail about DNA or how scientists do their work. Those who loved Kim Stanley Robinson's *Mars Trilogy* will presumably love this book too. But if you want to see how a book can contain large amounts of fascinating science without boring the reader stupid, read Brian Stableford's *Dark Ararat*. With *The Secret of Life* I ended up skipping pages at a time.

The other thing I didn't like was Mariella herself. For someone supposedly so intelligent, she spends far too much of her time being particularly stupid. Heinlein made a name for himself by filling his later books with sex-mad heroines who will jump into bed with anyone. McAuley goes one step further by having a heroine who is addicted to alcohol and sex with rough, muscular low-lives. I guess men get a kick out of writing about women like this.

Aside from those two annoyances, *The Secret of Life* is a well-written book with a noble if rather hackneyed theme. Lots of people seem to like it very much. For me, however, McAuley has once again just missed the boat.

The Secret of Life – Paul McAuley – Voyager – hardcover

Utopia in the Sky

Having talked my way onto the SF and politics panel at Eastercon I felt it only fair that I prepare properly by reading one of the most famously political SF novels ever written. Ursula le Guin won both the Hugo and the Nebula for *The Dispossessed* (back in

the days when, if a publisher wrote "Hugo and Nebula Winner" on a book cover it really meant that that book had won both awards, not just that the author had done so, probably for different works). It is a seriously famous book, and that poses a problem when trying to review it. After all, there have probably been more academic papers written about this book than issues of *Emerald City*. What can I say that is new, or at least doesn't sound irredeemably foolish?

Well, I guess I can't go too far wrong with a plot summary. The twin planets of Urras and Anarres circle each other like moons. Urras is the richer of the two, and civilisation flourishes there, but Anarres is also capable of supporting life, albeit at a very basic level. Thus it was that the anarchist revolutionary, Odo, claimed Anarres for her followers. The visionary herself never made it to the new world, but her followers did, and they set up a very different kind of society to those that they had left behind. While Urras continues with a society reminiscent of early 20th Century Earth, the people of Anarres hold tight to the concepts that property is theft and that everything must be done for the good of society as a whole.

But all is not well in the anarchist paradise. Sure, times are hard. That is inevitable on Anarres. But if everyone pulls together they can get through. Unfortunately it has only taken a few generations for the Odonians to discover that money and goods are not the only indicators of status, and that competition and privilege will flourish in society no matter how poor the soil.

Enter Shevek. The man is a genius at temporal physics, and will one day produce the theory that will enable the ansible to be built. But he is also a confirmed Odonian, angry at the way his less bright fellow academics have used

political manoeuvring to wreak jealous revenge upon him in defiance of Odo's teachings. Furthermore, the only people capable of understanding his work, and providing the intellectual discussion that he needs, are on hated and shunned Urras. To further his work, Shevek is obliged to consort with the Propertarian enemy.

So it is that "The Man from the Moon", as the local media dub him, ends up with a professorial post at Ieu Eun University on Urras. The book tells two stories in parallel. The first is the tale of Shevek's exile, and how he comes to understand the true iniquity of the people who have given him sanctuary. The second tells of his earlier life on Anarres and his increasing disillusion with that society that caused him to accept exile in the first place. The purpose, of course, is to compare and contrast the two societies.

What makes the book great, of course, is that in addition to telling a fine story with believable characters, Le Guin does an honest and competent job of her political analysis. You may not agree with her all the time (and I don't), but you have to admit that this is an analysis, not a polemic. The erstwhile anarchists are just as grasping and prone to "egoizing" as the capitalists of Urras, and the good of society turns oh so easily into the tyranny of the majority when a misfit like Shevek is found.

Reading Le Guin's book, of course, made me realise that *Salt* by Adam Roberts is supposed to be a commentary of sorts on *The Dispossessed*, and this made me dislike *Salt* even more. Roberts essentially holds that all politics tends towards absurd and cruel extremes, and that therefore political debate is sterile and pointless. And yet it clearly is not, because *The Dispossessed*, written at a time when digital technology was almost unthinkable, nevertheless still holds so much for readers today despite the

occasionally laughable 1970s view of the future.

I don't know whether Le Guin has read any of Ken MacLeod's work, but I hope she has and I would very much look forward to reading what she has to say about the debate between Anarcho-Communism and Anarcho-Capitalism that MacLeod presents in his Fall Revolution series. In the meantime, however, it is a pleasure to read a work on liberty by an American who understands that "freedom" does not mean "freedom from responsibility".

"Once you are there, once you walk through the wall with me, then as I see it you are one of us. We are responsible to you and you to us: you become an Anarresti, with the same options as all the others. But they are not safe options. Freedom is never very safe."

Ben Franklin would have understood and approved, but sadly too much of present day America does neither.

The Dispossessed – Ursula K. Le Guin – Avon - softcover

Angels with Many Faces

OK, so science fiction is a literature in which we are allowed to take risks. But surely there must be limits, especially for a first novel. So try this for a plot synopsis.

