

EMERALD CITY #92

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

Introduction

Um, thank you. Thank you, thank you, thank you! I'd like to thank my mum (sob), my cat (sob), my personal trainer (sob)...

OK, OK, I'll stop now. But I'm not going to win so I figured I should get the Gwyneth Paltrow impersonations out of my system now. And if you haven't figured it out yet, the good news is that *Emerald City* has been nominated for Best Fanzine in this year's Hugo Awards. Full details of the nominations lists are in the Miscellany section below.

And seriously, thank you all very much (especially Kevin and Anne who contribute far more to this magazine than is immediately obvious to the casual reader).

I'm rather hoping that *Plokta* wins. They deserve it. But hey, if you all want to vote for me I'll be delighted.

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Return to Hinckley

So, here we are again. If it is Easter it must be Eastercon, and increasingly it seems that it must be Hinckley. Oh well, it could be worse. It could be Liverpool.

Train Trauma

But before we get there, another exercise in breaking the supposed golden rule of con reporting. I'm going to talk about getting there. This is, of course, purely because Kevin had managed to find the time and the air miles to join me at this year's convention. He does this partly to humor me, partly because he likes Britain, but mainly because it gives him an opportunity to ride on trains. I mean, we arrive on the platform at Gatwick and there are services from at least four different train companies pulling in and out at roughly 5-minute intervals. It is trainspotter heaven.

This year, however, I managed to lay on something special. Coinciding with Kevin's day of arrival, I was able to supply an actual, genuine British train strike, complete with emergency timetables, mass confusion and delays. Or at least I thought I had. Supposedly both Midland Mainline and Central Trains, the two services you need to get from London to Hinckley, were on strike. We had it all planned out, down to the emergency route on Chiltern Trains from Marylebone to Birmingham Snow Hill and taxi on to Hinckley. And what happened? The damn trains ran pretty much to time! They were not even overcrowded. What sort of bank holiday chaos is that? British trade unionism has obviously gone downhill

significantly while I have been out of the country.

(Actually, to be fair, someone I met at the con said that it took him 6 hours to get from York to Hinckley because of the strike. That should tell you a lot about the class and wealth divide between northern and southern England.)

At the Borders

Actually, however, my Eastercon began rather earlier than that. Pat Cadigan (bless her resolutely organizational heart) has managed to persuade the Oxford Street branch of Borders to hold a monthly SF reading, and one of these events was scheduled for the Monday before the convention. As I was already in the UK on business, and as the program promised Justina Robson and Colin Greenland, I made my way over there.

And a very fine evening it was too. In addition to the advertised speakers, Pat Murphy and Ellen Klages turned up to do some PR for the Tiptree Award (of which more later). Justina read from *Natural History* (see below) and Colin from his new novel, *Finding Helen*, which I intend to review next month. What disappointed me was the turnout. It was mainly the usual suspects. Farah Mendlesohn, Claire Briarley, Mark Plummer, Tanya Brown; plus a bunch of industry people and authors. Hardly anyone I didn't know, and most of the strangers appeared to be friends of Pat's. Come on, London fandom, this is an excellent event. Let's have a bit of support for it.

Further praise of La Cadigan is also due for her having introduced me to an absolutely superb barbecue restaurant. That's the sort of thing you really only

expect to find in the US, preferably in the Deep South. But here we were in Soho and it was really good. Nice one, Pat.

State of the Horror

Still, enough of food for now. What I am sure you are sitting on the edge of your seats waiting for is a report on the state of the Hinckley Horror (otherwise known as the Hanover International Hotel), one of the world's most bizarre architectural monstrosities. I'm pleased to report that our American visitors were duly appalled at the lack of taste involved in mixing classical Greek, Dickensian London and country pub styles in a single building. Sadly, however, the tat on sale from the Dickensian Street windows has undergone a significant increase in quality since the last Hinckley Eastercon. Gone are the window full of Charles and Diana wedding souvenirs, the Cliff Richard teddy bear collection and the bust of Marilyn Monroe with a rooster perched on her head. In their place we had some almost tasteful jewelry and lots more pottery figurines. Very sad. My prize for tattiest item of the year went to the violent pink "cat dangle"; a model feline in what appeared to be Dame Edna drag. But there really wasn't much competition. A great Eastercon sport is vanishing.

I should also add that the hotel is learning rapidly from experience and it getting much more friendly and much better at catering for fans. They solved my Internet connectivity problems quickly and efficiently, and while the food is still largely inedible it is now cheap and fast. This has advantages for people on a busy or crushed schedule.

Program Pain

In general I was very impressed with the organization of this year's Eastercon (at least what I saw of it, of which more later). All of my dealings with the committee were handled efficiently and effectively. Hardly anything seemed to go wrong on the day. And they even coped with the potential disaster of one of their Guests of Honor, Mary Gentle, pulling out at the last minute. It was all very smooth.

What did seem strange, however, was the program schedule. You may recall that my favorite programming style is to use 90-minute program slots, with each item scheduled for 75 minutes and 15 minutes to move between panels. That works fine at Wiscon , and was a boon at ConJosé where it sometimes took 15 minutes to walk from one end of the convention center to the other.

This Eastercon (which, by the way, for nostalgic reasons, was called Seacon '03, despite being about as far from the sea as you can get in England) chose to use 1-hour program slots, with half hour gaps between them. Most panels took this to mean that they had to finish within the hour, which left people with an aimless half-hour plus to fill. Possibly it was intended to give you time to order another pint or two at the bar. Where this was really irritating was in the evening, because there was no time scheduled for dinner. Attendees were thus left with the choice of either blowing off one panel or trying to scoff down their dinner in one of the half-hour dead zones. Not smart. Note to future program designers: always schedule time for dinner (and preferably lunch too).

Tiptree comes to Britain

The star event of this year's Eastercon, at least as far as I was concerned, was the presentation of the Tiptree Award. The Tiptree has been peripatetic for some time, but this is the first occasion that it has traveled outside the US. Pat Murphy, Ellen Klages and Jean Gommoll, plus several other Wiscon regulars, including Jae Leslie Adams and Matt Austern, who were on last year's judging panel, all made the trip over. They were joined by Farah Mendlesohn (also a judge) and joint winner, M. John Harrison.

Now the Tiptree is not like ordinary awards. Ordinary awards have people making boring speeches. The Tiptree ceremony has a silly song, which the audience is expected to join in with. Ordinary awards give the winners money and (generally ugly) ornaments to put in their trophy cabinets. The Tiptree gives you money and chocolate. And given that it is a girly award, and bearing in mind that none of us is ever likely to win Miss World, the Tiptree has a ceremonial tiara with which to crown the winner. Mike Harrison took the whole thing in precisely the spirit in which it is intended and had a wonderful time. We also discovered that tiaras are a great chick magnet. I was chatting with him outside the bar afterwards and almost every girl who passed us tried to chat him up just because he was wearing this pretty piece of jewelry on his head. So now you know, guys. Get a tiara and get laid.

Gastric Grumbles

So far so good. Sadly from my point of view most of the rest of the weekend was a bust. I woke up on Saturday morning

feeling decidedly queasy. I couldn't finish my breakfast, and most of the rest of the day was spent alternately lying down and allowing my body to purge my digestive system of whatever was upsetting it. Sunday and Monday were largely felt feeling tired, weak and sorry for myself. Presumably what I had was food poisoning, because Kevin didn't catch it from me. In defense of the hotel I should add that no one else came down ill during the weekend. However, as I ate nowhere other than in the hotel on the Friday I'm pretty convinced about the source of the problem.

The one good thing about this was that I wasn't too upset about missing the expedition to the Bell Inn on Sunday evening. I had to cover the BSFA Awards ceremony and I was moderating a panel immediately afterwards, so I couldn't go even if I had been capable of eating. Kevin went, and now sees why I rave about the place.

I should also add that Kevin and I had a chance to try out Barnacles, the restaurant at the fish farm across the road from the hotel on the Thursday evening. It was very good, but as usual very busy most of the weekend.

Writing techniques panel

I did manage to get myself together enough to attend a panel on Sunday morning and I'm delighted I did because it was fascinating. The panelists included writers Jon Courtenay Grimwood, M. John Harrison and Guest of Honor Chris Evans. Critics Farah Mendlesohn and Paul Kincaid tried to get them to explain how they did what they did, and perhaps by

extension how we might thereby identify the good stuff.

