

# EMERALD CITY #96

Issue 96

August 2003

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## Introduction

Hello, and welcome to the Torcon III issue of *Emerald City*. If you have picked up this 'zine in the fanzine lounge, or have looked it up on the web having picked up a flier, I hope you will find it interesting.

In honor of the first Canadian Worldcon in many years, I have devoted this issue almost entirely to Canadian (and Canadian-based) writers. I have, of course, not been able to include all of them. I am particularly disappointed not to have had a book from Nalo Hopkinson to review. Her new novel hasn't quite made it to the shops in time for the convention, but it is not far away and I will feature it as soon as possible. I should also apologize profusely to Edo Van Belkom whose novel, *Martyrs*, is the only one of the Aurora Best Long-Form in English finalists that I have failed to review. The book is only published in Canada and I screwed up on getting hold of a copy. Meanwhile we have some very fine writers to discuss. I am also deeply honored to have some contributions from science fiction's premier critic, John Clute (whose words I have left spelt in their native Canadian rather than the more-or-less-US that I have long since adopted for the rest of the 'zine).

I should also remind you that, technology willing, the *Emerald City* Worldcon blog will be operative once more this year. You can find it at <http://www.emcit.com/blog/blogger.shtml>. This will be one of the first places online where you can learn that *Emerald City* has not won a Hugo and various other people and publications have. Unlike last year I won't have the advantage of having access to the official press release, but I'll do my best to get the results up quickly.

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## In This Issue

What Is Canadian SF? - Cheryl and John Clute go in search of a fabled beast

Leading the Blind - Robert Charles Wilson plays Peeping Tom with aliens

Elves in Space - Julie E. Czerneda concludes her Trade Pact Universe series

Planning for the Future - Karl Schroeder contemplates galactic civilization

After the Ball - Phyllis Gotlieb tidies up a trilogy

Song of the Sea - Ursula Pflug turns turtle to escape from Toronto

Painting with Words - Guy Gavriel Kay takes up poetry

Clute Scores - John Clute publishes his collected reviews

Back to the Future - Margaret Atwood creates some very retro SF

We're All Going to Die - John Brunner's classic eco-disaster novel is re-issued

Short Stuff - Charles De Lint plays with teenagers, plus a classic Canadian anthology

Miscellany - the news section

Footnote - the end

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## What is Canadian SF?

### Cheryl's Introduction

One of the lessons that will always remain with me from my time in Australia is the keen need that my Australian friends had to identify the Australian-ness in the science fiction works produced by their local authors. This was a new concept to me. I had been brought up in a Britain that, while fading, seemed by no means the desperate shadow of its imperial self that it is today. Suez meant little to a generation of kids brought up on Biggles, Dan Dare and Hornblower. Besides, we had no need to look for British SF. We had invented it. We had Mary Shelly, H.G. Wells, John Wyndham, John Brunner and Arthur C. Clarke. We read Verne too, even if he was a Froggie. But he wasn't an American. And when we got older and rebellious we read Michael Moorcock and M. John Harrison. We felt no need to see SF as something distinctly American that

was invading our culture. It was comic books, not Robert A. Heinlein, that got our parents worried.

Elsewhere, however, as John Clute points out below, SF is seen as very much an American invention. And if there is one thing that has been burned into my brain from making many Canadian friends it is that *Canadians Are Not Americans*. This is an attitude that I can understand. After all, we Welsh are *Not English*, even after almost a millennium of subjugation and the determined attempts of Americans to redefine us so. How, then, can a Canadian work within a form of literature that is so closely associated with American cultural imperialism? More to the point, who better to answer such a question than SF's foremost critic, who just happens to be a Canadian. Over to you, Mr. Clute.

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### Fables of Transcendence: The Challenge of Canadian Science Fiction

by John Clute

We can call it a number of things. But what we call it gives us different starting points, and each time we start we end up with a different breed of fish. We can call it Utopian Discourse, and start off with Plato or Sir Thomas More – whose *Utopia* in 1516 gave this version of the genre a name – and end up with Zamiatin and Huxley and Orwell and Philip K Dick as our touchstone figures. Or we can say it's a genre fundamentally devoted to the Fantastic Voyage, and start with Lucian or (say) Cyrano de Bergerac – who wrote a tale in 1659 about travelling to the Moon – and end up with Jules Verne, E E Smith and Poul Anderson, whose romances of space are really romances of geography.

Or we can say it is basically a form of Rationalized Gothic, and start off with Mary Shelley – whose *Frankenstein* in 1818 is thought by many to be the first tale genuinely to confront the impact of Progress and technology upon history--and end up with Theodore Sturgeon and Gene Wolfe as the carriers of the flame. Or we can call it Scientific Romance, and think of H G Wells – whose *Time Machine* in 1895 was the first text to treat this globe as time-bound in its round – and end up with Olaf Stapledon and Arthur C Clarke and Brian Aldiss as figures who convey a view of the world that takes evolutionary perspectives as central.

Or we can call it science fiction.

But this means we must travel south. It is not, of course, an unusual direction for Canadians to take. We must go to the United States, because it is there that science fiction (henceforth SF) began in the late 1920s; it is there that publishers and editors who thought of themselves as SF publishers and editors began to publish stories by SF writers who thought of themselves as SF writers – rather than writers who wrote popular fiction to order – and who sold to magazines in which these SF stories were published for an audience that thought of itself – within half a decade of the founding of *Amazing Stories* in 1926 – as making up a unique and privileged family of SF fans. From its beginning, SF was not, in other words, definable simply as a series of texts which expressed a characteristic take on the world (though see below); SF was a highly interactive affinity subculture, many of whose members played--either simultaneously or in turn--all the various roles available within that subculture. People like Isaac Asimov, Damon Knight, Judith Merril and Frederik Pohl were fans,

editors, publishers, writers, convention organizers; and they also had a habit of marrying one another, too. They may have shared a take on the world (see below), but they were also a family.

This did not happen in Canada until much later. Which is the first thing to understand about Canadian SF. As a family, it is very recent. Those Canadians who wrote SF for Americans in (say) 1940, like A E Van Vogt, did not do so as members of a family. They wrote alone.

The second thing to understand about Canadian SF – and it's here we begin to enter deep waters--is that when we say it's not in fact American SF, it's almost as though we were saying it was not SF at all. We can argue against the narrowness of this view by arguing that the term SF was never really anything more than shorthand for the nest of widespread genres we've already listed above--a term used by American pirates to gather into a single hoard the Utopian Discourse, the Fantastic Voyage, the Rationalized Gothic, the Scientific Romance, and so forth; and that we're being unduly submissive when we allow the American SF tag to wag the Speculative Fiction dog in this fashion. And we can go on to argue that Canadian speculative fiction – *Consider Her Ways* (1947) by Frederick Grove, say – is just as much SF as the *Lensman* series by Doc Smith, or *Sixth Column* (1949) by Robert A Heinlein.

No.

In our hearts we must know this isn't good enough. In our hearts we must recognize that there was something about American SF in the days of its glory – from about 1925 to about 1965 or 1970 – that profoundly marked it precisely as American. The characteristic flavour of

20th century SF — I think we must recognize — was the flavour of America; and the characteristic plots of 20th century SF were versions of the fable of America. This heartwood American SF story was the myth of a frontier-busting gadget-loving tall-tale-telling melting-pot community, linked by blood or affinity into a genuine folk; exempt from mundane history; and guided by cantankerous Competent Men who created new scientific tools to mark the path, to challenge the frontier, to penetrate the barrier of the unknown, to conquer the aliens, to occupy the territory, to stake out the future.

