

EMERALD CITY #82

Issue 82

June 2002

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Introduction

Super quick turn round with this issue, folks. I need to get it online before I have to head off to the UK again on a business trip at the end of the month. As #81 was released right at the end of May, and #82 has to be online by the end of June 23rd, I only have three weeks. Thankfully all of this traveling that I have been doing has enabled me to get a lot of reading done. And of course I have been to Wiscon. So hopefully the fast turnaround doesn't show.

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Marvelous Madison

Well that's a relief, Wiscon (<http://www.sf3.org/wiscon/>) is still the best regular convention SF in the world.

Not that I was really worried, of course. Just because last year I was prevented from attending because of my visa application doesn't mean that the con would go suddenly downhill. Indeed, they had the tremendous good taste to invite Nalo Hopkinson to be one of their Guests of Honor. So it was going to be good, right? And of course it was.

Post-bedtime-ism

Long time readers will remember that Wiscon is the convention at which I spend almost all of my time in programming. That is true even if said program items are

late at night. As you may recall from last issue, I got back to San Francisco from a business trip to Europe on the Thursday before Wiscon and the following morning left for Madison. My brain was therefore considerably elsewhere on the Friday night when there were panels on "Postmodernism and Deconstructionism", and on "Literary SF". My only consolation was that I wasn't on those panels, whereas Paul Kincaid, who had flown in from London the day before and was therefore almost as jet-jagged as I was, had to sound intelligent in front of an audience.

It is, of course, vaguely possible that these panels would have made more sense if they had been conducted during the day when people were more awake. But then again, even for Wiscon, they were a little esoteric. All in all I think things went pretty well. My only real regret was that there was no one on the first panel who was really prepared to defend Postmodernism as a concept. We all paid lip service to the concept that the "meaning" of a book is in the eye of the reader, but there was no real attempt to go beyond there. Had Adam Roberts been on the panel he might well have held forth on how the intention of the author is irrelevant, and how novels can be written with a Postmodernism analysis in mind. And then I could have complained about what a mess this makes of novels. But he wasn't there, so things were thoroughly non-controversial.

Do they mean us?

There wasn't a particular theme to the programming at Wiscon this year, but thanks to my selection of panels to attend I managed to acquire one. Several of the panels dealt, from different perspectives,

with the question of how science fiction is viewed from outside the SF community. This ranged from why mainstream literary critics still look down on SF, to why ordinary people who are otherwise voracious readers "don't read SF".

The mainstream issue is particularly annoying. British newspapers, for example, will happily give serious reviews to the vast plague of "chic lit" novels that are so prevalent in the country today. These books are a modern equivalent of romance novels, heavy on the sex and alcohol and light on happy-ever-after, but ever bit as formulaic and predictable as a Mills & Boon. And yet the same newspapers regard novels by the likes of China Miéville and Gwyneth Jones as worthless genre crap. It is highly annoying, and deeply unfair.

However, the discussion at the panels revealed that this is partly our own fault. Chic lit novels are shelved under "fiction", and the people who buy them are happy to shop in that part of the store, and to buy novels that are not packed in the standard, garish chic lit cover. SF readers, however, have become used to their ghetto shelves, and won't buy books that don't appear on those shelves. (This is not my opinion, but the distilled opinion of various people on panels and in audiences who know rather more about the bookstore business that I do.)

Another valuable perspective on the issue was provided by discussion of Magic Realism. It is much more likely that a fantasy novel will be accepted by the mainstream than an SF novel. All sorts of mainstream novels use fantasy tropes (not just ones by people from non-Anglo cultures), and they don't seem to get rejected by publishers the way that they would if they used SF tropes. The

explanation that we came up with for this is that the public perception of “fantasy” as a genre is very narrow. While we will view any book that contains mythic or magical elements as fantasy, to most people “fantasy” means cod-medieval pseudo-Tolkien books. As long as you avoid that particular corner of the genre, you can get away with claiming that your book is not “fantasy”.

The case with science fiction is rather different. As people have been saying ad nauseum for some time now, science fiction has won the cultural battle. Most of the top ten grossing movies of all time have been SF, and SF shows have effectively displaced Westerns as the standard genre for action-based TV series. You might think that this has been good for SF, but the opposite may be true.

The trouble is that most of this media SF is very bad fiction. The movies, in particular, are heavy on special effects and light on character development and plot. This makes for very spectacular movies. SF is unique in the movie business in providing excuses for utterly spectacular special effects. But it also gives the movie-goer the impression that SF books are likely to have really dumb plots. And why read a book if you are going to miss out on all those glorious visuals?