The first thing that became immediately obvious (well, Farah had set it up that way) was that these were three writers who worked very hard at their craft. There was none of this “the story tells itself” stuff. The story is a story, and it may have independent existence, but turning it into a piece of brilliant literature requires a lot of hard work and talent.

Just precisely what one does in that hard work was rather harder to explain, and all three writers found it very difficult to discuss their craft in the abstract. They were much more comfortable explaining what they had done to create the specific atmosphere in actual samples of their work. However, there were a couple of comments from Harrison that I’d like to pass on. The first is that he said writing SF is very much like travel writing, because it is your job to describe something strange and wonderful that your readers have not seen. The other is that he said he would rather kill himself than write huge sections of exposition, which I guess sums up why I think that Harrison is a genius and the likes of Kim Stanley Robinson and Robert Sawyer are hacks.

Lost Gems panel

The one panel I was scheduled for was fortunately scheduled for Sunday evening by which time my stomach had more or less settled down. The idea of the panel was that we, the panelists, should produce lists of favorite SF material that we felt had been unduly ignored. Mostly we talked about books because that is what we knew, but I was very grateful to Dave O’Neil for extending the discussion to TV,

radio and film. I can’t reproduce the entire discussion here, but if you are interested here are the items that were discussed.

Rog Peyton: (being in the business, Rog was able to list stuff that most of us had never heard of and which is very hard to find)

Insider, Christopher Evans (most of the run sadly pulped by accidentally shortly after publication).

Elleander Morning, Jerry Yulsman (WWII alternate history).

Replay, Ken Grimwood (the book on which the movie *Groundhog Day* was based).

What Happened to Emily Goode after the Great Exhibition, Raylyn Moore (Victorian woman travels through time to modern day New York).

Time and Chance, Alan Brennert.

Peter Weston:

Picnic on Paradise, Joanna Russ, MacDonald 1969.

The Fury From Earth, Dean McLaughlin, Pyramid 1963.

Deeper Than The Darkness, Greg Benford, Ace 1970, re-worked completely (and utterly changed for the worse) as *The Stars In Shroud*.

Tales From The White Hart, Arthur C Clarke, Ballantine 1957.

The Ballad of Beta-2, Samuel R Delany, Ace Double, 1965.

World Out of Mind, J.T. McIntosh, Museum 1955, Corgi 1961.

Tetrasomy Two, Oscar Rossiter, Bantam 1975.

Julian Headlong: (Julian produced a huge list which I don't have room for here, so I've limited myself to the books he talked about at the panel)

Becoming Alien and sequels, Rebecca Ore.

Our Man for Ganymede & A Skull and Two Crystals, George Dick Lauder.

And Having Writ, Donald Bensen.

Dave O'Neil:

The Fury, Henry Cutler.

The Survivors (BBC TV series guaranteed to freak out anyone currently obsessed with the SARS panic).

The Flip Side of Dominic Hyde, BBC one-off drama.

Quest for Love, Joan Collins movie based on a John Wyndham story.

Cheryl Morgan: (as moderator I tried to limit my participation to give the others more time, but this is the full list of books that I prepared)

Back in the USSA, Kim Newman and Eugene Byrne.

Resume with Monsters, William Browning Spencer.

The Fortunate Fall, Raphael Carter.

The Resurrected Man, Sean Williams.

The Sheep Look Up, John Brunner (shortly to be republished, huzzah!).

Strange Toys, Patricia Geary.

Other stuff

Of course a lot more went on at the convention that I have reported here. I did, after all, miss quite a lot of it. I was particularly sad to miss the annual

discussion of the Clarke Award nominees. Farah Mendlesohn tells me that the panelists were totally unable to agree on a probable winner, which does not surprise me at all, as it is a very good list.

There was a masquerade, but I was in the Lost Gems panel at the time. There was, of course, the usual SMS-run Cyberdrome spectacular, this one with a mediaeval theme. The idea of Ye Olde Duelling Robotos is certainly amusing and I am sorry to have missed it. And of course there were lots of other panels, an art show, and a dealers' room in which I spent lots of money stocking up on books for next issue. Next year's Eastercon will be in Blackpool, which does at least mean that there will be plenty of restaurants in walking distance. However, the suitability of Hinckley for the event (difficulty of getting fed aside) was underlined by the fact that the convention voted to return there in 2005. I really must make sure that I have a car for that one.

Searching for Copernicus

So here we go with part two of Cheryl's excursion into literary theory. Those of you who were with us last issue will remember that the question we had left unasked was the thorny old chestnut of what exactly do we mean by terms like "science fiction" and "fantasy". How do we tell if a work is SF or not? In a week in which Kevin has had to deal with yet another ill-informed but earnest fellow demanding that the WSFS authorities change the rules of the Hugo Awards so as to exclude works of "fantasy" I am not sure I should be addressing this issue.

The current set-up, in which we agree that anything that a sufficiently large number of people vote for is Hugo-worthy, is both sufficiently vague to be difficult to argue and guarantees us a large amount of voter satisfaction with the results. Any sort of attempt to define "science fiction" would result in endless and pointless debates over books such as *Cryptonomicon* and *Perdido Street Station* and would result in large numbers of people believing that a miscarriage of justice had taken place because the people responsible for making the decision did not share their particular, narrow interpretation of the official definition. I would much prefer a world in which every crackpot in fandom believes that the rules are wrong than one in which those same crackpots can claim that the rules have been mis-applied and threaten lawsuits as a result.

On the other hand, perhaps by going through some of the discussions that took place at ICFA, and are continuing to take place, I can show just what a difficult problem this is. After all, if the finest minds in SF literary criticism cannot reach agreement as to what we mean by "science fiction", what hope do we have of the WSFS Business Meeting creating a workable and broadly acceptable definition? So here goes.

Let us start once more with the paper by Gary K. Wolfe that was the inspiration for most of last issue's article. Wolfe's approach is to try to find a definition that is both simple but also broad and nebulous. The most workable example of this is his definition of horror, which he says is fiction that is concerned with "the [narrative] geography of anxiety". We can see immediately what he means by this. A horror story does not need to contain ghosts or vampires or tentacled beings

from beyond the stars. It simply has to be a tale whose telling fills us with a sense of creeping anxiety. We can dispense with the tropes, or use them in new and imaginative ways, without losing the essential horror-ness of the narrative.

Moving on to science fiction, Wolfe suggests that it comprises tales that explore the narrative geography of reason. This is a slightly less obvious definition, because reason is not an identifiable emotion like anxiety. However, it could be argued that reason is an absence of emotion, and that a science fiction story is thus one that engages the reader by encouraging her to think logically about the plot rather than by reacting to it in some emotional manner. We can see immediately that much SF does indeed fit this mould. For example, a classic Beowulf Schaeffer story from Larry Niven puts our hero in a difficult situation and is resolved when he uses his knowledge of physics to extricate himself from his predicament.

On the other hand, we can also see that there may be issues of extent here. As I have argued before, *Cryptonomicon* is indeed an SF novel because, although it does not postulate any science that is unknown to us, it nevertheless progresses the story in exactly the same way as an SF novel would do. (Incidentally, Wolfe tells me that the forthcoming sequel to *Cryptonomicon* includes a character who is 300 years old, so hopefully this particular dispute will go away.) The problem is that we could also argue that many crime novels are also SF because the detective is presented with a collection of facts and uses reason to come to a conclusion as to the identity of the murderer. I think that we would generally agree that a definition of SF that appears to absorb crime fiction into the genre is perhaps a bridge too far.

Thus we see one of the pitfalls of simple definitions.

The most contentious of Wolfe's definitions was that pertaining to fantasy fiction. Wolfe suggested that fantasy fiction was that which treated the narrative geography of desire. It was, of course, immediately obvious to me that linking the words "fantasy" and "desire" in a single sentence is a recipe for a public relations disaster. The fact that the assembled academics at ICFA looked blankly at me when I made this point tells you rather a lot about academics. But even without this obvious flaw, Wolfe's selection of word again appears suspect. Desire for what? Chic Lit fiction is all about the desire to be rich, beautiful and popular. Romance fiction is all about the desire to be loved and looked after. No, "desire" won't do. Farah Mendlesohn suggested "justice" as a replacement, and I think she is getting somewhere with that. But "justice" itself is a word that has acquired a fatal ambiguity of meaning, for what is handed out as justice in courts these days is often anything but what one might regard as just.