There are a couple of things to note here. Obviously heroes dominate the American SF story, flamboyant inventive geniuses with calluses who figure in so many of the texts we still find ourselves reading; but there is also a sense of community, a sense that heroes are part of a larger enterprise. That heroes can come home. American SF is community SF. And even though it presents its underlying ethos in terms which tend to obliterate the difference of the Other, it does invite us in. For many of us — Canadians and others — that invitation to join the fable of community is like catnip.

Moreover, there is a trust in reason, too. American SF generates a sense that—even though almost every single story ultimately solves its problems through action — the ethos underlying that action is sustained by arguments no reasonable person can ultimately deny. These arguments — cleanly and clearly conveyed by the hero, or by his uncle, the garrulous but wise scientist/entrepreneur who scorns the bureaucrats back East — are not simply undeniable: in the final analysis, they are clean. They bind their

readers into futures whose contours are unsullied by blood-guilt or sophistry, without side-effects, and without any lasting resentment on the part of the aliens whose frontier has been smashed, whose culture has been obliterated, whose own future has been cancelled. A cynic might suggest that the logic of empire always abides with the victors, but once again a comment like this fails to capture the allure of the fable, the generosity of American SF's assumption that reasonable suasion, promulgated by heroes, will bring us all together, even redskins.

Which brings us to a pressing question. Why should the patriotic populist positivism of a literature designed to generate affirmative (and even triumphal) feelings in the citizens of the United States be so successful in other parts of the world? Why (for instance) should Canadian children (in the 1940s and 1950s I was one) find this alien corn so tasty? Like Disney. Like Coca-Cola. Why should we swallow this nonsense? Well, partly because it's not exactly nonsense. Or if it is nonsense, then the whole history of the Western world is nonsense. Partly it's because triumph is contagious. When you read American SF you're on the right side. You are going to win. There will be no side effects. And partly because it makes for awfully good story-telling.

So it is hard to escape the allure of the classic American SF myth; and even nowadays—long after many Americans have ceased promulgating it — its characteristic story-types continue to have an almost hypnotic effect on non-American writers and readers and viewers. Both Star Trek and Star Wars — in TV, film and book form — obsessively continue to present the world as

conquerable if you have the Force behind you.

Is there any room for Canadian SF? Has there ever been?

There are two answers. One) we can restrict ourselves to texts like Grove's *Consider Her Ways*, which is a satire in Utopian Discourse mode; or Hugh MacLennan's *Voices in Time* (1980), which is an anatomy of post-holocaust cultural breakdown, without a vestige of the opportunity-loaded flavour of American SF; or Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), which is a dystopia; or any of the novels of Phyllis Gotlieb or Elizabeth Vonarburg. Though they are certainly speculative fictions, texts like these have little to do with the dominant tone or subject matter or plot-structure of 20th century SF, and they tend not to be read as SF by fans. Or Two) we can see if Canadian writers attempting to write within terms of the dominant version of SF have managed – consciously or unconsciously – to convey a dissident sense of the nature of things.

Under One) there seems relatively little to say. Good books have been written, and constitute a respectable contribution to the world stock of speculative fiction; and a Canadian concern for the fragility of political and cultural institutions can be seen informing most of them.

Under Two) it may be possible to make a suggestion or two, and it might be an idea to glance here at the career of the most prominent single SF writer of Canadian birth. A E Van Vogt has been active from 1939; he is a writer whose prominence from 1940 to 1950 was so marked that most American SF readers thought of him as an unquestionably central figure in American SF, along with Asimov,

Heinlein, Clarke (who was British, of course), and very few others. After 1950 he faded from the front rank, partly because of his involvement in Scientology, partly because (as it seems) he burned out, after writing millions of words. In about 1970, he returned to active writing, and enjoyed something of a revival--though he did not regain sufficient fame to be invited to the World Science Fiction Convention held in Winnipeg (his home town) in 1994.

It is the decade of the 1940s, therefore, that must concern us, the period when most American readers of SF thought he was one of them. In retrospect, it is a strange assumption to make, if we actually look carefully at his novels, or novel-like fixups. The most important of these – all at least partly written before he left Canada in 1944, and mostly published in *Astounding Science Fiction* long before they reached book form – are *Slan* (1946), *The Weapon Makers* (1947), *The World of A* (1948), *The Voyage of the Space Beagle* (1950), *The Weapon Shops of Isher* (1951) and *The Pawns of Null-A* (1956). They are all profoundly un-American, as we'll point out. Do they also help define something we might call Canadian SF?

Van Vogt's tales are un-American, to begin with, in their almost total disregard for the details of human community. Their protagonists live in neighbourhoods or cities which are generally unnamed, and which are essentially featureless. Countries are also nameless. The planet is probably Earth, but it is not a special part of Earth. It is not a promised land. It is, rather, a tabula rasa, a wilderness to be imprinted. But the protagonists who must leave some mark are themselves either without family, or have lost their notional families at the moment the tale begins. The destinies they forge (in reality, there is

normally only one character who ultimately counts in any of these books) are solitary destinies; though they may ostensibly bear the world on their shoulders, Van Vogt's protagonists are not, in fact, leaders at all, because there is no one in the wilderness to lead. A E Van Vogt novels are solitudes; and the fingerprints of passage left by their protagonists constitute not a message to the folk but an indecipherable rune.

These novels are also un-American in the nature of the heroism exhibited or grown into by the protagonist. His heroism — as we have already indicated — cannot be that of the leader of the community who shapes his folk into conquerors of unexplored territories, because of an absence of folk. His heroism is not that of the leader who progresses through the worlds at the head of a folk, but that of the solitary imago-magus who becomes a full-blown superman through transcendence. Because there is no intervening tangle of world or community to encumber him, the Van Vogt hero leaps into what he is going to become.

Let us put it more positively.

Van Vogt novels pay no attention to ethnicity, or nationality, race or colour or creed. They pay no attention to civic prides, nation states, or any of the imperial special pleading typical of literatures — like American SF — which plump for the winning side, which treat the cod Social Darwinism to which they're prone as an affirmation of Manifest Destiny to the stars. Moreover, Van Vogt novels — though they are obsessed by supermen — express absolutely no interest in how these super beings affect the details of human discourse. There is no mythopoesis of the culture hero, and

there are no prolonged harangues designed to change the mind of the folk — unlike the habitual browbeatings inflicted by Heinlein's typical heroes upon their communities. There is nothing left-wing in Van Vogt; there is nothing fascist.

And finally, Van Vogt novels show an astonishing lack of interest in matters of science or technology, both of which are treated as magic buttons. There is no reverence for senatorial reason.

Canadian SF — in the hands of someone like Van Vogt — is clearly not much like American SF. It is not community based; it is not about the penetration of frontiers; it is not triumphalist about the nation state; it ignores the culture heroes who marshal the folk or who save the world; and it ignores the details of the science and technology which are used by culture heroes to weld the community together and to arm it for conquest. Canadian SF — if A E Van Vogt is one of its central founders — can therefore be defined as a genre which translates the fable of survival so central to the Canadian psyche into a fable of lonely transcendence.