As for the TV stuff, the transformation of shows like Star Trek into soap opera with adoring and imitative fan bases has not done our reputation any good. This, and shows like X-Files that equate SF with belief in UFOs and alien abduction, have encouraged the general public to believe that science fiction fans are people who believe that SF is literally true (in much the same way as soap opera fans believe that their favorite show are real). So while you might watch an SF show on TV for

light entertainment, you would not want to be seen reading an SF book on the subway in case you were mistaken for one of those fruitcakes.

Perhaps the most valuable lesson, however, was that about accessibility. This came up in two panels. In one case Matt Austern relayed the (highly plausible) theory that the success of Harry Potter is, to a large extent, a result of the care with which Rowling introduces the weirdness of her fantasy world on a gradual basis. In another panel Mary Doria Russell explained how she had used just the same technique in writing *The Sparrow*. She wanted the book to be accessible to ordinary readers as well as SF fans, and she test-marketed the book on her mother to check that the strange stuff was not too off-putting.

There is a very real problem here. Another panel I attended was about the language diversity in SF&F literature. In that panel we, as committed SF fans, bewailed how too many authors do such a bad job of creating believable languages (or even just names) for their non-human (or even just foreign) societies. But there is an equal and opposite complaint from mainstream fiction readers that says, “I don’t want to have to read books full of names that I can’t pronounce”. What we like in a book is often deeply off-putting to many potential readers.

The same applies to assumptions about technology and/or the workings of magic. I loaned my copy of *Warchild* to a colleague during my business trip to Europe. He’d seen a fair amount of SF on TV and the cinema, so when he encountered the word “leap” in an unusual context he had a reasonable idea what it meant. I, of course, had read straight past it and automatically

translated to “hyperspace jump”. But someone with very little exposure to SF tropes would have been confused.

And this brings us back to the newspaper reviews. You can give any old book reviewer a chic lit book and they will understand what it is about. But give the same reviewers SF or fantasy and they will be completely confused and may not even be able to follow the plot. Consequently, to review SF&F competently, a newspaper will need to have a group of specialist reviewers on whom they can call. Very few publishers are prepared to make that effort.

And the lesson from all this is that we have to a large extent written ourselves into a corner. Many of the things that have made SF successful in the media have harmed it as a written genre. And many of the things that SF&F fans like about their favorite books are precisely the things that put other people off reading them. All in all I think that is a valuable insight. The next question is, “what do we do about it?”

Saving America

One of the panels I was on, as opposed to simply attending, was one probably born out of the aura of doom and gloom that has descended on the USA since 9/11. Just supposing, the panel title asked, that Armageddon happened and America was destroyed, what would we want to save?

I was a little worried that at Wiscon such a panel would turn into a debate about US politics, but thankfully we managed to avoid that for most of the time. There was also a definite danger of Americans failing to understand themselves. We did get one person who praised the American spirit of

curiosity and adventure. This from a country where a very large percentage of the population doesn't own a passport, and where people would rather go to Las Vegas than visit the real Paris, Venice or Cairo. But for the most part the discussion was interesting and entertaining.

One of the biggest areas of agreement was over popular music. From musical theatre through the blues and jazz to rock 'n' roll, the USA has given musicians a whole new way of expressing themselves, and brought music to the forefront of everyday life. This is well worth preserving.

My own personal vote went to baseball, in part because it is such an un-American sport. The archetypal American sport is basketball because it provides constant instant gratification. Close your eyes for a few seconds and you will have missed three scores. But with baseball it is entirely feasible to experience a 3-hour game that finishes 1-0 and was fascinating throughout. Compared to that, the average cricket match is played on hefty doses of amphetamines.

Real Celts

My other panel asked “what do we really know about the Celts”, and judging by the nonsense that two of my fellow panelists spouted the answer to this question is in many cases, “absolutely nothing”. I've been worried for some time about the American tendency to badge English mediaeval folk music as “Celtic”, but it is really depressing to discover that many people take the nonsense peddled by the likes of John and Caitlin Matthews as reputable historical research. Taking a heavily mythological folk story that was written down hundreds of years after the society it refers to had ceased to exist, and

claiming that this is historical proof of how all Celtic societies behaved is not history, it is fabrication.

Of course it is entirely our own fault. We Celts are notoriously good storytellers. That people should actually believe the stories that we tell is, I guess, an unexpected consequence of the quality of those stories (or at least their emotional appeal). And in any case the continuation of story telling is something that all good Celts should approve of. But it is kind of depressing to the scientist in me to discover how ready people are to believe complete nonsense on the basis of no evidence whatsoever.