What I think that Wolfe was trying to get at is that fantasy fiction embodies stories that describe an essential wrongness about the state of the world, and a consequent desire amongst the protagonists to right that wrongness. That wrongness is often embodied as some sort of evil overlord who is to be fought, such as Sauron, but this is not a necessary requirement. The *Thomas Covenant* series, for example, suggests on one level that Lord Foul is simply an expression of the hero's leprosy and the self-pity that he feels because of it. And in *The Wizard of Oz* the wrong that Dorothy rights is the deception that the Wizard is perpetrating upon the people of

Oz in order to satisfy their desire for a wise and powerful leader.

An alternate approach to the problem was provided at ICFA by Farah Mendlesohn who is attempting to construct a taxonomy of fantasy. Whereas Wolfe puts forward definitions and claims that anything fitting a particular definition is, de facto, an example of the defined genre, Mendlesohn takes the opposite tack. She lists things that we identify as genre (in her case solely fantasy works) and then attempts to describe what it is about them that makes them fantasy. By implication, any other work that shares those characteristics must also be fantasy.

Many critics in the past have attempted a taxonomy of fantasy, but Mendlesohn's both innovative and powerful. She bases her categorizations on the question of how elements of the fantastic enter the text, and the consequences that has for the reader and the narrative structure. Most of her classifications are instantly recognizable, as you will see from the first three that I present here.

Portal or Quest fantasies are stories in which the protagonist(s) either begins in our world, or in a humdrum existence in the fantasy world and then is thrust into some major adventure. This adequately describes all sort of classic fantasies, from *The Lord of the Rings* and *Narnia* through to the first *Star Wars* film. It is a very Joseph Campbell sort of fantasy.

Intrusive fantasies work in a different way. Here the fantastic breaks through into our world, and the thrust of the story is generally to put it back where it belongs. Emma Bull's *The War for the Oaks* is a classic story of this type, and it is possible to argue that Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a similar type

of tale, although in that case the Faerie go away of their own accord once their purpose is fulfilled.

The third category, Immersive fantasies, comprises those stories that are set entirely in a fantastical world. I suspect that L.E. Modesitt's work is typical of this category as, on the basis of our dinner conversation at ICFA, he deliberately set out to construct a believable, workable fantasy world and then set stories in it. It is at this point that Mendlesohn's and Wolfe's definitions of fantasy diverge, because it is perfectly possible to imagine a wide range of fantasy works that use all of the fantasy tropes (pseudo-mediaeval society, dragons, elves, magic and so on) but contain none of the overarching moral imperatives that are typical of Tolkien, Lewis or Donaldson. Indeed, I suspect that an awful lot of modern fantasy literature is of exactly this type. In addition it is possible to argue that the whole of science fiction is simply a set of immersive fantasy stories in which the nature of the fantasy world is entirely explained with scientific theories and extrapolations. Anne McCaffrey's *Pern* series fits neatly into that argument.

However, Mendlesohn discovered that there were many fantasy works, including some of the best respected in the field, that did not fit into any of the above categories, and for this reason she postulated a fourth category that has become known as Liminal fantasy. In explaining what she means by this, Mendlesohn describes a wonderful set-up from the story, "But It's Tuesday", by Joan Aitken:

There is a unicorn on the Armitage family's lawn. When, we, the reader, mentally express surprise, the family tell us "Yes, and it's Tuesday, magical things only happen on Mondays".

The authorial trick here is to play with the reader's expectations of the story by cunningly juggling the way in which characters in the story react to the fantastical elements of it. As Mendlesohn says, it is "that form of fantasy which estranges the reader from the fantastic as seen and described by the protagonist." And by some strange coincidence she discovered that many of the stories in the *Conjunctions* #39 anthology are of exactly this type. In other words, to hark back to last month's article, writers who specialize in the evaporative extreme of genre literature tend to write liminal fantasies.

At this point it is worth focusing our attention on one of the most controversial stories in *Conjunctions* #39. "The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines", by John Crowley, contains no fantastical elements whatsoever. Nevertheless, it has been widely acclaimed by many critics (including me) as one of the best fantasy stories in the collection. Why? I think we can make the argument from both the Wolfe and Mendlesohn point of view.

To begin with, Crowley's story reeks wrongness from every pore. It deals with a couple of intelligent and creative young people who meet at a summer festival of Shakespeare's plays. It looks as if they have a bright future, both in the theatre and as a couple, but this vision is slowly poisoned as the story progresses. Firstly Crowley introduces his protagonists to the idea that the plays they love may not have been written by the man known to history as William Shakespeare. Their love of the plays thus becomes polluted by an ugly obsession with determining the authenticity of the material. Then, though no causal connection is ever postulated, the wrongness seeps into their physical lives as they both contract polio. From

bright young things to struggling cripples in one unguarded summer's day at the beach. Although Crowley never once mentions fantastical elements in the story, it is clear to the experienced fantasy reader that his protagonists have been cursed.

From Mendlesohn's point of view, the story stretches liminality to the ultimate extreme. Crowley is continually setting up the expectation that some fantastical element will enter the story, but it never actually happens. It is, I think, impossible to play with readers' expectations any more than this. And the very controversy that the story has generated is evidence of the estrangement that Crowley has generated.

As a final spanner in the works I would like to introduce one additional controversial tale. This is "What I Didn't See", a story by Karen Joy Fowler that appeared on *Sci Fiction* last year. The story does not contain any discernable SF or fantasy tropes. As it involves the mysterious disappearance of a member of a jungle expedition it might perhaps be classed as horror. But the story does not make use of much in the way of horror techniques. It doesn't induce anxiety in the reader, and it is not intended to. It is, in fact, a fairly obvious feminist commentary, and the political nature of the tale dominates the reader's experience. So why did it appear on an SF web site? The editor of *Sci Fiction*, Ellen Datlow, was on the Cross-Pollination panel at ICFA that I mentioned last month. On being asked why she had purchased the story, she said unequivocally that she had done so because it directly addressed themes raised in a famous SF story, "The Women Men Don't See", by James Tiptree Jr. In Datlow's view, therefore, a work can be SF, even if it fails to meet any of the

criteria set out by Wolfe and Mendlesohn, if it deserves a place in the SF canon by virtue of providing a cogent commentary on a well-known SF story.

I hope that the above discussion has illustrated just how difficult it is to create a workable definition of something as slippery as SF. It is, of course, very easy for one individual to say, "I know what it is when I see it", but the problem with such an approach is that each individual sees something different. Most of the people who complain that the wrong works are being nominated for the Hugos are simply saying that the works they like are not being nominated, and that the rules should be changed to ensure that their favorite works win. So let's see an end to these pointless disputes, and leave trying to define SF in the realm of academia where it belongs, OK?

Sensawunda

The Pigeon came silently, almost indistinguishable from the afternoon sky: a smooth blue oval with a long, graceful tail like a gigantic airborne manta ray. Low sunlight shone golden of its pale underside, and glinted in tiny blinks of pure white from the diamond scales on its wings as they angled gently this way and that, feeling for the best course through the wind's currents.

It was only when the Pigeon passed the University's Library tower on its final approach that Zephyr realized how big it was – a good fifty or sixty metres long and about forty wide; almost too big for the deck, which was used to small helicopters and robo-lifter flights. Its sinuous tail added some twenty

extra metres at the rear, bearing fins of unknown purpose along half that length, each the height of a human and as wide at their fleshy base. At the end of its long glide the silver MekTek on its underside opened and put down fine support struts that groped for the ground. It perched on them as delicately as a landing butterfly, making no sound at all. At rest its wings folded and drooped towards the ground. There was a general sigh of admiration in the lounge.

Zephyr, who had been extremely apprehensive, felt better as she heard staff from the Research Department start to talk about the Pigeon's excellent statistics. Also, she felt better because she'd never seen a Forged human as beautiful as this one.

"Toto, I don't think we are in Kansas any more..."

Dorothy Gale

Justina Robson's two previous novels, *Silver Screen* and *Mappa Mundi*, have been resolutely near-future and, if not quite grimy, certainly unconvinced about the probable future state of the world. However, when she told me last year that her new book was going to be space opera and much more fun, I still wasn't prepared for the exuberance and vast vistas of imagination that greet us in *Natural History*. Fear not, though, dear reader, this is still a Justina Robson novel. It still revolves around issues of the politics of technology. It still has an insecure female lead, and it is still very, very good.