Van Vogt is not alone. Gordon R Dickson was born in Canada, but though he left by the age of twelve or so there remains something ineluctably Canadian about the solitary take of his heroes on the universe. William Gibson and Robert Charles Wilson were born in the United States, but both have lived in Canada for many years. The protagonist of Gibson's *Neuromancer* is a cyberspace cowboy, a solipsistic hacker in a vast world of owners. He is streetwise — but being streetwise means you know how to survive in the street (or wilderness). It does not mean you understand the street. And Wilson's novels tend to feature transcendental

migrations of displaced persons into blank terrains.

For more than half a century, SF has been a literature of culture heroes, conceptual breakthroughs, manifest destiny, and imperial reasonings. Over that period, Canadian SF has been a wainscot halfling, murmuring a more bleak tune. Perhaps it has come time to treat it as the theme.

[This article was first published in *Out of this World* (Quarry Press/National Library of Canada, 1995) ed Andrea Paradis, and also in *Northern Suns* (Tor, 1999) ed David Hartwell, Glenn Grant]

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## Tenant SF

by John Clute

Here is a truism which has probably been in print lots: I think about Canada, therefore I am a Canadian. It has certainly been my experience of the twentieth century — I write as a Canadian who spent much of that century either in the United States or in England — that Americans or Brits might *ask* about Canada, but that they never really give a *thought* to the big sad thin land at the edge of the mall. To think about Canada, in the twentieth century, was therefore to be Canadian.

But twentieth century SF — which has been my default subject for 40 years or so — was an American genre, and could not therefore conceive of Canada. This is a big claim. I made some arguments to sustain it in “Fables of Transcendence: the Challenge of Canadian Science Fiction”, a piece I wrote for *Out of this World: Canadian Science Fiction & Fantasy Literature* (anth 1995); and won't repeat them here. What I said then had the sharp edge that comes when one is under the

impression that one is saying something for the first time; if I repeated myself now, what I wrote would be neither new nor fresh. Suffice it that I argued there that twentieth century sf was *designed* to tell the story of twentieth century America; that the experience of Canada was not conceivable within that design.

It has struck me more recently that one of the central cultural tasks of writers of the fantastic active today in 2002 will no longer be to manifest that relationship but to dissect it: we are going to have to understand the past of SF, so as not to repeat it. It will be our task to understand the archaic futures of bush America, just as it was our fathers and mothers task to foretell that future in stories of triumph after triumph, each triumph increasingly precarious. Donald Kingsbury — a long-time Canadian resident whose earlier novels, like *Courtship Rites* (1982), could be seen as inspired outgaussings of twentieth century America--has begun that task in his new novel, *Psychohistorical Crisis* (2002), which subjects the kind of world Isaac Asimov could conceive of to a loving, melancholy, eye-opening rewrite.

Now that the story of America has spent itself, now that America has become the armed purveyor of archaic visions of the nature of life and history on a planet that will only survive if “America” leaves it, maybe there will be space for some other models of how the world becomes the future. This is not to suggest that Canada (for one) is an ideal culture; it is to suggest that Canada may be an *apt* culture to write science fiction in.

Because it has failed to come together.

Because it has never been properly constructed.

A personal excursus here.

In 1965, one year after returning to Toronto from New York and three years before lighting out for London, I published in the *Varsity* a couple of articles about Canada, one a “think” piece about why I lived there, the other a review of Gerald Clark's *Canada: the Uneasy Neighbor* (I commented in the review on the spelling of “neighbor”). The underlying mood of these pieces was a kind of adolescent rage: a frustrated sense that this country of my birth was failing to make a go of being anything but a shy shabby ressentient clone (as far as anglophone Canada went) of America Below the Belt. Biculturalism was in the air; and biculturalism, I thought, was almost certainly the only route forward for a people who did not want to end up inhabiting America Lite.

Canada was not a cultural entity, I suggested, nor was it a *story*: which was its potential salvation. Unlike the United States, Canada/Canadians had a chance *not* to own the wrong future. We had a chance to occupy a venue whose abject failure to attain the patriotic univocal Monotony Sublime might just give space for Canada/Canadians to be porous to the world, to inhabit the future without strangling it.

I did not exactly say this in 1965, though I do think it is kind of what I was trying to think; what I actually said was more in the language of 1965; I quote the end of the thing verbatim:

*I learned that English Canadians, who can be the nicest of chaps at times, sound like Barry Goldwater when they talk about French Canadians. I learned that what is obvious to some – that Canada will remain autonomous only if she becomes bicultural, and that the chance to do so is a rare opportunity, not a*

*surrender -- is not at all obvious to many, and that the many are loud.*

*I learned that poor feeble Canada is in danger. I learned that I was a Canadian at heart because I cared.*

One might add: I learned that I was a Canadian at heart because I thought of Canada at all. Because I longed for a certain Canada to happen. Because, I guess, I knew it wouldn't. . . .

We return to 2002, to the future which America endangers us all by continuing to think it owns. Here in 2002 it has become our task to dissect and to mock and to forgive – but above all to attempt to suggest routes that will allow us to *pass beyond* – that American stranglehold on the future, which America's current hegemony manifestly hopes to tighten, and which we writers and readers of SF recognize in our bones as the geriatric exudation of a triumphalism our predecessors helped give voice to long long ago.

If the twentieth century told us one thing, it was this: that to think you own the future is to assault the world with a deadly weapon. It is to think you can make the world into your own themed image and live. It is to think like an owner. The twentieth century still had room for owners.

But now the owners are going to kill us.

What can Canada, and the Canadians who think about Canada, do?

Remain unconstructed, unfinished, unstoried.

Owner SF, the SF that told America to go for it, is dead.

We have entered the post-story century.



Maybe Canadians will be wise enough to live here.

Maybe we will be wise enough to write the kind of SF we need for the world now.

Tenant SF.

[This article was first published in *Hugo's New Home Brew* (anth 2002), Don Bassie Ed. For more details see: [http://www.geocities.com/canadian\\_sf/hugo\\_brew.htm](http://www.geocities.com/canadian_sf/hugo_brew.htm)]

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## Leading the Blind

The telescope has for many centuries been the premier tool of astronomy. Ever since Galileo we have been able to prove theories about outer space simply by inventing means to look more deeply and more accurately at what is going on out there. But telescopes can play us false as well. Telescopes led Percival Lowell to believe that intelligent beings on Mars had built a system of canals. No matter how accurate our instruments, we always have to be cautious about interpreting what we see.

These days, of course, telescopes are put to much more sinister uses. While astronomers point their satellite-based instruments into deep space, investigators of an entirely different nature point theirs at the Earth and take pictures of us. Rumor has it that some spy satellites have such powerful cameras that they can identify individual people walking about. And of course such instruments get more powerful all the time.

So let us play that favorite science fictional game of extrapolation. Or rather, let us let Robert Charles Wilson play it for us. Just

suppose that we could create telescopes so powerful that we can easily see planets orbiting nearby stars. We are close to that already, right? So with a bit more increase in telescope power and better image resolution software we could look at these planets in greater detail; maybe enough detail to distinguish mountain ranges, deserts, oceans and cities. That doesn't seem at all unobtainable, does it?