The other interesting thing about the panel was how boggled some of the audience were that people could still hold a grudge against foreign invaders after a mere 1600 years of so of history. Not that we mind the Saxons living amongst us, of course. They are mostly OK people. (And huge thanks here to Maureen Kincaid Speller for playing the role of token Saxon on the panel with such good grace.) But let's not forget that the name of that island is Britain, not England. The English are not Celts, and no amount of clever story telling by the likes of Geoffrey of Monmouth, Mallory and Wordsworth will make them so. So let's put an end to the unconscious cultural imperialism, America, please?

Book discussion panels

One aspect of this year's Wiscon that did not work was the book discussion panels. At the wrap session on Monday afternoon we discussed why this might be so. My personal theory is that a panel advertised as one person leading a discussion amongst the audience suggests to

potential attendees that they are going to have to work hard. People might be put off attending if they feel that they don't know the book well enough to make a useful contribution. Jane Hawkins, the head of programming, said that perhaps discussing books was something that at people felt that they could do any time, whereas listening to a bunch of experts discuss an issue was an experience that they could not get elsewhere.

I think in the end these two views boil down to the same thing. People might think it was worth attending a book discussion if they felt that they could listen to a small group of people who knew the work very well, rather than having to provide the input themselves. In any case, the issue has been marked down for consideration by the programming committee, and next year we'll do something different. Hopefully I'll remember to let you know whether it worked.

Madison recap

I should take a little time out to remind you that one of the reasons Wiscon is so good is that Madison is a lovely city. There's a bunch of good restaurants and interesting shops within easy walking distance of the convention. There is the farmers' market on Saturday morning in Capitol Square. And of course there is Michaelangelo's, probably the best coffee shop in the world.

GoH speeches

I don't often go to the GoH speeches at Wiscon. The idea of a dessert banquet is kind of cool, but a dessert banquet and

speeches at a time when you are usually going out to one of those nice Madison restaurants is not wholly attractive. This year, however, I figured I should go and support Nalo, so I did.

I'm pleased to say that both Nalo and her fellow GoH, Nina Kiriki Hoffman, gave excellent speeches. (Also the cheesecake was very good.) But the point I actually wanted to make was this. At the Clarke Award last month Tom Arden was expounding to me about how the old TV sitcom, *Bewitched*, made a wonderful allegory about the difficulties of a gay couple trying to survive in middle class America. And Nalo, in her speech, commented on how *Bewitched* made an excellent allegory about a colored couple (or perhaps mixed race given that Darren is so determinedly ordinary) trying to survive in white, middle class America. And they are right, it works perfectly. So next time you wiggle your nose to try to make something happen, remember that you are also saluting a great piece of social satire.

Next year

Much to my delight, one of the GoHs for next year's Wiscon will be the superbly talented China Miéville. This will be China's first GoH appearance at an American convention, and I'm delighted that it should be my favorite con that awarded him that honor. It should make for a fun weekend. Carol Emshwiller is the other GoH.

Also in the news about next year's con is that Wiscon has finally grown big enough to buy out the traditional Saturday night wedding. That means we get a whole lot more function space, there will be much less need to patrol our parties for gate

crashing drunks, and there will be more rooms available in the Governors' Club.

I have persuaded Kevin to come along next year so that he can see how a really slick convention is run. I'm hoping that this also means that we'll get a panel on gender bending in Japanese anime, something that Kevin knows a lot about but Wiscon has largely ignored.

And of course I hope that you will come next year too. Wiscon is apparently the only event at the Madison Concourse hotel since 9/11 that has actually grown in attendance. The hotel loves us, and it is a great con. Let's keep up the trend.

Light Fantastic

"Words get in the way. The music is actually a more precise way of telling someone something. Music is the words, that's the way I speak."

Peter Green

And so we come at last to the final installment of Kathleen Ann Goonan's nanotech series, one of the most under-appreciated science fiction series ever. Partly, as I said in my review of *Mississippi Blues*, is because the books are very complex and hard to read. Partly, I guess, it is because she's a woman and she doesn't go for the usual style of women's SF. Goonan's books are, amongst other things, very much about science. But whatever the reason is, it is unfair. I've not always agreed with the points that Goonan is trying to make, and I think that *Mississippi Blues* got seriously sidetracked,

but all four books have been fascinating reading and deserve a much better reception than they have got.

I said in my review of *Crescent City Rhapsody* that I hoped Goonan would take the opportunity in her final book to examine the Utopia she created in the third. As it turned out, she simply dismissed it out of hand. Utopias, she says, are stagnant and will inevitably fail. So right at the beginning of *Light Music* we see Crescent City sacked by Caribbean pirates. The novel, therefore, has to be about something else entirely. And so it is. Goonan has finished talking about America, and has turned her attention to the future of the human race.