As you may have guessed from the somewhat extensive quote, *Natural History* takes place in a future in which some human beings have taken on significant

adaptation. The Forged are made, not born. Embryos are implanted in technology and raised to be part of it, to work with their machine parts as well as they work with their fleshy limbs. There are many types of Forged. The Passenger Pigeon, featured in the extract, is one of the rarer types, and perhaps one of the less exotic. It is, after all, only a passenger aircraft. Compare, for example, with Ironhorse Timespan Tatresi, the giant interplanetary freighter, or Voyager Lonestar Isol, the deep space explorer.

It is Isol who is the catalyst for our tale. Wandering far out near Barnard's Star, she blunders into a micrometeorite field, the apparent wreckage of an explosion of some sort. Before she has a chance to slow down, fragments of rock and metal have ripped through her delicate structures, shredding her solar wings and irreparably damaging her systems. Just when she thinks all is lost, up ahead she notices some new material: a small, inert chunk of gray matter. Stuff. And it talks to her in her dying dreams. "I can save you", it says, "eat me."

Some time later, Isol is unexpectedly returned to the solar system. She claims to be in possession of a hyperspace drive. She claims to have discovered an Earthlike planet, former home of some long-dead civilization, that the Forged can claim as their own. Here at last is a chance to escape from the overlordship of the Unevolved, the hated Monkeys. Equipped with Isol's hyperspace drive, the Forged can flee into space, make their own society, and throw off at last the tyranny of Form and Function.

General Machen isn't too worried about Isol's revolutionary aspirations. There has been discontent amongst the Forged for

many years. Powerful Union leaders like Tatresi are always agitating for increased rights for the members. And then there are sad cases like the Degraded, Forged whose manufacturing process was less than perfect and are forced to eek out a living on the margins of society as they are unable to fulfil the Function for which their Form was designed. No, the Forged have a case, and some from of secession, probably by people like the Jovians, is inevitable. What worries Machen is Isol's hyperspace drive. Where did she get it? Is it really alien technology? If so, are those aliens still about, and what do they want? That is the sort of thing that Gaiasol Security is paid to worry about, and if necessary use the utmost force to deal with.

Reluctantly, Isol has agreed to an inspection of the world to which she has laid claim. While Gaiasol is prepared to tolerate an exodus of the Forged, having them invade an inhabited alien planet is quite another matter. Isol claims that the ruins on the planet are dead, and appear to have been that way for millennia. An archaeologist is required to substantiate that claim. Not a full expedition, as Isol has little carrying capacity, so just one person. A number of names are suggested, and thus it is that Professor Zephyr Duquesne finds herself being collected by the rare and exotic executive passenger ship, the Passenger Pigeon.

If this were a Ken MacLeod novel, Isol and Tatresi would be the heroes. They would fight valiantly for the liberation of the Forged and achieve a glorious yet hard-won victory. But this is a Justina Robson novel, so our hero is Zephyr, a fairly ordinary academic thrust into the

center of Gaiasol politics, largely clueless about the tides of power that surge around her, and still fretting about her lack of success with relationships. The politicians, from Tatresi to Machen and all points in between, all have their good points and bad points. Tatresi has a good cause to fight for, and Machen is right to be worried.

From here we descend rapidly into horror, cutting-edge physics and philosophy. The horror bit revolves around Zephyr's investigation of the alien planet. Just where are those aliens? The physics is needed to tell us why we can't see them. And the philosophy considers just what sort of escape might be offered to the Forged, and whether or not they might want it.

Got you hooked yet? Hopefully I have, because this is a wonderful piece of space opera. Although there is some good, solid science behind the story, don't expect to have it all worked out and explained in precise detail. Nor is the Gaiasol society described in any great depth. Robson is telling a story, and raising interesting questions in our minds, not undertaking an exercise in world-building. There will be some who find it unsatisfying from that point of view, but most readers should find it a fascinating exercise in imagination and thoroughly entertaining.

Now will some US publishing house give Robson a contract?

Natural History - Justina Robson - Macmillan - hardcover

Hell's Angels

Richard Morgan's first novel, *Altered Carbon*, was very well received. Now he has a new book out. Will *Broken Angels* live up to the promise of its predecessor? It really depends on what people want from it.

In essence, *Altered Carbon* was a murder mystery. OK, so for good science-fictional reasons the victim wasn't actually dead anymore, but he had killed himself, and someone had encouraged him to do it. Our hero, Takeshi Kovacs, is given the task of finding out what happened. And given that the whole thing takes place in a grimy, far future San Francisco, there is more than a passing nod to Dashiell Hammett.

The new book, *Broken Angels*, also stars Takeshi Kovacs, and is equally dark and grimy, but it heads off in a very different direction. In his Acknowledgements, Morgan tips his hat to John Pilger, and much of the book heads directly into Jon Courtenay Grimwood territory. It is a war novel, and the level of violence, already quite high in *Altered Carbon*, escalates by several orders of magnitude. In addition, the book has an entirely different side to it – that of the archaeological horror story; the sort of thing that might have been familiar to Robert E. Howard or Lovecraft. It is a strange mix, but it works very well.

When we first encounter Kovacs he is working as a junior officer in a crack mercenary unit helping to suppress a revolution on the planet, Sanction IV. As an ex-Envoy he is, of course, well suited to such action, but given that the UN Envoy Corps members are something like a combination of James Bond and the SAS, it is rather like using a tiger as a retriever

on a duck hunt. You need to be very careful what you put on your leash.

As luck (or rather the plot) would have it, Kovacs suffers a period in hospital and there encounters a man with a secret. Jan Schneider claims to have a way out of the war to fame and fortune. He was working as a pilot for an archaeological expedition. Shortly before the war started, they made an amazing discovery. But now their site is close to the front lines. There is an opportunity for a group of foolhardy and greedy people to dash in there and secure the prize. What is more, if they succeed, and the find becomes public knowledge, everyone will stop fighting and gawp in awe. To Kovacs it sounds like a good deal – worth deserting for. All he needs is an archaeology specialist, money for equipment, and some hired guns.

The scientist is no problem: Kovacs and Schneider manage to spring the original expedition's leader, Tanya Wardani, from the refugee camp where she is being held. Money is more difficult. Indeed, the only way to get hold of it is to get backing from a small but ruthless corporation: people who don't have the ability to just come and take over, but who are sufficiently ruthless to not care about running a smash and grab raid in the middle of a war. As for the hired guns, as in any war story, you know that most of them are going to die horribly.

So what is this great find? As you may recall if you have read *Altered Carbon*, Morgan's future world features a long-dead civilization that, once upon a time, inhabited Mars. Whether they originated on Mars is unknown, as evidence of their activity is being found throughout the galaxy, but given that we humans are a self-centered lot we call them Martians

anyway. Martian artifacts are in fact pretty common, but what Wardani found makes finding Tut's tomb look like no more than turning up a battered old quarter with your metal detector. In a cave in a beachside cliff she found a working hyperspace gate, and on opening it found that it led out deep into space above the planet. Just a tantalizing few miles of vacuum away drifted an intact and quite possibly fully functional Martian starship.

The debate about the Martians, of course, revolves around what sort of people they were. Some historians claim that they were peaceful, high-minded intellectuals. Others claim that they were vicious predators. They did, after all, look rather like giant, humanoid vampire bats. But regardless of all this, their technology was way ahead of ours. Sufficiently far ahead that some people are prepared to stop at nothing in order to get their hands on new treasure. And in the middle of a very bloody war, the devices that you can deploy when you are prepared to stop at nothing are very nasty indeed.

In the end, Morgan forces us to conclude that war is hell. It is hell because it is fought by greedy and/or ideologically committed intelligent beings. And we might also conclude that Takeshi Kovacs is not much of a hero and not even particularly sane. It is a brutal message, and powerfully put. I suspect that the book will do very well in the UK. In the US, where rather too many people still view wars as live action Hollywood movies (Clint Eastwood as General Tommy Franks, Bruce Willis as the Marine Lieutenant and Reese Witherspoon as the girl soldier who gets captured by the enemy and has to be rescued), Morgan's message is likely to stick in the throat.