But in his latest novel, *Blind Lake*, Wilson goes one stage further. He assumes that we have invented quantum computers and put them to work on the telescope images. And they are so good that we can see close up detail. At the Crossbank establishment, alien seascapes of great beauty give rise to a whole new industry in home decoration. Sure, you might live in the middle of Detroit, but you have a "window" that looks out onto the seas of an alien planet. And at the new Blind Lake observatory there is something very special indeed. At Blind Lake the astronomers are able to watch alien beings going about their day-to-day lives.

"Lobsterville", as the tabloid media call it, is a city on the planet UMa47/E in the constellation Ursa Major. The inhabitants don't really look like lobsters, but it was the closest Earthly analogue that the journalists could come up with. At Blind Lake the scientists rigorously avoid any hint of anthropomorphism. The creature that they observe is known only as "Subject". It leads a fairly humdrum life. By day it works on an assembly line in a factory, putting little cylinders into some unidentified machine. By night it sleeps on its own in a small room while small creatures (parasites? symbionts? children?) suck at teats on its body. The observation is perhaps intrusive, but as Uma47/E is many light years away from

Earth the scientists console themselves with the knowledge that poor Subject must be long dead by now and therefore cannot care that its life is so closely scrutinized.

Yet there is a problem with Blind Lake, one that the scientists themselves are reluctant to face. The quantum computer imaging system was first developed because software glitches in the satellite telescopes were causing the images to degrade. More powerful image resolution software was needed, and the quantum devices responded to training very well. Indeed, they soon surpassed all previous software in effectiveness, even though the telescope data continued to degrade. Then one day the telescopes packed up altogether. But the quantum computers kept on producing images, just like they had before.

The scientists at Blind Lake know that there is something very suspect about their systems. They shouldn't work, but they do. Are the quantum computers making it all up, showing us what they think that we want to see? That would suggest that they are somehow intelligent. Or perhaps the lunatics in Congress are right and the aliens have somehow taken control of the system and are feeding images back to us. Nobody knows. All that most of the team can do is continue to observe Subject on the assumption that it is a real alien living a real life, and wait for the theorists to come up with an answer to why the system works.

Then the unthinkable happens. The military throws a quarantine cordon around Blind Lake. Supplies are sent in by GPS-guided, driverless truck, but anyone attempting to leave is shot down by remote-controlled drones. No

communication is allowed in or out. Something has so terrified the government that Blind Lake has been put in strict isolation.

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This is the third of Wilson's novels that I have read, and I have been more and more impressed each time. Blind Lake has some fascinating science, some pointed philosophical speculation, and some excellent human interest to keep the plot moving. It is seriously unputdownable. Towards the end it does get a little mystical, or at least starts dealing with science sufficiently in advance of our own as to be deemed magical. This will probably annoy some of the hard SF crowd. But Wilson's previous effort, *The Chronoliths*, was on the Hugo shortlist in San José last year, and *Blind Lake* is a better book. I expect to see it up for an award in Boston.

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That should be enough praise for any book, but before I leave *Blind Lake* I want to take a brief look at the philosophical argument that Wilson presents in the novel. Ostensibly the debate is one about scientific method, but it can be read on many levels. In the book, the inhabitants of the Blind Lake facility are divided into two camps. On the one hand are those who believe that the observatory must be dangerous and that if they shut it down then perhaps the government will let them out of their quarantine. This faction is led by Ray Scutter, a minor bureaucrat and chief bad guy who has been left in charge of the facility by dint of all of his bosses being away at a conference when the quarantine was imposed. The opposing faction is led by Scutter's ex-wife, Marguerite Hauser, one of the senior

researchers into Subject's behavior. As it happens, Subject has just started to break its normal daily pattern quite dramatically. Hauser argues that it is essential to follow its story to see what it is up to.

The operative word there is story. Scutter is of the opinion that all science can produce is hard facts. Attempting to interpret them in any way is dangerous and foolish. Hauser believes that human beings are story-telling creatures and that while the stories we tell each other may not always be correct or true, we can't really understand anything without building a story around it. Up until Subject began its anomalous behavior it had no story to tell; only now it has embarked on one can we start to understand it.

As I said, the argument can be understood on many levels. The most obvious reading is a plea to not abandon interesting lines of research simply because it is convenient to do so. Science, Wilson maintains, should not be run by bureaucrats. More broadly it is a question of how science is interpreted and understood. As a journalist myself I am constantly aware of the prevalence of bad story-making about science in the media. It is no wonder that scientists are so leery of interpreting anything these days. But I'm also aware that Wilson is right: most human beings can't understand a scientific idea unless some sort of story is presented to them. Ultimately, therefore, the novel becomes a plea in favor of science fiction. Whereas many critics of SF dismiss the genre on the grounds that it "isn't true", Wilson argues that it explains scientific ideas far better than dry academic papers and textbooks. Hooray for you, Mr. Wilson. I'm glad to see you standing up for what we do.

*Blind Lake* – Robert Charles Wilson – Tor – hardcover

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## Elves in Space

I'm starting to think of Julie E. Czerneda as a friend. Not that I have ever met her, but such a warm and humorous personality comes over in her writing that it is hard not to take a liking to the author. Her entry in the Aurora shortlist, *To Trade the Stars*, is primarily light entertainment, but it is very good light entertainment and great fun.

Ostensibly the *Trade Pact Universe* series is a science fiction story. In practical terms, however, it has a lot of relationships with a Celtic fairy story. The primary alien race in the series is The Clan, and they are quite clearly elves. They are humanoid but much more handsome than humans are, they have powers of telepathy and teleportation, they are arrogant and sometimes cruel, and they are few and dying out. The various alien races take the role of the many species of boggles, goblins and pixies that make up the rest of the fairy tale cast. As we expect, they are by turns obnoxious, hilarious and deadly dangerous. The heroine of our tale is the Queen of Faerie, and the subject matter of the story is her relationship with a brave and handsome human. Pretty much all of the standard elements are there.

Not that there is anything wrong with this, especially when Czerneda handles it so well. Sure the book is full of caricatures, but they are well drawn. I particularly liked Huido, the giant crab-like owner of the *Claws & Jaws* multi-species restaurant. He's a complete stereotype: cantankerous,

incredibly macho, and beloved of large, sharp weapons and things that go bang very loudly. This is comic relief in classic Falstaff vein, and Czerneda has it down pat.

As for the plot, well it isn't really worth talking about. Our heroine, Sira di Sarc, is captured by the Bad Guys. Her lover, Jason Morgan, rescues her. All is put right with the world. A couple of supporting characters fall in love. Huido makes his presence felt forcefully. The book is the third part of a trilogy. I didn't find it hard to get into, but there were some lengthy revelations about Sira's early life that probably meant a lot more to people who have been with the series from the start than they did to me. But you don't read books like this for the plot. You read them because they are predictable, amusing and soft-hearted.

I note in passing that Czerneda doesn't only write fluff. Her Phil Dick Award nominated novel, *In the Company of Others*, is a much more serious work. I also note that if I want to read fluff then I want to make sure that it is good fluff, and *To Trade the Stars* is very good fluff indeed. Recommended.