In a way, of course, the entire series has been about that topic. The world of the Flower Cities is so different from our own that we might just as well be talking about aliens. As William Gibson says in his contribution to the cover blurb for *Light Music*, "*Goonan is one of the very few writers of science fiction, today, willing to work with the unfettered vistas of abject weirdness presented by the apocalyptic potential of really new technologies*". Throughout the series, very, very weird things happen. Not only is there the infinite creativity of nanotechnology, but also the mental reprogramming merely hinted at in Justina Robson's *Mappa Mundi*. Human beings really can be anyone. But can they be any thing?

Well, of course the uploaded minds in the Los Angeles Dome can be whatever they want, but Goonan rejects the virtual solution. Indeed, she has Zeb and Sun-Ra ask the Dome to make them android bodies so that they can venture out into the world and return to Crescent City in its time of crisis. No, as far as Goonan is

concerned, humanity's future lies elsewhere: in space.

And here we return to the question of The Silence. Just what caused the mysterious effect that blanked out radio on Earth and helped precipitate the collapse of civilization? And why do so many people born at the time The Silence started have a strange genetic mutation? At this point we are veering into Sheri Tepper territory. Could we be about to learn that benevolent (and autocratic) aliens are in the process of giving humanity a helping hand up the evolutionary ladder? Thankfully Goonan's thinking is not that simplistic. Nor is her ambition.

It is hard to say any more without giving the whole game away. Besides, I have already said quite a bit. It is there in this review, and in the title of the novel, if you want some clues. But the point is that even at this mystical extremity, Goonan is still talking about science. The evolution of humanity does not come about through people sitting around in lotus positions and saying "Om" repeatedly, it comes about through scientists and engineers finding out about the world and applying that knowledge.

How could they tamper? How could they justify being so invasive? Upsetting the balance? Doing something which, once let into the larger system, might cause more harm than good? Whose idea of good were they using anyway?

"I wonder how long they agonized over whether or not to cure Polio?" she'd retorted. "I believe that most human ideologies are a disease. A horrible virus. As destructive as physical plagues. Wake up, Peabody! Can you honestly say that war is good? Can you honestly say that the preparation of the mind

for learning, that the transmission of information, is bad?"

There it is: the series in a nutshell. Modern science has the potential to open untold vistas of possibility. It also has the power to destroy the world. Should we follow where it leads, or, as in *Queen City Jazz*, retreat into superstition, religious fundamentalism and fantasy. Kathleen Ann Goonan makes a clarion call for science, and for that reason alone this series deserves a place on honor in the history of the genre.

Light Music - Kathleen Ann Goonan - Eos - hardcover

Toy Soldiers

The Warner Aspect Prize is a competition for first novels. In the past it has turned up some excellent writers, in particular the very excellent Nalo Hopkinson. This year's prize has gone to another non-Anglo writer living in Toronto. Karin Lowachee was born in Guyana in South America. She has also spent 9 months working as a teacher in an Inuit community. That suggests that, like Nalo, she might have some very interesting things to say. Accordingly I picked up her prize-winning book.

And at first sight *Warchild* is very impressive indeed. We join the story as the hero, Jos Musey, is seeing the starship on which he lives attacked by pirates. All of the adults, including Jos's parents, are killed, and the kids, including 9-year-old Jos, are shipped off into slavery. Jos, thanks to his particularly good looks,

becomes the personal favorite of the pirate captain, Falcone.

But the story is set in a galaxy at war. Mankind is locked in a ferocious conflict with the alien striviirc-na, and Falcone and his ilk survive only because the Earth fleet is otherwise occupied, and because they stay clear of the conflict. One day, however, Falcone arrives in the wrong place at the wrong time. Jos seizes his chance to escape, but only end up being captured by The Warboy, the turncoat human who leads the striviirc-na forces.

At this point the book borrows a leaf out of *The Forever War*. We learn that it was greedy humans who started the war in the first place, that it is the general alienness of the two sides that keeps it going, and that the pirates are not as disinterested as they might seem. Besides, Jos's new guardian is a considerably better human being than Falcone. So young Jos trains as an assassin in a striviirc-na religious order, and is then enlisted in the Earth space navy as a spy.

So far so good. Lowachee has a very interesting lead character and a nicely ambiguous background. She has also put a bit of effort into creating an interesting alien culture. *Warchild* could have been a very good book indeed.