Broken Angels - Richard Morgan - Gollancz - hardcover

Return of the Prince

It is a very long time since I last read an Elric novel, but I guess I can excuse myself because it is a very long time since Michael Moorcock last wrote one. Now, however, Melniboné's doomed sorcerer-prince has returned, and in a rather unusual setting. Moorcock has decided to try to use his Eternal Champion series in conjunction with our world, and consequently we get the unusual sight of Elric locked in combat with machine-gun wielding Nazis. Does it work? Well, maybe...

First, however, a quick recap of the setting. The hero of our tale is Ulric von Bek, a young German nobleman who happens to be an albino. He is the descendant of Manfred von Bek, hero of a previous series of Moorcock books, and his family are the guardians of a mysterious black broadsword called Ravenbrand. Seeking to oppose the rise of Hitlerism in his beloved homeland, von Bek falls in with an albino woman called Oona. She, it turns out, is the daughter of Oone, the dreamthief who accompanied Elric on his quest for the Fortress of the Pearl, hence the title of the book, *The Dreamthief's Daughter*.

At the beginning I had very high hopes for this book. Moorcock does an excellent job of portraying von Bek's puzzlement and fear as the black tide of Nazism engulfs his country. The Nazi leadership's well known interest in Wagner and things

mystical gives a good excuse as to why they should pursue him. And poor old Prince Gaynor the Damned, with his usual disastrous lack of wisdom, is perfectly cast as the relative who casts his lot in with the Nazis and betrays von Bek. So far, so good.

For Moorcock lovers, the usual gang is all there too. Von Bek is tutored as a child by a Catholic priest called Fra. Cornelius. Oswald Bastable turns up as a British secret agent. Prince Lobkowitz is running the German resistance to Hitler, and so on. Long time Moorcock fans will be kept happy spotting characters.

Moorcock also takes the opportunity to have a dig at a few politicians. This comment is supposedly about Hitler, but it is easy to see which modern leader it was aimed at.

It is a mark, I think, of the political scoundrel, one who speaks most of the people's rights and hopes and uses the most sentimental language to blame all others but his own constituents for the problems of the world. Always a "foreign threat," fear of "the stranger." "Secret intruders, illegal aliens..."

Elsewhere, and rather less subtly, Moorcock introduces us to a new member of the Law pantheon, Duchess Miggea of Dolwic. (For the benefit of non-British readers, Dulwich is a posh suburb of London wherein a certain notorious former Prime Minister makes her home.) Of course she turns out to be senile and incompetent, but very dangerous nonetheless.

Unfortunately, after 100 pages or so, the book drops into pure fantasy, and for another 350 pages it meanders aimlessly

through a succession of bizarre landscapes and multiple universes. At times it reminds me of one of the more excessive of Marcus L. Rowland's *Call of Cthulhu* scenarios: Cthulhu-worshipping Nazi nuns on motorbikes, that sort of thing. The book makes considerable use of the Grail myth, and for a while at the beginning Moorcock had that cup in his hand. Sadly he didn't recognize it for what it was, and filled it with cheap, tasteless American beer.

The Dreamthief's Daughter - Michael Moorcock - Aspect - softcover

Minstrel Tales

A few issues ago I reviewed some of Kim Newman's contributions to the Games Workshop Warhammer franchise series. This month it is the turn of Brian Stableford to show that a good writer is a good writer, even if he is operating in someone else's shared world. Like Newman, Stableford chose to produce his work for Games Workshop under a pseudonym, so the name to look out for on the covers is "Brian Craig." There are three books in total; all of them featuring a character called Orfeo. This review looks at the first of them, *Zaragoz*.

The first thing to note here is that the story is, at least so far, a re-working of the Orpheus myth. Stableford's hero appears to have been named Orfeo purely on the basis of his being a travelling minstrel. He himself doesn't use that term. He was abandoned as a child and raised by elves, so while he is a better musician, singer and dancer than most humans, he knows his art is merely a pale shadow of the real

thing. Nevertheless, humans greatly admire his work, and this gives him access to places, and more importantly stories, that are normally the preserve of the powerful.

The first story in Orfeo's series of tales is a relatively simple fantasy plot. The Duke of Zaragoz has fallen under the influence of a Chaos-worshipping magician and his followers, and is oppressing his people. Orfeo must somehow take on the bad guy and his supernatural allies and free the city. So far so formulaic, but watch how Stableford makes it interesting.

The first thing to note is that the story is cast against the background of a long-running feud between two noble families. The diAvilias and the Quixanas have been quarrelling over the Dukedom of Zaragoz for centuries. The current Duke is a diAvilia, and he claims that he will solve the feud by marrying his son to the young and beautiful Quixana heiress, Serafima. However, as chance (or a good plot) would have it, Orfeo discovers that the young heiress is being held against her will and will be forced into the marriage. Furthermore, he has already fallen in with a priest of Law who knows something about Duke diAvilia's trafficking with Chaos and is determined to stamp out the infestation of unrule.

We should note here that while Games Workshop itself has sometimes dropped into the simplistic Chaos=Evil, Law=Good interpretation, Stableford insists on sticking to Moorcock's original interpretation. Thus our crusading priest (and possibly witch hunter) is no pure-minded innocent. He is dedicated, single-minded and ruthless in his pursuit of the diAvilias. Stableford even manages to slip in a long conversation between Orfeo and

the wizard, Semjaza, in which the latter is allowed to make his case for Chaos-worship. Orfeo sensibly tries to steer something of a middle ground, and this is helped by another element of the plot.

Ordinarily we might expect Orfeo to come to the aid of a young nobleman who is in love with Serafima Quixana and wants to rescue her from the clutches of Semjaza and Duke diAvilia. The two would then live happily ever after and rule Zaragoz justly and well. Stableford twists this around. His young hero, Rodrigo Cordova, is indeed honest and loyal to a fault. But as a good citizen of Zaragoz he is loyal to Duke diAvilia and very much hopes to marry the Duke's daughter, Veronique. See if you can work out how this enables Stableford to resolve the immediate story but leave the feud intact.

Finally in our study of the plot, I should note that Stableford adds a framing story. When he tells us this tale, Orfeo is actually the prisoner of an Arabian pirate king. This Caliph turns out to be a Westerner who has taken to Arabic ways. He claims to have a close personal interest in affairs in Zaragoz, and demands that Orfeo recount his adventure there. Freedom is on offer for both Orfeo and the young cabin boy captured with him if Orfeo's tale pleases, but our hero has no idea which of the many characters in the story his captor is related to. Of course we know that Orfeo will escape as there are two more books in the series, but we still spend the main story trying to work out just where the pirate Caliph's interest lies.

Zaragoz - Brian Craig - Black Library - softcover

Dying to Rule

Space Opera is popular and respectable these days. Heck, David Hartwell presented a paper on the subject at ICFA. But, as the blurbs on the back of the book so often say, "Doc Smith would barely recognize it." Certainly the technology in Scott Westerfeld's *The Risen Empire* would leave him gasping. I'm not sure what he would make of the Nazi symbolism of the cover either. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Once upon a time there was a famous bioscientist whose teenage sister was dying of some untreatable cancer. Naturally he looked for a cure, but what he found was something very different. The Lazaru symbiant is a clever little creature that settles in to a human body and keeps the host awake and functioning indefinitely. There is only one snag. The host body has to be dead first.

Naturally our scientist hero offered his discovery for the good of mankind. After making himself and his sister emortal, of course. And to make sure that his discovery was properly and responsibly used, he imposed a small condition. He asked to be made Emperor for life. If you are emortal, that is a pretty good deal.

Ranged against the Emperor are various political parties with contradictory aims. Chief amongst them are the Secularists who decline to worship the Emperor and who believe that a little change now and then (brought on by actual, permanent, non-resurrectable death) is good for cultural development. The Utopians believe that emortality should be given free to everyone, not just selectively to loyal servants of the Emperor after a life of

service; and so on. Because the various opposition groups can't agree, because he can rely on the support of the Loyalty party, and because you can't get to be a senior commander in the military without being dead first, the Emperor maintains a firm grip on proceedings.