*To Trade the Stars* - Julie E. Czerneda - DAW - softcover

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## Planning for the Future

One thing that SF writers love to do, and you pretty much can't do it in any other form of literature, is think on a galactic scale. Let's assume that we can get out there. What will we find? Will there be other alien species? Will there be some sort of galactic civilization that we can

become part of? Or will we find that we are the only form of life anywhere? The *Star Trek* answer is, of course, the former. Their galaxy is full of alien beings that think like us, act like us and look like us except for their pointy ears and funny bumps on their heads. Other writers have assumed that we are alone and that we can move out and colonize the galaxy as we see fit. Karl Schroeder has opted to take a middle path that is much more interesting and challenging.

In his Aurora nominated novel, *Permanence*, Schroeder postulates that there are indeed alien life forms in the galaxy, but they are so different from us that we can scarcely communicate with them, let alone found a cooperative galactic civilization. There have, in the past, been civilizations like ours: tool-using, omnivorous animals who have got where they are by brainpower. The relics of their works, from abandoned cities to broken ringworlds, are there for archaeologists to study. But they are long gone. Their presence in the galaxy was measured in millions of years only. After that they have either wiped themselves out, devolved, or adapted into something that mankind can no longer understand or relate to.

Change is much of the problem. Evolution happens. Peace and prosperity are all very well, but how long can you sustain it? A thousand years? A hundred thousand? Sooner or later, war will happen. And science progresses. Adaptation to your environment makes sense, and in time you can do anything, and you become something else entirely. The only way to guarantee survival is to ban all change, to ruthlessly enforce that policy, and to obliterate anything that might be an agent of change, which means all other forms of

life. That was the route that the Chicxulub took, but unfortunately for them the machines that they created to enforce their dictates found them wanting.

This is a very intellectual argument to be making, but if you make it on its own you will end up with a dry, philosophical tome that will leave most readers behind. Schroeder knows this, so he sits his argument behind an adventure story that he can use to make his point. And that also allows him to speculate on what human inter-stellar civilization might be like.

In order to make it work, Schroeder plays games with dark matter. He postulates that the galaxy is full of unlit stars: brown dwarfs that are too small to blaze brightly, but can nonetheless have solar systems and emit energy in ways that can be harvested. Many of these dark solar systems are closer to Earth than Alpha Centuri, close enough to be effectively colonized by non-FTL ships. These are the halo worlds, and once they were the pride of humanity. They also invented a humanist philosophy, Permanence, dedicated to the preservation of the community spirit that allows the halo worlders to survive in their inhospitable environment.

Then an FTL drive was invented, and in Schroeder's universe it requires a very massive star to accelerate the starships to FTL speeds. The brown dwarves don't cut it, so the halo worlds have been bypassed. They are reachable only by slow, cyclor craft. Serious trade passes them by. In addition, Earth has invented the Rights Economy. This is Bill Gates' wet dream. Nothing can be owned except copyrights, and clever software ensures that all use of copyright items is monitored. Everything

you use or consume: your food, your clothes, your furniture, has been copyrighted by some corporation back on Earth and you must make micropayments each time you use it. This is a world of rampant monopoly industries, and it is ripe for revolution.

As you can see, a huge amount of thought has gone into Schroeder's book. He has galactic-scale philosophy he wants to discuss. He has a couple of complex human societies to study, one of which is clearly unstable and the other of which is based on a system of thought that Schroeder's philosophy holds is doomed. And now we need the human-interest angle. Enter Meadow-Rue Rosebud Cassels, a poor asteroid miner from one of the least prosperous of the halo worlds. Add also Laurent Herat, an archeologist from the Rights Economy who has spent his life studying the remains of alien civilizations and his assistant, Michael Bequith, a devotee of the banned NeoShintoist religion. And to complete the mix, Admiral Crisler, a Rights Economy soldier who will do whatever is necessary to protect his society, whether that be from rebels or aliens.

All we need now is the catalyst. Fleeing her greedy brother who is planning to sell her into slavery, Rue comes across a massive object in deep space. She stakes a claim to it. But upon examination it transpires that it is not an asteroid after all. It is a starship, bearing the distinctive symbols of the long-dead Lasa civilization. It is completely deserted, and it is less than 100 years old.

So Schroeder gets to do philosophy, politics, first contact, lots of Nivenesque action in deep space, and a love story. It is a very ambitious book, and some bits are

done better than others. As is usual with this sort of SF, the characterization is a little weak, but there is commendably little technical infodump and a lot of imaginative ideas. *Permanence* is the sort of book that goes down very well with Hugo voters. I'll be keeping an eye out for Schroeder's next novel.

*Permanence* - Karl Schroeder - Tor - softcover

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## After the Ball

The book I have for review from Phyllis Gotlieb is also the final part of a trilogy. This is probably telling me that I haven't been reading enough Canadian SF, and in Ms. Gotlieb's case this is most certainly true. If all of her work is as good as *Mindworlds* then I have been most remiss in my duty to you readers.

As the title of the review suggests, *Mindworlds* is one of those "what happened next" novels. The previous two books in the series, *Flesh and Gold* and *Violent Stars*, apparently tell the tale of how the interstellar criminal empire of the Zamos family was brought down and various inter-species disputes resolved. Doubtless all good, heroic stuff. But what now will happen to the O'e, the race of clones that the Zamos created to work in their factories and brothels? What indeed will happen to our hero, Ned Gattes? When not moonlighting as agents for the Galactic Federation he and his wife, Zella, were professional gladiators. With the Zamos gone, the arenas in which they fought have all been closed down.

And perhaps most importantly, what will happen to the Lyhhrt, the peaceful telepathic race who found themselves at

the center of the Zamos empire? Having been flung, unwilling, into interstellar politics, can they revert to their isolationist existence? And how can they survive the fact that many of their number have been out in the galaxy, have mixed with other sentient beings, and have developed dangerous and sinful notions of individuality?

Of course the Zamos empire has not vanished completely. Any effective criminal operation has more heads than a hydra, and little pieces of it are left thrashing about, separated from their now dead body. Across the galaxy, ruthless and greedy men see this as an opportunity, perhaps even a chance to take the Zamos's place. Naturally the Galactic Federation is keeping an eye on this, and when things start to warm up, who better than Ned Gattes to call upon? But it is five years later. Ned is out of shape from not fighting. He and Zella have three kids. His poverty is the only lever that is likely to bring him out of retirement.

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*The bar was as Ned remembered it, down a long lane, very much like the one he had run with his heart thudding only yesterday, behind slivered boardwood doors between a PiKwiK and a CashNow. Ned pushed through the doors into a blazingly lit room blaring with drums and cymbals, and centered with a canvas-floored ring where three beefy life-forms of indeterminate sex and species had wrestled themselves into a grunting pretzel-knot.*

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Gotlieb's universe has some really nice aliens. Alongside the formless, nameless but powerfully telepathic Lyhhrt are the giant, ponderous Khagodi. They look like

allosauruses, though the cover artist wimped out and drew an iguana, but they appear to be vegetarian. The horse people and leopard people are much less imaginative, but I did enjoy the guest appearance of a new type of alien with jet black fur, pointy ears, an arrow-tipped tail and a legendary ability to teleport, presumably in a puff of sulphurous fumes.