Sadly from this point onwards it degenerates into standard military SF. It has all the silly boot camp nonsense, nastiness between the lower ranks, noble officers, tragic deaths. It is all very predictable. It is also a mystery to me how Jos manages to avoid being spaced. He doesn't seem to be a very good spy, but he keeps getting away with it. And all the time the book is steaming along (at an admittedly excellent pace) to a conclusion that most readers will have predicted by

about half way through. Most of the interesting stuff is simply forgotten.

What disappointed me most, however, is the apparent strong streak of homophobia that runs through the book. As you may have guessed the villain, Falcone, is a pedophile. Well, OK, they are nasty people. But there is a strong undercurrent in the book that suggests that the real message is as follows: "Falcone is gay, and everyone knows that all gays are pedophiles." Lowachee never comes right out and says this, but it appears to be hinted at a lot. Perhaps I'm misinterpreting what is only a portrayal of the usual bigotry of the military. But whatever the source, the book left me with a very nasty taste in my mouth.

It is a shame really, because Lowachee is clearly trying to write a book about the evils of child soldiers. But by getting too interested in the military side of things, and perhaps by revealing her own prejudices, she ends up with something that could be interpreted as being deeply unpleasant. If you want a good book on kids and war, read John Courtenay Grimwood's *Effendi* instead.

Warchild - Karin Lowachee - Warner Aspect - softcover

State of Dismay

Brian Aldiss's latest novel is very much like a Sheri Tepper book. Brian isn't going to thank me for saying so, but it is true nonetheless.

Ostensibly *Super State* is a science fiction novel set in a future united Europe that involves a manned mission to Jupiter and

the discovery of life on Europa. In practice it is a long diatribe about establishment figures of various sorts, from politicians to bishops to academics to the military to media personalities and the nobility. Aldiss despises them all. He doesn't hate them quite as much as Tepper, so he doesn't wipe them all out. But he does include an inconvenient meteor strike and a consequent natural disaster. Like Tepper, Aldiss appears to think that there is nothing worth saving about mankind.

Also like Tepper, much of the source of Aldiss's ire is our husbandry of the environment. He rails throughout the book about how we have failed to heed the signs about global warming and how, in the future, things will be much the worse for us as a result. Of course he could well be right, but it is the incessant whining that grates. Like Tepper, Aldiss moans incessant about the state of the world and has nothing constructive to say. He comes over like a cartoon caricature of a curmudgeonly old man, and you spend much of the book wanting to just shake him and tell him to shut up.

The good news is that, like Tepper, Aldiss peppers his diatribes with instances of genuine humor. Particularly good are the wonderfully literal-minded conversations between the android servants, and the sermons by the awesomely insipid Reverend Angus Lesscock. Aldiss also has great fun with such bumptious characters as the romance novelist, Rose Baywater, and various senior military officers. Sometimes even the diatribes are funny.

What if this Earth, with all its teeming phyla, happens by some cosmic accident to be the sole refuge of life and consciousness? We seem, in that case, to have got ourselves elected as the consciousness of the galaxy, maybe of the

universe. It is a devastating honour for a species that believes in fairies!

I should also add that, unlike Tepper, Aldiss does not invoke divine intervention as a solution to his frustration. If *Super State* had been written by Tepper then the inhabitants of Europa would have turned out to be super-powerful beings who would chastise mankind for its wicked behavior and sentence the race to death. Instead Aldiss plays with the idea, almost as if he were satirizing Tepper. As for the Europeans, well, that would be telling.

Oh, and I'm sure that it is quite deliberate that people from Europe discover life on Europa.

One of the things that makes Tepper novels vaguely bearable is her plucky, middle-aged female heroines (who have normally been abysmally treated by their stupid husbands and ungrateful children). Aldiss has no such rosy view of his own history. Instead *Super State* is crammed full of goatish old men acting out their pathetic lusts. I guess at least he's honest.

All in all, *Super State* is superior to a Tepper because it is funnier and because it doesn't have a hugely predictable ending. However, I can't help but feel that Aldiss is wasting his considerable talent on this sort of ire venting.

Super State - Brian Aldiss - Orbit - hardcover

Going Offline

Neal Asher is one of the new breed of Brit SF authors whose work I have not yet covered. I am about to rectify that

omission. Asher has published a fair amount of short fiction, mainly through small press publishers, but has recently had two novels published by Pan-Macmillan. This review is of the first of them, *Gridlinked*.

From the title and cover you would probably get the impression that *Gridlinked* is a cyberpunk novel. In that you would be wrong. As Asher freely admits in one of his chapter headings, it is actually James Bond in space opera.