The major threat to the Empire, therefore, comes from outside. To be precise it comes from the Rix, a once-human cult who believe in immortality by cyborgization, and who roam the galaxy seeding worlds with sentient, globe-encompassing AIs that they proceed to worship. The Emperor, in his wisdom, has banned such super-sentient machines, and indeed seems to have a distinct fear of any sentient entity potentially more powerful than himself. Not surprising really, given that paranoia and supreme power tend to go together. Unfortunately the Rix are fanatical, ruthless, and utterly uncaring about human lives. Their latest outrage has been a sneak attack on the planet Legis XV. Somehow their intelligence services learned that the forever-child Empress would be there, and now she is held hostage. Captain Laurent Zai and His Majesty's frigate, *Lynx*, provide the only naval forces close enough to attempt a rescue.

So much for the background and set-up, what about the rest? As far as I can make out, Westerfeld is constructing a non-too-subtle satire on Western society. His "dead" represent the ever-growing legions of rich retirees who spend their lives in gated communities in places like Florida, playing golf, going on cruises, and plotting how to extend their lives yet further. He's probably right that such people are generally opposed to innovation and change, and will tend to support authoritarian, conservative

governments. He is probably also right that this will result in the societies they control being overtaken economically by nimbler, less hide-bound groups. I suspect that John Clute had the last word on this subject in *Appleseed*, but I'm pleased to see Westerfeld taking the idea on.

More generally, Westerfeld does a great job of introducing interesting technology. He's no Al Reynolds, so don't expect to find cutting-edge physics here, but do expect some delightfully innovative uses of IT and nanotech. Westerfeld also has a nice sense of humor running through the novel. Where he falls down, and becomes reminiscent of the awful space opera of the past, is when he leaves politics and technology and tries to do human interaction. The later stages of the book, which deal with crew relations on board the *Lynx*, are poorly handled and stilted. Also Westerfeld produces a cliff-hanger ending of such monumental proportions that you suspect he is deliberately trying to emulate the pulps in some way. Oh well, I guess it means I will have to buy the next volume.

The Risen Empire - Scott Westerfeld - Tor - hardcover

Rock 'em, Cowboy

Most anime, as far as I can make out, is about teenage girls with implausibly large boobs and very short skirts. Sometimes they were boys originally and only became girls through some magical intervention, which may also have given them super powers, but those series don't seem to get shown on American TV. That,

anyway, is the stereotype. But just like all comics are not *Superman*, so all anime is not *Sailor Moon*. In comics, people like Neil Gaiman and Alan Moore have gained appreciative followings from lovers of literature. In anime there is *Cowboy Bebop*.

For those of you who haven't seen the TV series, it recounts the adventures of a misfit bunch of near-future bounty hunters ("cowboys") who travel the solar system in a battered old ship called *Bebop*. The plots are generally fairly standard future-noir adventures, and if you were to take them seriously you could find all sorts of logical flaws. However, the scripts have a wonderful sense of humor, a razor-sharp cultural awareness, and a tendency to turn serious and tug and the heartstrings when you least expect it. It is such a shame that there is no new TV material being produced for the series at the moment, because it could walk away with all five nominations for the Short-form Best Dramatic Presentation Hugo.

What there is, however, is a movie. It has been out for some time now, but has had limited distribution. Kevin and I caught up with it at a small art-house theatre in San José and were very impressed. The two-hour, commercial-free format has given the team the freedom to flex their muscles and the result is hugely entertaining. In style it is very much like a TV episode, even down to the traditional episode of *Big Shot*, the TV show for bounty hunters, and guest appearances from favorite recurring characters. The plot is a little more complex and, given the movie format, a little less obscure. (The TV episodes had a delightful tendency to end with the viewer completely confused by some aspect of the plot.)

Other than that, I don't know what to say. I don't really have the critical vocabulary to deconstruct a movie. I just know that I recommend this highly, and that from someone who hardly ever watches TV or movies because most of it is so bad. As I said, distribution is limited, so you may find it hard to find. In the meantime, however, Amazon is running a special promotion of the entire 26 episode TV series for only \$99 (a 45% saving on buying them individually). Doubtless a DVD of the movie will be forthcoming soon.

Cowboy Bebop - Shinichirô Watanabe - Pioneer - DVD

Right on Base

As with anyone else from a relatively young culture, American writers have a distinct hankering to write the definitive American novel. Michael Chabon's contribution to this search is a young adult fantasy called *Summerland*. Whereas Tolkien saw paradise in terms of comfortable chairs, full stomachs and smoldering pipes, Chabon's fantasy world resounds to the thwack of bat on ball and the scamper of small feet around the bases. And why not, for while cricket bats are only made of willow, the baseball bat is made of ash, the very substance of the World Tree itself.

And so Chabon gives us an engaging tale of the young lad who has never had a hit or catch in his life, his nerdy but sports-mad dad and his odd but loyal friends setting off to save Fairyland from the whiles of old Coyote. It is a difficult

alchemy that Chabon attempts. His fairies are American Indians, the inhabitants of Fairyland include both giants and Sasquatch, and his mythology has a strong tinge of Norse. There is, of course, and strong connection between Coyote and Loki, and Chabon manages that mixture very well. The only place that he really falls down is his characterization of God. Although the Big Guy is referred to throughout as Old Mr. Wood, the ending is far too sugary and modern-day-Christian for Woden to stomach. But then it is a romantic fantasy for young boys, so what did we expect?

Chabon's ability as a story-teller should, I think, be above question, although I am very impressed with how he moved effortlessly from the very adult world of *Kavalier and Clay* to the young adult material of *Summerland*. The book is a good tale, well told, with about the level of moral content that I would expect. It is certainly much less blinkered and saccharine than what Disney aims at American kids, and for that we must be eternally grateful.

There is, of course, some doubt as to how American boyhood will react to it. I have a horrible suspicion that the idealized, game-filled summers that Chabon writes about are memories of his generation and will be viewed with scorn by your average, skate-boarding, rap-listening modern teenager. Then again, if they have all been reading Harry Potter then they might be grateful for a fantasy world that they can relate to rather better than one set in British p/r/i/s/o/n/s public schools.

As to the rest of the world, sadly the book is likely to be utterly mysterious. It has been suggested to me that I may be the only Brit in the world who has been

seduced by the magic of baseball. I don't think that can be true, but I have to admit that the sport is an acquired taste. To start with you have to be the sort of person who thinks that one-day cricket is a rather tasteless snack compared to the bounty of a five-day test, and that Geoffrey Boycott was a talented artist in his own, idiosyncratic way. Chabon, I suspect, would like cricket, though he may find it far too full of action and sadly short on suspense. He does, however, have a very sound view of the world. Anyone who thinks that imprisonment from now until the end of the universe is a fair and just punishment for inventing the designated hitter rule is my sort of guy.

Summerland - Michael Chabon - Hyperion - hardcover

Short Stuff

Brief Flurries

Ellen Kushner has managed to create a record here. She's the first author for whom I own three copies of the same book. My original *Swordspoint* it, I think, in storage in London somewhere. When *The Fall of the Kings* came out I bought another copy to remind myself of the plot and characters. But then Bantam issued the new edition, and at the back they put the three short stories that Ellen has written in the *Swordspoint* world. Now, *Swordspoint* is undoubtedly worth owning, but if you already have it, do you need to buy the new edition to get the shorts?

On balance I would say "no". There are three stories altogether. One of them, "Red Cloak", is the first story Kushner ever sold, and it shows. It is well enough written, but it is based around one of those tired, over-used short story clichés that should have been retired decades ago. "The Death of the Duke" is interesting but simply whets the appetite for finding out more about what happened to the major characters between *Swordspoint* and *The Fall of the Kings*. And finally, "The Swordsman Whose Name Was Not Death" highlights the fact that *Swordspoint* didn't address the issues of gender politics inherent in the society in which it is set, but is too short to do much more than that.

My main concern, however, is that the short form doesn't give Kushner the room to do what she does best. You may recall that she is a one of the ringleaders of a group dedicated to promoting character-based fiction, and that is hard to do in very little space. What you end up with are brief flurries of engagement that probably only work because we know who Richard and Alec are. The full bout requires a much longer work to describe. Thankfully it sounds from Kushner's afterword that there will be at least one.

Swordspoint - Ellen Kushner - Bantam - softcover

Novella Reprise

The many fine novellas produced by PS Publishing in the UK deserve a wider audience. Fortunately they do sometimes get one because Peter Crowther is good at persuading larger publishing houses to take his books and anthologize them. The latest example of this is *Cities*, which is

now available in hardcover from Gollancz and will hopefully appear in some mass-market edition in the US soon. The timing is particularly important because one of the four stories included has just appeared on the Hugo list for Best Novella. That story also happens to be the one entry in the anthology that I have not yet reviewed, hence this reprise.