Essential to doing good aliens is that they must be alien, and while truly alien thought is obviously beyond the ability of any SF writer, Gotlieb has managed to create races that don't all seem like different types of American. The Lyhhrt risk insanity when they are alone, and the Khagodi appear happiest when lying in the sun with a nice cup of tea, thinking prodigious thoughts. Except where mating is involved, when they seem to get quite violent very quickly.

The best thing about the book, however, is that for most of its length you have no idea what is going on. There are three separate strands, following separate groups of characters on two worlds. Any one group's story might suggest the nature of the plot, except that those suggestions are all contradictory. About fifty pages from the end, Gotlieb explains what is happening, and then you have no idea how she is going to wrap it all up. Oh, and the writing is superb as well. Gotlieb apparently writes a lot of poetry, and it shows. If I have a reservation, it is that this volume wraps things up rather too neatly, which is a shame given that the premise of the book is that endings are not normally happy ever after. But I can't quibble with the quality of the writing. Phyllis Gotlieb is an author to watch.

*Mindworlds* - Phyllis Gotlieb - Tor - hardcover

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## Song of the Sea

Once upon a time an old man and a turtle met on a beach and swapped bodies because they found that they could. They learned a lot from each other, including that they had a shared love for a certain brand of Tennessee Bourbon. The man was called Steven, and he had to leave soon for there were medical people back in his world fighting to save his life. The turtle was called Jack after his favorite tippie.

Both man and turtle promised to return in a year's time and, thanks to some foul weather on Lake Superior, Steven was there as promised. But Jack had been travelling and had been taken prisoner by the moon. Undeterred, Steven settled down on the island and founded a town by the beach. Soon it became populated by other drowned souls. Steven named the town after his charming and imaginative granddaughter, Marina. And from this, everything flowed.

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*It was on the moon's Other side that it first occurred to Jack that he might not want to live forever. He'd thought he'd known what old meant, and realised he hadn't. Ancient sorrows and deceits poked their arms and twisted their necks out of the tumbled rock; no light had ever been cast upon them. Jack knew they were sorrows because they cried in the dark. He knew they were deceits because he could feel them smirking. The sorrows cried over the deceits, but the deceits only smirked back, their faces frozen.*

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I must admit that when Candace Jane Dorsey first showed me this book called *Green Music* with a picture of a turtle on the cover I was expecting something eco-soppy: some sort of "Free Jack the Turtle" story. To a certain extent I was right, because the people of Marina do live in an imaginary island paradise that Ursula Pflug compares favorably to the bustling inhumanity of modern Toronto. Marina has little in the way of technology, and what it does have has been available to mankind for centuries. There is, I suspect, a little of the fantasy writer's dishonesty here. Pflug writes charmingly about the smell of sea and salt, of the wood and varnish in the shipyard, and of wild roses. However, I have this sneaking suspicion that the overwhelming smell of Marina would have been the Green Turtle Ale brewery, and this would not have been nearly so romantic.

Then again, Marina is not a real place. Many of its inhabitants are dead, and who knows how children born to the dead class in the spiritual hierarchy. Marina is not a place that we mortals can visit, except by magic and in dreams.

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*There is a place you can go when you want to plant gardens in memory of your secret lovers. You can find these gardens behind high walls and locked gates obscured by rambling overgrowths of climbers; climbers that have escaped and run down to the sea, brightening the roads of an old harbour town. Go to Marina. In Marina you can still buy a boat. In Marina the roses bloom.*

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Well, an island paradise is something that many of us cleave to, and in the humid hell that London has become as I am writing this I sure wish I was on a beach

on Scilly again, watching the terns fish and the seals basking in the sun. But instead I watch people and cars go by in the street outside and the best I have to look forward to is an evening in the pub and a long, cool beer. Toronto, I am sure, is quite a bit like London.

So *Green Music* is not really a book about escaping the real world for a sun-soaked romantic fallacy populated by talking turtles. It is a book about surviving. It is a book about having a dream in our hearts and not giving in to the rat race, to the endless chink of money and rumble of traffic. It is a story about two young women in an unfriendly world, one of whom grew up and coped, and one who refused to compromise.

Above all, *Green Music* is a story about a little girl who loved stories, and whose parents wished that she wasn't so much trouble and would learn to enjoy watching videos and chatting on the phone to her friends like her elder sister.

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*Look for the girl  
With the sun in her eyes  
And she's...*

*Gone*

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The story of *Green Music* is firmly rooted in urban Toronto. Who knows, maybe the bars called Flamingo and Gasworks, or the Lakeview Café, really exist. Maybe I will go and look for them while I'm there for Worldcon. And if you happen to see me in a certain subway station throwing roses on the tracks, you will know that Ursula Pflug is responsible.

*Green Music* - Ursula Pflug - Tesseract - softcover



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## Painting with Words

Any collection of Canadian SF&F authors is incomplete without mention of Guy Gavriel Kay. Sadly Kay's new novel is not due out until next spring, but he does have a collection of poetry available. The book, *Beyond this Dark House*, is only published in Canada. It is available from the Amazon.ca web site and presumably they will ship anywhere. Copies will doubtless also be available from the Torcon dealers' room.

This is the first poetry collection I have ever reviewed, and I'm not entirely sure that I am competent to do so. I enjoy epic poetry such as Coleridge, and I definitely appreciate a good haiku, but much modern poetry leaves me cold. As for the stuff that gets included in formula fantasy novels, well, the less said the better. Thankfully Kay's poetry is easily understood, even by a novice like me. It doesn't often have formal structure and rhyming patterns, but its meaning is generally clear, and frequently haunting.

Much of this, of course, is down to Kay's skill as a fantasist. There is nothing quite like mythology for bringing the reader out in goosebumps, and poetry seems to be an excellent form for doing this. So many of the poems in the book have mythological themes, sometimes blatant, other times subtle and concealed. One of my favorites from the book is a poem called "Tintagel", which nods its head to the vast depth of Arthurian legend surrounding the location, but acknowledges that the sea was there first, and will be there, still uncaring, long after Arthur is forgotten.

Many other poems are about love: about fleeting moments, about desire, about pain. Poetry is good at this, and again Kay has the talent with words to make his point succinctly and powerfully. Sometimes, of course, the poems are about both, for they treat of Guinevere or Orpheus. In both cases Kay does not judge, but merely asks us to understand. "What else could he have done?" he asks of us about Orpheus, and goes on to illustrate the agony that the bard must have gone through before his fateful glance. For Guinevere he finds reflection, an ocean of regret, but no apology for love.

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*I am learning how to live with this.  
I thought of dying more than once.  
The last time, the night that Arthur died.  
Not since. We cannot be other than  
we are. I loved two men. A kingdom  
broke for it. Something fell that was a star.  
We cannot be other than we are.*

from "Guinevere at Almesbury"

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Although most of the poems are raw with emotion, Kay is not above an occasional dose of humor. I particularly enjoyed "At the Death of Pan" in which some poor court flunky tries to work out an appropriate ceremony for the funeral of a god. "There are no *rules* for this," he cries despairingly to his assistant, "Precedent is somewhat limited."

So there we have it: triumph and disaster, tears and laughter, such is the stuff of poetry. But more important is the artist's command of his tools. Guy Gavriel Kay is a master of words. Enjoy them.