Our hero, Ian Cormac, has been an agent for Earth Central, the AI that runs the galaxy, for several decades. Fortunately future medical technology means that he's still youthful and handsome. But for the past 30 years he has been fully gridlinked - that is interfaced with the galactic AI network - and this has resulted in his losing some of his human feelings and instincts. Therefore, before sending him off on his latest mission, his masters decide to remove his link. Cormac is on his own for the first time in three decades.

The mission in question is to investigate a transporter accident that caused a 30-megaton explosion on a young colony world, wiping out the entire population. It looks like sabotage, and indeed Cormac soon finds himself pitted up against his old nemesis, a 4 kilometer-long space-going alien who goes by the name of Dragon. (See, space opera!). Just to make life a little bit more interesting, the book opens with Cormac breaking up a terrorist ring on another planet, and the bloodthirsty terrorist leader chases off after him, bent on revenge.

Much of the rest of the book is simply toys for boys. The guns keep on getting bigger, we graduate from grenades to anti-matter bombs, and we talk blithely about machines that generate so much energy

that they need to use mountains as heat sinks. It all helps with the terraforming of colder worlds, of course. The saving grace in all this is that Asher can never quite take it all seriously. In particular, his chapter headings, which he uses mainly to explain some of the stranger aspects of his world, exhibit a wry irony that is very amusing.

Other things that I liked about this book include some of the terminology and the structure. For some reasons probably known only to Asher and his psychotherapist, all of the transporter technology is named using words out of Edward Lear's *The Owl and the Pussycat*. The explanation for this is that the guy who invented this stuff had experimentally interfaced himself to a "Craystein" supercomputer and got a bit weird (before publishing a heap of revolutionary papers that no one fully understands and dying soon afterwards). See what I mean about the strange sense of humor?

The interesting thing about the structure is that Asher chooses to follow the bad guy terrorists as well as the hero. This, of course, gives him the opportunity to write about all sorts of nastiness, but it also provides him with the only real human story in the book. (Cormac, of course, is way too professional to ever have a relationship with anyone, though he does find it useful to have sex with lots of women.)

I should also note that Asher tries very hard to make the ending obscure. And if you think about it carefully you realize that there is a reason why Earth Central wanted him off the grid. Which in turn begs the question as to whether the AI was really worried about his lost humanity, and whether the supposed progress that

he makes in recovering it during the book is real or just his imagination.

In the end, however, this is a book about getting to play with toys that makes the average July 4th celebrations look like a sputtering candle. Space opera is like that. Asher is amusing, and sufficiently devious to keep you interested. But *Gridlinked* has none of the mystery, grandeur and warped imagination of *Revelation Space*. Asher is good, and I already have his second novel in my "to read" pile, but it doesn't have the priority that a new Al Reynolds would.

Gridlinked - Neal Asher - Pan - softcover

Cultural Imperialism

I've been aware of this book for some time because I saw an ad for Jim Munroe's reading tour in a local paper. That in itself was enough to perk my interest, because most authors don't do reading tours. What authors do is sign their books at bookstores, and maybe do a short reading, at no charge. But Munroe had hired a hall and was going to talk about his book and read from it to a paying audience. It sounded more like the sort of thing you would expect from a stand-up comic or a rock band, but it also brought to mind thoughts of Mark Twain's lecture tours.

The air of comedy was further enhanced by the fact that the book, *Angry Young Spaceman*, is about a young man who gets a job teaching English on a planet of octopus people. And checking out Munroe's web site (<http://NoMediaKings.org>) confirmed that Jim was both funny and seriously

anti-establishment. I had the good fortune to meet Munroe at Wiscon and I can confirm that he is indeed highly entertaining in person. But what about the book?

The first thing to note is that this is not gag-a-minute comedy in the style of Pratchett or Adams. Munroe's style is much drier and very heavy on the irony. I suspect that many American readers won't see the jokes at all (Munroe is Canadian). Also the book is unashamedly political. Munroe rages against cultural imperialism, which in his world takes the form of Earth having established English as the interplanetary language of trade, copyrighted it, and started charging other species for the right to use it. For the young Octavians whom Munroe's hero, Sam Breen, is hired to teach, English is seriously cool because it is the language of pop music, but Sam can't help seeing them as destroying their own culture and enslaving themselves.

In addition the book touches strongly on racism and racial stereotyping (something it is easy to satirize when you have a bunch of weird aliens to play with). And it spends a lot of space bemoaning the Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle. Munroe, I suspect, has had a lot of involvement with punk bands, and Sam Breen was a leading member of the pug movement, an expression of youth culture that is rather like being a Milwall fan without the knives, chains and broken bottles. In a totally sanitized, media-run world, personal violence becomes an ideal vehicle for political rebellion.