As a themed anthology I think that *Cities* is actually quite weak. As you will see shortly, Paul di Filippo's "A Year in the Linear City" is indeed a story in which a city is a major character. In addition China Miéville's "The Tain" oozes with the author's love of London. However, Geoff Ryman's "V.A.O." is simply a story about modern urban life, and Michael Moorcock's "Firing the Cathedral" is a Jerry Cornelius story and thus not really anything to do with cities at all. Still, they are all good stories, and if we get the eligibility extension passed again this year that will probably give both "The Tain" and "V.A.O." well deserved opportunities to join "A Year in the Linear City" as Hugo nominees.

But what of this year's nominee? As regular SF readers might guess from the title, di Filippo has produced one of those wonderfully bizarre SF tales that is grounded in alternate geography. The Linear City is precisely that. The street of Broadway runs down the middle of the world, and all buildings front onto it. Their backs open either onto the River or onto the Tracks. The Far Shore and the Wrong Side of the Tracks are, respectively, Heaven and Hell. And perhaps most bizarrely, there are two suns, one of which travels the length of Broadway, and the other of which moves perpendicularly to the first but whose circuit travels up and down Broadway to give seasons.

The imaginative exercise is taken yet further as di Filippo introduces us to a hero who is a writer of Cosmogonic Fiction (CF to its fans). This gentleman proceeds to produce interesting if disturbing ideas such as a story about people who live in a world whose city extends in two dimensions. Di Filippo has a lot of fun with this and also makes some pointed observations about the status of SF in the wider community.

This is a strange story in some ways because while it is aggressively SF in content it is also very mainstream in style. We get outtakes from one year in the life of our hero, Diego Patchen. We see some of his triumphs and disasters, and meet many of his interesting acquaintances. Then the story stops. SF readers will doubtless be crying out to learn more about The Linear City and its origins. I'm sure that it could fill a novel or two. But di Filippo is content to fill our heads with wonderful ideas and leave us to extrapolate from them. Sometimes it is good to be given that freedom.

I don't think that "A Year in the Linear City" stands much of a chance against *Coraline* in the Hugos, and I still think that "The Tain" is a more powerful story. But I'm delighted that it has made the Hugo shortlist and I hope that this will result in a significant increase of interest in the fine work that PS Publishing does.

Cities - Peter Crowther (ed.) - Gollancz - hardcover

Miscellany

Hugo Nominees

Best Novel: *Bones of the Earth*, Michael Swanwick (Eos); *Hominids*, Robert J. Sawyer (Tor); *Kiln People*, David Brin (Tor); *The Scar*, China Miéville (Macmillan; Del Rey); *The Years of Rice and Salt*, Kim Stanley Robinson (Bantam).

Best Novella: *A Year in the Linear City*, Paul Di Filippo (PS Publishing); "Breathmoss", Ian R. MacLeod (*Asimov's* 5/02); "Bronte's Egg", Richard Chwedyk (*F&SF* 8/02); *Coraline*, Neil Gaiman (HarperCollins); "In Spirit", Pat Forde (*Analog* 9/02); "The Political Officer", Charles Coleman Finlay (*F&SF* 4/02).

Best Novelette Category: "Halo", Charles Stross (*Asimov's* 6/02); "Madonna of the Maquiladora", Gregory Frost (*Asimov's* 5/02); "Presence", Maureen F. McHugh (*F&SF* 3/02); "Slow Life", Michael Swanwick (*Analog* 12/02); "The Wild Girls", Ursula K. Le Guin (*Asimov's* 3/02).

Best Short Story: "A Gift of Verse", John L. Flynn (*Nexus* Fall 2002); "Creation", Jeffrey Ford (*F&SF* 5/02); "Falling Onto Mars", Geoffrey A. Landis (*Analog* 7-8/02); "'Hello,' Said the Stick", Michael Swanwick (*Analog* 3/02); "The Little Cat Laughed to See Such Sport" by Michael Swanwick (*Asimov's* 10-11/02).

Best Related Book: *The Battle of the Sexes in Science Fiction*, Justine Larbalestier (Wesleyan University Press); *Better to Have Loved: The Life of Judith Merrill*, Judith Merrill and Emily Pohl-Weary (Between the Lines); *Dragonhenge*, Bob Eggleton and John Grant (Paper Tiger); *Bradbury: An Illustrated Life*, Jerry Weist (Morrow); *Spectrum 9: The Best in Contemporary*

Fantastic Art, Cathy Fenner and Arnie Fenner, eds. (Underwood Books).

Best Dramatic Presentation, Short Form: *Star Trek: Enterprise*, "A Night in Sickbay" (Paramount Television), Directed by David Straiton; Teleplay by Rick Berman & Brannon Braga; *Star Trek: Enterprise*, "Carbon Creek" (Paramount Television), Directed by James Contner; Story by Rick Berman & Brannon Braga and Dan O'Shannon; Teleplay by Chris Black; *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, "Conversations With Dead People", (20th Century Fox Television/Mutant Enemy Inc.), Directed by Nick Marck; Teleplay by Jane Espenson & Drew Goddard; *Firefly*, "Serenity", (20th Century Fox Television/Mutant Enemy Inc.), Directed by Joss Whedon; Teleplay by Joss Whedon; *Angel*, "Waiting in the Wings", (20th Century Fox Television/Mutant Enemy Inc.), Directed by Joss Whedon; Teleplay by Joss Whedon.

Best Dramatic Presentation, Long Form: *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (Warner Bros.), Directed by Chris Columbus; Screenplay by Steve Kloves; based on the novel by J. K. Rowling; *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* (New Line Cinema), Directed by Peter Jackson; Screenplay by Fran Walsh, Philippa Boyens, Stephen Sinclair & Peter Jackson; based on the novel by J. R. R. Tolkien; *Minority Report* (20th Century Fox & DreamWorks SKG), Directed by Steven Spielberg; Screenplay by Scott Frank and Jon Cohen; based on the story by Philip K. Dick; *Spider-Man* (Columbia Pictures), Directed by Sam Raimi; Screenplay by David Koepp; based on the comic book character created by Steve Ditko and Stan Lee; *Spirited Away* (Studio Ghibli & Walt Disney Pictures), Directed by Hayao Miyazaki; Screenplay by Hayao Miyazaki

(English version by Cindy Davis Hewitt and Donald H. Hewitt).

Best Professional Editor: Ellen Datlow, Gardner Dozois, David G. Hartwell, Stanley Schmidt, Gordon Van Gelder.

Best Professional Artist: Jim Burns, David A. Cherry, Bob Eggleton, Frank Kelly Freas, Donato Giancola.

Best Semiprozine: *Ansible* edited by Dave Langford; *Interzone* edited by David Pringle; *Locus* edited by Charles N. Brown, Jennifer A. Hall, and Kirsten Gong-Wong; *The New York Review of Science Fiction* edited by Kathryn Cramer, David G. Hartwell & Kevin Maroney; *Speculations* edited by Kent Brewster.

Best Fanzine: *Challenger* edited by Guy H. Lillian III; *Emerald City* edited by Cheryl Morgan; *File 770* edited by Mike Glycer; *Mimosa* edited by Rich and Nicki Lynch; *Plokta* Alison Scott, Steve Davies & Mike Scott, eds..

Best Fan Writer: Bob Devney, John L. Flynn, Mike Glycer, Dave Langford, Steven H Silver.

Best Fan Artist Category: Brad W. Foster, Teddy Harvia, Sue Mason, Steve Stiles, Frank Wu.

John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer: Charles Coleman Finlay (second year of eligibility); David D. Levine (first year of eligibility); Karin Lowachee (first year of eligibility); Wen Spencer (second year of eligibility); Ken Wharton (second year of eligibility).

Hugo Commentary

Well folks, the "Send A Hugo to China Campaign" is in full swing once more. Sadly I don't think it will have much

effect. What with Robert Sawyer having home field advantage and Kim Stanley Robinson being able to win with the most appalling exercises in info-dumping, I somehow suspect that *The Scar* does have much of a chance. My second place vote is going to David Brin for a brave and imaginative departure from his usual material.

I suspect that *Coraline* will run away with Best Novella, and rightfully so. I'll be trying to catch up with the rest of the short fiction nominees over the next couple of months. The Greg Frost novelette is already available for free from Fictionwise (<http://www.fictionwise.com>) and more stories are likely to follow.