*Beyond this Dark House* - Guy Gavriel Kay -  
Penguin - publisher's proof

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## Clute Scores

I've been doing this SF reviewing lark for quite a while now, and immodest as it may be I think I am getting quite good at it. There are, however, two people whose reviews are head and shoulders above mine in quality. The first is Gary K. Wolfe, the lead reviewer for *Locus*. The other, of course, is John Clute.

Wolfe's reviews are professional, informed and detached. Also, because *Locus* generally doesn't carry negative reviews, Wolfe doesn't get to launch into invective. The most damning Wolfe ever gets is refusing to review a book (and most of the time the *Locus* staff screen out the dross before he ever sees it). Clute, on the other hand, is a master of literary pyrotechnics, and as an independent he can sometimes get quite brutal. He's not necessarily more incisive than Wolfe, but he is often more fun to read. Consequently, when he offered me a review copy of his collected reviews over the past decade, I jumped at the opportunity.

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*...the increasingly sclerotic human Empire, an imperium Niven/Pournelle actually ask us to believe is run by an Emperor and an aristocracy-by-birth composed almost entirely of ass-tight WASP males, icy spouses of same, and the utterly appalling sanitary spoiled children of both, all of these latter being specially abled to exude, when duty calls, the profoundly moving spartan charisma natural to any twenty-year-old scion called from his yacht (this does actually happen) to defend an unearned income. Every one of these little shits knows the true secret of being rich, too:*

*which is that being rich allows you to hire the lives of others.*

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### Clute on *The Gripping Hand*

So here we have *Scores: Reviews 1993-2003*, a book entirely devoted to SF&F book reviews. 444 pages of them (excepting a few pages given over to an introduction, contents and index), plus a very nice cover by Clute's artist wife, Judith. Most of the material originally appeared in either *Interzone*, *The New York Review of Science Fiction*, various newspapers and Clute's *Excessive Candour* column on the *Science Fiction Weekly* web site.

(Note: *Excessive Candour* only appears once a month so for 75% of the time if you look up its URL you will get a 404 error. Try mid way through the month.)

Clute reviews are somewhat a matter of taste. As with his novels, they showcase his passion for archaeological excavations of the English dictionary. Straight away in the introduction he regales us with "haecceity", a word which apparently means "the Thisness of Things". But he also invents words, often very useful ones. Perhaps there should be a word that means "The Cluteness of Things," which should have overtones of lexicographical virtuosity. Still, it is entertaining, and it does mean that Clute is perhaps the only person in the known universe who can legitimately describe Iain Banks' *Feersum Enjinn*, a book written largely in a phonetic version of what appears to be Glaswegian dialect, as "easy to read."

Clute can be cute too. Just because he has a reputation for excessive verbosity it doesn't mean that he'll be shy about excoriating it in others. In reviewing Elizabeth Hand's *Waking the Moon* Clute

notes, "Hand has a habit of iterating in threes, and the English version of her tale, her story, her narrative, is extremely long as a consequence, result, eventuation." He also has a quiet dig at China Miéville – this on *Perdido Street Station*:

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*There are some headachy passages where all too many short, pounding, colourful, hectoring phrases congregate in gonzo gangs to describe the clangorous candied convulsive congested really quite big city of New Crobuzon.*

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Thankfully we can forgive Clute for these minor displays of hubris, because they are very funny.

None of this, however, explains why Clute is such a wonderful reviewer. Anyone can be wordy, many people can be funny, but few people can match Clute for erudition and perception. You never know, when reading a Clute review, when he is suddenly going to illustrate a point with reference to some classic of literature or a currently popular movie, either of which he will know intimately. An unfavorable review may just poke fun at the author's political idiocies (as with the Niven/Pournelle review above), or it may launch into a complex discussion of the literary theory of a particular type of SF story that explains just where the author goes wrong. Clute's review of Michael Swanwick's, *The Bones of the Earth*, for example, expounds at great length on the structure of time travel stories and explains far better than I did how Swanwick managed to lose the plot.

Clute is often at his best when given something to get his teeth into. We all struggle to understand what is going on in Gene Wolfe novels. Because I like to be

topical, I review them bit by bit as the separate volumes are published. Clute waits until he can do an entire book at a time, and then proceeds to dissect it thoroughly. I think I learn more about a Wolfe novel by reading Clute's review than by reading the book myself. And of course Clute manages to throw in the occasional pithy but remarkably apt aside, such as "Gene Wolfe novels don't end any more than an Escher drawing ends."

More than that I can't say. My admiration for Clute is that of a journeyman painter gawking in awe at the manifest virtuosity of a Leonardo or Michaelangelo. Your mileage, as a consumer of reviews, may differ. However, I feel it in my bones that if you are discerning enough to read *Emerald City* regularly (as opposed to, say, getting your reviews from the customer rants on Amazon) then you are just the sort of person who will appreciate the artistry displayed in *Scores*.

The book is published by a British small press company called Becon Publications and is being distributed in the US by Mike Walsh of Old Earth Books. The initial print run is only 500, with an additional 50 in a special hardback edition. The best way to find a copy is at a convention dealer's room, and Mike says he expects to have copies at Torcon III. You can also order it from Mike's web site: <http://www.oldearthbooks.com/>. British readers will probably find it easiest to throw money at Roger Robinson at The Tun.

*Scores: Reviews 1993-2003* – John Clute – Becon  
– publisher's proof

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## Back to the Future

One of the most talked about science fiction books of the year has achieved notoriety precisely because its author has been quite fanatical about insisting that it is not science fiction. This is rather odd, because Margaret Atwood is well known for having written one of the best ever pieces of feminist SF, *The Handmaid's Tale*. That book won the inaugural Arthur C. Clarke Award. However, in deference to Ms. Atwood's preferences, and because she is, after all, predominantly a mainstream novelist, I'm making *Oryx and Crake* this month's featured mainstream novel.

Atwood's comments on the SF-ness of her tale have generated a significant amount of negative comment within the genre. Justina Robson laid into Atwood at one of the ICA panels. Muriel Gray's probing questions apparently provoked incandescent fury from the author in an interview for BBC Radio Scotland that was sadly not live and was edited for broadcast. John Clute described Atwood's attitude as "priggish" and muttered about intellectual treachery. It has been suggested that Atwood is trying to protect her reputation as a mainstream author by distancing herself from the SF ghetto, but if that was her aim it has failed quite spectacularly in one respect. A reviewer for the *New York Times* announced that *Oryx and Crake* was crap because it was SF and SF, by its very nature, could never be anything other than crap. Oh dear.

Looking more closely, however, I am beginning to suspect that Atwood's comments are in fact a result of ignorance more than anything else. In one interview, for example, she described SF as being about "talking squid in outer space". Of

course this might have been a cheap jibe at Ken MacLeod's *Engines of Light* series, but I suspect it was actually prompted by the Mon Calamari in *Star Wars*. In an essay on the book's web site Atwood says:

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*Like The Handmaid's Tale, Oryx and Crake is a speculative fiction, not a science fiction proper. It contains no intergalactic space travel, no teleportation, no Martians. As with The Handmaid's Tale, it invents nothing we haven't already invented or started to invent.*

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Well to start with, "speculative fiction" is a term that SF writers have been using to describe their work for decades. Clute (who is normally right about such things) attributes the term to Heinlein, although I have seen others trace it back to Campbell and further. Brian Aldiss did write a book (*White Mars*) about a Martian life form recently, but the vast majority of recent work about Mars has focused on colonizing the planet, not on Martians, and I can't imagine anyone accusing Kim Stanley Robinson of wild speculation. My guess is that Atwood meant to write "aliens", or perhaps "Klingons". Intergalactic space travel is something that hardly anyone in SF writes about these days, even on *Star Trek*. And as for teleportation, it is something that we have started to invent, albeit currently only on a quantum level. It does rather sound like Atwood is a little out of touch, or at least gets her views on what science fiction is from TV and movies, not books.