I found the book a little hard to follow in places. I suspect that in part I was concentrating on looking for the jokes and politics, and consequently missed looking for the SF, so I was totally caught out by

the ending. Also, as the book covers a whole year of Sam's life on Octavia, the story tends to jump around fairly quickly. Nevertheless, it is a fun book full of interesting ideas and pointed political statements. I shall seek out more of Munroe's work, and I very much look forward to seeing him on panel at some conventions.

Angry Young Spaceman – Jim Munroe – Four Walls Eight Windows – softcover

Original Syn

“Probably the most important function of SF as literature is to describe the present to us under cover of describing the future ... But sometimes older SF can describe our now to us better than it ever had a chance of doing when it first appeared.”

Neil Gaiman

That quote from Gaiman comes from his introduction to the new tenth anniversary edition of Pat Cadigan's *Synners*, one of the classics of cyberpunk SF. Think about what Gaiman is saying for a moment. He is claiming that Cadigan got it right, that the future she predicted back in 1991 is remarkably similar to the future that we are living in now. It isn't often that SF manages to do this. Indeed, as Gaiman said, what SF writers are generally doing is talking about their now, not making predictions. But he's right; *Synners* is scarily prescient, and therefore thoroughly deserving of a reprint.

It hasn't all come true, of course. The sophisticated Internet that Cadigan

described (back when hardly anyone had heard of the thing) doesn't quite exist yet. Nor does the technology for direct interfacing of human minds to computers, so central to Gibson's vision of the future, seem remotely plausible. But Cadigan's vision of a world in which what electronic communication we do have is completely fucked over by spam and viruses (both also almost unknown in 1991) is absolutely spot on. She saw it coming, and we are living in the hell that she wrote about.

The central plot of *Synners* concerns the invention of "sockets", the man-machine interface. Doubtless they will come eventually. They are just too sexy a concept, and too many people will want them. But in the world of *Synners* they have just arrived, and Cadigan uses this setting to give us a lesson that we signally failed to heed when she first preached it.

To make life more interesting (and with a fair degree of plausibility) the technological breakthrough comes from the world of rock videos. Thus we enter the world of the superbly talented Visual Mark who is constantly frustrated by his inability to get the pictures in his head onto disc. When the ghoulish Dr. Lindel Joslin approaches Mark's employers with a technological fix for his difficulties he is only too keen to be a guinea pig. Soon, of course, bigger sharks scent the prey. There is hacking; there are deals; there are double-crosses. This is standard cyberpunk stuff. But for Cadigan this is only the introduction. What she is interested in is what happens next.

So we get a character-rich tale of love, greed and technological disaster featuring such luminaries as the ambitious, amoral and manipulative suit, Manny Rivera, the burned out writer of commercials, Gabe

Ludovic, his estranged daughter and genius hacker, Sam, and Visual Mark's increasingly desperate partner, Gina. Oh, and not to forget a smarmy AI with the cute moniker of Artie Fish. It is all very cool, and it all takes place before a convincing background of rock groups, designer drugs and wild parties in a future Los Angeles where traffic congestion has reached its logical, absurd conclusion.

"Change for the machines." She sighed heavily. "That's all we've ever done is change for the machines. But this is the last time. We've finally changed enough that the machines will be making the changes from now on."

Did I mention that the book is full of deliciously cool wordplay?

But it would be a mistake to think that *Synners* is another gloomy John Brunner style dystopia. It isn't until you get to the epilogue that the true message of the book (and the true meaning of the title is finally revealed). As you are going to be reading the book, I'd better leave it at that.

Of course the really scary thing about books like this is that you start to wonder about what you are reading now and whether it too will turn out to be prescient. I think I have survived Cadigan's future fairly well. I don't pass on viruses (software or meme), my home Internet connection has a firewall, and the *Emerald City* web site hasn't been hacked (despite at least one attempt). But I wonder how things will look in a decade or two if Kathleen Ann Goonan's vision of the future starts to come true. Will I still be a survivor rather than a victim? Will *Emerald City* be there to tell you how prescient

Goonan was? And if so will you be able to eat it? If so, I promise not to put too much chili in the mix.

Synners – Pat Cadigan – Four Walls Eight Windows – softcover

Miscellany

Tun moving

The word on the Net is that the traditional monthly London meeting of SF fandom is on the move. Apparently the Florence Nightingale has a new landlord who wants to get rid of all the weirdos who fill up his pub and drink vast quantities of beer, and replace them by respectable businessmen and Bridget Jones clones who will drink expensive vodka cocktails instead.

So a search for a new venue is on. Last I heard, the meeting had fallen back on its previous haunt, the Jubilee (also near to Waterloo station) but that this was not expected to be a permanent move. I'll publish more news as and when I get it. In the meantime, ask around before planning to attend.