In a near future America dominated by religion, an evangelist preacher has found a way to make people think that they have been visited by angels when they surf the Internet. He has his fake angels announce that he is the New Messiah and support his campaign for the US Presidency. God is not

impressed, and sends his four Archangels: Michael, Gabriel, Raphael and Uriel, to sort out the impostor. But, being angels, they are not allowed to just toss miracles around. That would be too easy. And so, much to the amusement of their former, now-fallen colleague, they are required to work with humans. Which is how Michael gets mixed up with former NYPD tech-crime cop, Deidre McManus, a young lady who is in considerable disgrace after her partner assassinated the Pope.

And if you think that sounds utterly far fetched you are quite right. Can Morehouse pull it off? Maybe. The biggest thing that she has going for her is her sheer audacity. I mean, if you start from a premise like that, everything else will seem easy, won't it? And it does.

The next thing that helps save the book is that Morehouse does the religious angle pretty well; at least she does provided that the reader is not some sort of fundamentalist. It is clearly her view that religion is about doing good and loving your fellow man, not about adhering to doctrine. Consequently we see that while the handsome Italian-American, Michael Angelucci, joins the NYPD, Gabriel, sorry Jibril, is hanging out with black Muslim extremists, Raphael has joined a group of Jewish terrorists, and Uriel, well, let's just say that there should be more angels like Uriel.

Morehouse also does pretty well in the misdirection stakes. I don't want to give away any of the surprises, but let's just say that the plot isn't entirely what it seems. I was a little disappointed at the end because I felt that the true state of affairs was perhaps a little far-fetched, even for a book like this. It was a nice idea, but it needed better support. I also want to note that if you are going to put extracts from newspapers in your book than you should

make them sound like newspaper writing, not like more bits of story. All in all, however, *Archangel Protocol* is an excellent first novel, and Lyda Morehouse is most definitely a name to watch.

Archangel Protocol - Lyda Morehouse - Roc - softcover

Dread in the Bones

Dealing with small press companies is hard. I get a lot of enquiries from such companies, most of them eager to give me review copies. But on investigation the vast majority of these turn out to be vanity press outfits. Typically they have been founded by American men (probably old and white) who have always wanted to be Jerry Pournelle or Robert Jordan and who firmly believe that their inability to get a contract with a major publisher is a result of some vast conspiracy rather than the leadenness of their prose and their inability to spell or construct a grammatical sentence.

There are exceptions, however. Big Engine in the UK is publishing some very good books. And I think that Firelight Publishing (<http://www.firelightpublishing.com/>) may be another. Their web site sounds very professional, and the writers that they are publishing seem to have no family relationship to the company. What is more, they have published at least one good book.

Of course when I get offered a fantasy novel that has been written by a corporate lawyer I worry a little bit. And when the hero of the book turns out to be an accountant then I worry a lot more. But in fact Kevin Howe's *Bone Walk* shows that the author has far more understanding of how fantasy should be written than most of the Tol-clone writers about at the moment. One

newspaper reviewer described the book as “a blast of fresh air in a horribly stale field”. That is a bit of an exaggeration as in fact Howe is working more or less in a tradition exemplified by the likes of Lord Dunsaney, James Branch Cabel and Neil Gaiman. However, it is a delight to see someone else writing that sort of book.

The plot is relatively straightforward. Thomas Shepard is a clerk who works in the warehouses of Lord Raven. His job is to count the tithes as they come in and make sure than all of the Lord’s underlings have paid the right amount of taxes. He is very good at it, and Lord Raven’s chief counsellor, the ambitious and cunning Varden, soon notices Thomas’ abilities at maths, logic and diplomacy.

When a number of incredibly beautiful objects start turning up in the village, Varden is determined to find and control their source. That source appears to be somewhere in the vast, mysterious and supposedly haunted Western Wood. Three envoys, with military escorts, have been sent into the wood to investigate, but all Varden has got back is two madmen who committed suicide shortly after returning. In desperation he turns to Thomas, who seems the least likely person in the village to succumb to fantasies and insanity. But the dangers of the Western Wood are all too real, as Thomas will soon find out.

The first half of the book was very good. There’s some superb atmosphere. Howe manages to make the wood and its monsters genuinely scary, which is unusual in a fantasy novel. Unfortunately he spoils this to some extent in the second half by providing rational explanations for everything, but the story is still well told. I’ve read much better fantasy novels than *Bone Walk*, but I have also read a lot of books that are much worse and are getting heavy promotion from major publishers.

Much of that, I suspect, is that the bad books are either by people with less dull-sounding backgrounds, or because they are what the publishers think will sell (i.e. Tol-clone bugbusters). So congratulations are due to Firelight Publishing for having the courage to try something different simply because it was good. The company is not a specialist SF&F publisher, but *Bone Walk* is set up for a sequel, and I hope they publish more quality genre work.

Bone Walk - Kevin Howe - Firelight Publishing - softcover

Miscellany

Tiptree Results

The results of the 2001 Tiptree Awards have been announced. The winner is *The Kappa Child* by Hiromi Goto, Red Deer Press. The short list comprises: *Half Known Lives*, Joan Givner, New Star Books; *The Song of the Earth*, Hugh Nissenson, Algonquin Books; *Dark Light*, Ken MacLeod, Tor Books; and *The Fresco*, Sheri S. Tepper, Harper Collins/Eos.