An early release of the nominee list contained a Ted Chiang story in the Best Novelette category, but for some reason Chiang declined to accept the nomination. I think he is just very shy.

I am beginning to think that it is time for a separate category for art books because trying to choose between a bunch of pretty pictures and a serious work of non-fiction is not easy. Big shame that Ollie Morton didn't make it to the final ballot.

The Long Form Dramatic should be a rollicking good contest with no clear favorite. I have no idea about the TV stuff. I haven't seen any of it.

I'm delighted to see David Cherry in the Best Professional Artist list. He was a great Guest of Honor for ConJosé and thoroughly deserves to be included.

Here's to David Hartwell for Best Professional Editor, because he champions some really good novels (the Brian Stableford Third Millennium series being a good example).

So *Ansible* is now a semiprozine. Will it win? Probably not, the *Locus* juggernaut is too well established. Will it finish second? Almost certainly. There was some discussion at Eastercon that this would be rather embarrassing for *Interzone*, given that that magazine contains a digest version of *Ansible*. So if *Ansible* finished above *Interzone* in the ballot that would suggest that the value of the fiction in *Interzone* is negative. Oops.

Here's hoping that Sue Mason's stint as Guest of Honor at Minicon will have given her a higher profile and will help her towards a well-deserved Hugo.

I'd like to see David Levine or Wen Spencer will the Campbell because they are both lovely people, but I think that Karin Lowachee is the best writer in that bunch.

And I'm trying very hard not to say anything more about the Best Fanzine category, other than that it is a wonderful excuse to go out and buy a new gown. Thank you!

Nebula Awards

And the winners are:

Best Novel: *American Gods*, Neil Gaiman (Eos).

Best Novella: "Bronte's Egg", Richard Chwedyk (*F&SF* Aug 2002).

Best Novelette: "Hell Is the Absence of God", Ted Chiang (*Starlight 3*, Patrick Nielsen Hayden, ed., Tor).

Best Short Story: "Creature", Carol Emshwiller (*F&SF* Oct/Nov 2002).

Best Script: *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, Fran Walsh, Philippa

Boyens, & Peter Jackson (New Line Cinema; based on the novel by J. R. R. Tolkien).

BSFA Awards

As announced at Eastercon, the Best of British comprises:

Best Non-fiction: introduction to *Maps*, a collection of works by John Sladek, Dave Langford.

Best Artwork: cover of *Interzone* #179, Dominic Harman.

Best Short Fiction: *Coraline*, Neil Gaiman.

Best Novel: *The Separation*, Chris Priest.

In accepting the award for Neil Gaiman, Chris Bell noted that she was under strict instructions not to use a similar style of speech to that used by Neil when collecting his Hugo last year.

BSFA Commentary

With the Clarke Award announcement due up in a few weeks, and having missed the Clarke panel at Eastercon, I feel compelled to add a few comments on the subject of *The Separation*. It is, there is no doubt, a beautifully written book. It is also highly ambiguous. And its very ambiguity is a serious flaw, because depending on how you view the author's intent the book can be viewed either as very clever, or as very rude, or as disturbingly cynical. In order to explain I am going to borrow a few points from the review that John Clute wrote of the book for his *Science Fiction Weekly* column, *Extreme Candour*.

I'd like to focus first on the question as to whether the Joe Sawyer sections of the

book should be interpreted as a lucid dream or as reality. Clute says:

“It would fatally reduce the cognitive strengths and the effective potency of *The Separation* to think of it as presenting Joe Sawyer’s reality as a lucid dream. It is a far more interesting conclusion – one amply allowed for by Priest’s Moebius-like plot turns – to think of *The Separation* as an exact reversal [...], one in which the lucid dream is the reality.”

Unfortunately, while Clute is correct to say that you can interpret *The Separation* in that way, you have to deliberately manufacture that conclusion from the twists and turns of plot that Priest presents. The natural conclusion, from the way the book is written, draws us towards what Clute correctly observes is a fatal stake in the reader’s view of the potency of the book.

There are several reasons why the reader is tempted to come to this conclusion. Firstly it is how the story is presented. Joe Sawyer continually talks about how his life appears to be a lucid dream. And we know that he has suffered a severe concussion that might lead him to have such dreams. Secondly, Joe Sawyer’s version of WWII is the one that is furthest from our own reality, and the hardest for us to believe. It is a world in which Rudolph Hess brokers a peace between Britain and Germany and brings an end to the war. Although it is an interesting argument, it is a hard one to swallow, and in my opinion Priest does not do a good job of persuading the reader of its feasibility. The story is presented far more like the sort of fantasy that the ardently pacifist Joe Sawyer might dream.

The problem, then, is that we can only conclude that *The Separation* is indeed a

great book if we take the generous interpretation that Priest is in fact being as clever as Clute describes. If we don’t allow him that courtesy we are forced to conclude that instead what he is doing is thumbing his nose at alternate history as a genre (and indeed genre writing in general).

And it gets worse, because there is still the problem of Stuart Gratton to resolve. Clute says:

“I leave to someone wiser than I how to unpack the peculiarly irritating enigma that Gratton presents [...] It is, perhaps, a Moebius strip too far.”

Well I’m sorry, but finding someone smarter than Clute is not an easy task. I haven’t got a clue what Priest had in mind with Gratton, and I suspect that most other readers will be similarly confused. The only possibilities I came up with were equally bad. On the one hand Priest could have simply tied himself in so many knots that he was unable to resolve the story. I suspect that he is far too much of a professional for that.

The other potential conclusion is saying that understanding history is simply impossible. That all witnesses are unreliable, and all interpretations are unreliable, so we can know nothing and learn nothing. And if that is the case, then all of the powerful points that Priest has made about things like the firebombing of Dresden go out of the window. We are cynics. We cannot know what is true in history so we cannot learn anything from it. I sincerely hope that this is not the message that Priest intended, but I have an awful suspicion that I may be wrong.

None of which should stop you from trying to get hold of a copy of this book if you can. After all, something that arouses

this level of discussion has to be worth reading.

Of course I don't expect the Clarke judges to take much notice of what I have to say. Either they will give the award to Chris Priest because he has a long and glorious career in British SF, or they will decide that he's already won the BSFA so they will go for someone else. In the latter case that someone else probably won't be Harrison either because he has the Tiptree. As long as they don't give it to Robinson I don't care.

Philip K. Dick Award

And finally, hot from Norwescon in Seattle, we have the award for the best novel first published in the US in paperback. The winner was *The Mount* by Carol Emshwiller, with an honorable mention for *The Scar* by China Miéville.

SF Museum Planned

One very interesting piece of news that came out this month is that Microsoft millionaire, Paul Allen, intends to open a science fiction museum in Seattle. Allen has apparently assembled an advisory board containing a large number of SF luminaries, from authors like Greg Bear to industry figures like Charles Brown and David Hartwell. The museum is, at present, only in the planning stage, but it could become a very significant element of the SF community. Hopefully Torcon 3 will be inviting Mr. Allen and/or his representatives to come and talk about the project at this year's Worldcon.

Dictionary Deviousness

Every year the *Washington Post* runs a competition called the Style Invitational. The idea is to invent a new and useful word by taking an existing word and adding, removing or changing just one letter. The standard of entries is always very high. Here are some of this year's winners:

Foreploy: Any misrepresentation about yourself for the purpose of getting laid.

Sarchasm: The gulf between the author of sarcastic wit and the person who doesn't get it.

Inoculatte: To take coffee intravenously when you are running late.

Hipatitis: Terminal coolness.

Osteopornosis: A degenerate disease.

Karmageddon: It's like, when everybody is sending off all these really bad vibes, right? And then, like, the Earth explodes and it's like, a serious bummer.

And, the winner:

Ignoranus: A person who's both stupid and an asshole.

Footnote

So, there we are for another month. Next issue will see my report from Wiscon, plus reviews of books by the likes of Jon Courtenay Grimwood, Tad Williams, Lyda Morehouse, James Lovegrove and Colin Greenland. The short fiction will include a look at British magazines, a start on the Hugo nominees and a story by China Miéville that has just appeared in

the magazine of one of Britain's Sunday newspapers. Is that respectability or what?

See you in a month,

Ciao,

Love 'n' hugs,

Cheryl