ConJosé news

The Hugo nomination ballots (and the rest of Progress Report #4) are now in the post. Once again, Kevin took personal responsibility for posting the non-US copies so you should get them. The only question is how long it will take. I understand that PR#3 took a very long time to get to Australia. This is unfortunate, but using bulk mail does save

over \$3 per member on the overseas postage. The good news is that the mailing has already reached London. Also Australia has enough members now to get their own sack, rather than sharing one with Japan, so hopefully things will be better this time. In the meantime the ballot is available online as an HTML form, a printable web page and a PDF. Go to <http://www.conjose.org>.

Talking of saving money, ConJosé has now entered that traditional stage of Worldcon development known as the "budget panic". It is particularly serious this year because the state of the US economy, the general unwillingness to travel after 9/11 and the dreadful mismanagement in its early years has left ConJosé very short of money. Consequently, all of the fun things that it would have been nice to do are being cut in favor of the things that the con absolutely has to do. That's where shortsightedness and unwillingness to work until an emergency strikes gets you.

I don't expect the con to fail. Kevin is far too competent for that, and if necessary the silly boy would work 50 hours a day doing everything himself to make it work. But, like ConFrancisco, it is going to be another case of getting to the end and thinking, "if we hadn't made all those silly mistakes this could have been so much better". <sigh>

Shadowmarch news

Tad Williams has announced that his experimental Shadowmarch online novel will cease to publish online as of the end of its first year. This does not mean that there is no interest in the story. Indeed, Tad's various publishers are queuing up to get the rights. But it does mean that Tad

and Deb have not been able to persuade enough people to join the online site to pay for the running of that site.

So what happens now? Tad has committed to finishing the first year's episodes some time in August. Those will then be edited somewhat and appear as the first volume in a paper novel. Subsequent volumes will appear in due course. In the meantime Tad will keep the Shadowmarch site open in a changed form. It will now focus on developing the background of the Shadowmarch world. And presumably with the book coming out in a physical version the site will get a lot more traffic.

The future of the Shadowmarch community is a little less clear. Managing the vibrant bulletin board is likely to be one of the major costs of running the site (both in terms of technical requirements and Tad's time reading/posting to it). However, the fans involved seem keen to keep it going so hopefully it will survive.

The other interesting question is what this means for the future of online fiction. If Stephen King, with his huge readership, cannot make it work, and Tad, with his web-savvy readership can't make it work, what hope is there? Right now things don't look good. Obviously the state of the economy doesn't help, but for individual authors I have to say that doing your own web-book does not seem like a good idea.

On the other hand, ebooks are certainly not dead. Fictionwise (<http://www.fictionwise.com/>) seems to be doing good business as an ebook vendor, and many publishers are using ebooks (or e-extracts) as a means of promoting their wares. For example, Karin Lowachee's *Warchild* is available as an ebook, which is presumably an attempt by

Warner to attract readers to their promising young star.

As yet it is unclear whether ebooks are a good idea that is just taking a long time to catch on, a blind alley, or an idea desperately in need of a technological solution. Personally I favor the latter. Even though I publish online, I still prefer reading on paper. And even though I now have a full time job, I haven't got round to buying a portable ebook reader. I'm sure that other people must feel the same.

Minneapolis in 2002

No, not a Worldcon, but World Fantasy Con, which is indeed being held in Minneapolis this very year. I have discovered that the hotel I stayed in on a recent business trip (the Minneapolis Hilton) is the venue for this year's WFC. If you are planning to go, I'm pleased to say that the hotel is very nice, and that there is a wealth of interesting restaurants on nearby Nicollet Mall (not to mention a British pub). It looks like a really good place for a con. See <http://www.worldfantasy.org/> for details.

Silicon Announcement

The dates and venue for this year's Silicon have been announced. The con will take place over October 11-13 at the Crowne Plaza in Foster City. For more details see <http://www.siliconventions.org>.

Footnote

Well, looks like I made it despite the short deadline. The next issue looks like it is going to focus on fantasy books by women writers. My to read pile includes Storm Constantine, Laurie Marks, Jude Fisher, Cecilia Dart-Thornton and Juliet McKenna. In addition I will have been to Westercon in LA, and I guess that with Worldcon fast approaching I had better start on Cheryl's Guide to San José.

#83 will probably also be out early as it turns out I am scheduled for a business trip to Australia at the end of July. I don't have any firm bookings yet, but the trip has me in Brisbane and Sydney and I'll do everything I can to find time to hit Melbourne while I am there.

Ciao,

Love 'n' hugs,

Cheryl