There’s not a lot I can say about this because I haven’t read the winner, or two of short list. However, given the other two on the short list that I have read, I have to wonder what the judges were thinking. Sure, *Dark Light* has a character who comes from a society where crossing gender roles is commonplace, but this is used more as a source of humour than as promoting good gender politics. I guess *The Fresco* is in there because it has a brave and resourceful heroine who makes idiots of the male villains in the book, but it also has some utterly repulsive politics of a type that I never imagined a Tiptree judging panel would approve of.

Dick Results

As Norwescon happens at Easter, when I am normally in the UK I could not turn up to see the Philip K. Dick Awards presented. However, I did send my loyal cub reporter, Kevin, to the convention to keep an eye on things for me. He reported by email to me at Eastercon. As I more or less expected, Richard Paul Russo won with *Ship of Fools*. There was a certain air of disappointment amongst Brighton fans present at Eastercon as a result, but I don't think that they should be too downhearted. *Empire of Bones* is a much better book than *The Ghost Sister*, and that was very good, so I confidently expect Liz Williams to be spending next Easter in Seattle as well.

In the Big Time

Not many newspaper book editors pay much attention to SF, but Michael Dirda at the Washington Post is an exceedingly honourable exception. On April 7th the Washington Post Book World devoted the entire issue to SF&F, and there was some fine material in it.

Michael Swanwick was asked which classic piece of British fantasy literature would follow Harry Potter and Lord of the Rings into Hollywood. Much to my delight he included *Perdido Street Station*, although personally I think that *King Rat* would make a much better film.

Elizabeth Hand produced a useful piece on the many fine women writers who produce SF&F literature. Nick Gevers explained why Gene Wolfe is our greatest living writer (no argument there, Nick). And Charles Sheffield produced an interesting and amusing article on hard SF, complete with a do-it-yourself test to see if you would like that sort of book. My favourite was question 6, which went approximately,

“You have a word that begins with “hyperbol”. If you want to complete that with an “a” you are a hard SF reader; but if you complete it with an “e” you are not.

Bullsheet Revived

I'm pleased to be able to report that the Australian SF Bullsheet has arisen from the ashes of Marc Ortlieb's retirement. You can find more details at this web site: <http://members.optushome.com.au/aussff/bullsheet.html>.

ConJosé News

While Kevin was busy with a weekend full of committee meetings, I was able to check out a few things in Downtown San José.

The bad news is that Mongo's is definitely closed. This is a real shame because it was the best Mongolian Barbecue restaurant I have ever been to. However, House of Siam has opened a second branch and they are very good indeed. I also noticed a new Indian restaurant about to open quite close to the convention center. Finding food at lunch time over the weekend is normally quite hard, but we will have the luxury of being able to eat at the street stalls that accompany the Tapestry craft fair, so that problem is solved. Most restaurants appear to be open in the evening, although there was a 20,000-person convention in town at the time so this may have been an exception. What the town does desperately need is a juice bar. Hopefully one will open in the next few months.

The quilt museum is quite small but very interesting if you are at all into needlework. It has very little material of its own and relies instead on visiting exhibits. Unfortunately, due to the timing, the material on display during ConJosé will be images of death and bereavement.

The art museum is also full of interesting stuff and will appeal to a much wider range of visitors. It is free too, which is very welcome. I'm not a great fan of modern art, but had I had the money there were several exhibits at the museum that I would have loved to buy.

I will be supplying a comprehensive guide to San José in the August issue. The plan is to get that out a week or so before the con so you will all get your copies before heading out here, but if all else fails there will be paper copies available at the con.

Pat at BASFA

Also this month, San Francisco-based author Pat Murphy came to talk to BASFA. Unfortunately I was laid low by an evil virus (thanks Kevin!) at the time and missed all the fun, but apparently it was a highly entertaining evening. Unconventional as ever, Pat chose to illustrate her talk using balloon animals, which she made on the spot. Consequently I have become the proud owner of a signed Pat Murphy balloon squid. Not a lot of people can say that. Thank you, Pat!

Footnote

Well, that one went on a bit, didn't it? And it is only the 20th as I write this. Of course I need to get it proofed (thank you Anne!), but it is good to be able to get into reading the books for next month early. May is going to be a nightmare. From the 6th to the 10th I'm running a seminar at work. On the 13th I leave for Amsterdam, and on the 17th it is on to London. On the 23rd I return home just in time to leave for Wiscon. I'd really like to have a new issue ready for

then, but somehow I don't see it happening.

Anyway, next issue should feature new novels by Kim Stanley Robinson and Sheri Tepper, the Hugo nominee from Lois McMaster Bujold, and the first novel by Campbell nominee, Wen Spencer. There should also be a report from the Clarke Award ceremony, and possibly something about Wiscon.

Ciao,

Love 'n' hugs,

Cheryl