Reading *Oryx and Crake* reveals just how out of touch Atwood is. The book is a classic eco-disaster novel of a type that was popular in the late 1960s and early 1970s. People like John Brunner (*Stand on*

Zanzibar, *The Sheep Look Up*) and Harry Harrison (*Make Room! Make Room!*) did precisely this sort of book thirty years ago, and did it rather better. Atwood may try to claim that her book is new because it is about genetic engineering, but there she would be out of touch again. One of the supposed shock ideas of *Oryx and Crake* is a chicken genetically engineered to be nothing but a large lump of fast growing breast meat. It was done years ago, 1953 to be exact, in *The Space Merchants* by Pohl and Kornbluth.

Then there are the silly mistakes. No experienced modern SF writer would assume that a video game that is popular with the characters when they were 14 will still be around ten years later. Neither would they assume that anyone in the mid-21<sup>st</sup> Century would submit a job application on paper. All of the mega-corporation stuff is old hat as well, and Atwood's attempts at devising brand names and slogans are pitifully inept when compared to a master of the field like William Gibson. In short, to the extent that *Oryx and Crake* is obviously SF, it is really bad SF. It is rather like someone has come up with what looks like a second rate Beatles tribute band and is claiming that this is a radical new form of music (and nothing to do with that terrible rock 'n' roll stuff).

There is actually one area where Atwood is more up to date with SF themes, but she doesn't appear to have realized it. Her mad scientist anti-hero, Crake, before wiping out mankind, creates a new breed of humanoid, the Crakers, who are ideally adapted to their environment. They eat grass, and are designed to be incapable of things like sexual jealousy and belief in God that might cause violence. They are also immune to all known diseases and

fast healing but are genetically programmed to be incapable of overbreeding. As Karl Schroeder points out in *Permanence*, this type of post-human evolution is highly likely once we have the technology, and will probably replace our own tool-using culture because it is more efficient. The only way to prevent this happening over the long term is to ban scientific progress. Atwood has hit upon the idea, but doesn't seem to have thought through the argument.

Then again, one of the interesting things about *Oryx and Crake* is that it is remarkably non-judgemental in many places. This seems particularly unusual for Atwood, but there it is. What do I mean by this? Well, take the Crakers for example. Atwood is scathing about capitalist society and bio-technology in particular. Her viewpoint character, Jimmy (who is far too much of a basket case to be called a hero) gets hugely angry about it. But there is nothing he can do. In part that is because he's so inept, but Crake is equally angry and highly competent, and he does do something. As he points out, many people in the environmentalist lobby would be delighted to be able to transform humans into grazing animals. The Crakers really are a very effective solution to our current problems, but it needed genetic engineering to create them.

The next angle is about the state of the third world and child prostitution. *Oryx*, the girl whom both Jimmy and Crake come to love, begins life in a poor village somewhere in SouthEast Asia. When her father dies her mother, who is desperate for cash, sells her to a man from the city. From there she goes into acting in child porn movies and ends up, before being rescued by the police, as the sex slave of

an American businessman in San Francisco. Jimmy, as is his wont, is full of righteous indignation and wants to hunt down and kill everyone who has exploited his girlfriend in the past. But Oryx has nothing but gratitude for all of the people who helped her rise out of poverty, get educated and put her in a position from which she could acquire a well-paid job in corporate America. If she had to pay for that help with sexual favors, so be it.

Somewhere around the middle of the book Atwood launches into the arts v science debate. Crake goes off to the top-rated bioscience university where he is given every possible comfort (including prostitutes where necessary to avoid teenage romances distracting the students from their study). Jimmy, who is hopeless at math, goes to an arts college instead. Atwood displays quiet fury about how little regard is given to artistic creativity, but at the same time she populates Jimmy's college with a bunch of ineffectual, neurotic poseurs.

Although Crake designed the Crakers to be free of religion, following the fall of mankind Jimmy (who is apparently the only human survivor) manages to get them worshipping Oryx and Crake as gods. How does this happen? Did Crake get his gene manipulations wrong? Is religion learned by nurture rather than nature? Or is spirituality somehow innate to conscious beings and a result of their having souls in addition to biological bodies? Once again, Atwood leaves the question open.

(By the way, it may sound that this review is full of spoilers, but in fact the book starts with Jimmy in the post-catastrophe world and tells the entire story in flashback. Most of the plot is so obvious

that you know what is going to happen after a chapter or two.)

Finally I'd like to highlight the question of Jimmy's family. His father is a hearty, golf-playing nerd who is so incompetent you wonder how he got his high-paying job. Jimmy's mother, on the other hand, is highly intelligent but totally neurotic. She's incapable of relating to anyone, and eventually runs off to become an eco-terrorist. As a mother she is a complete failure. When she leaves, Jimmy's father marries his lab assistant, Ramona, who is just as smart but who affects an ultra-feminine airhead tart personality. Given what we are shown of Jimmy's personality, he would normally be lusting after her like crazy, but because she has supplanted his mother he is contemptuous of her. Jimmy can detect no evidence of Ramona and his father having had an affair beforehand or being in any way responsible for his mother's depression. They were just good friends who drifted into something more when the opportunity arose. Nevertheless in time they come to have a close (and enthusiastically carnal) relationship. Ramona is unfailingly polite and kind to Jimmy, despite his hatred of her. This situation is in marked contrast to Crake's family. Here it transpires that it is the father who has qualms about his work, but he is murdered by his employers, having been betrayed by his wife who is having an affair with his boss. Given Atwood's track record in feminist SF you might have expected her to be fiercely condemnatory of Ramona, but instead she sets yet another open-ended moral conundrum.

The above discussion hopefully illustrates that there is some good, intelligent stuff in *Oryx and Crake*. Science fiction writers (not

mentioning any Sheri Teppers by name) all too often have an agenda. Atwood, rather surprisingly, seems to have eschewed this idea in favor of asking questions. Because she has buried all this in a poorly executed, corny-sounding 1960s plot you have to think a bit about the book in order to realize what she has done, but it is there. All of which is to say that *Oryx and Crake* could have been a very good science fiction book if only Atwood had been more familiar with the field and its methods. Sadly, like many of the big name mainstream authors who decide to slum it in the ghetto, she has come badly unstuck and is receiving praise only because the mainstream critics who review her work are just as ignorant of SF as she is.

*Oryx and Crake* - Margaret Atwood - Doubleday - hardcover

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## We're All Going to Die

Science fiction books are not generally supposed to be predictive. Where they do include things like social and political commentary, their writers intend them to be read as an examination of how we live today, not some irrelevant tale about the future. Even so, some SF writers do manage to sound awfully prescient after the event. This is particularly true if they concentrate on near-future stories. John Brunner (*The Shockwave Rider*) and Pat Cadigan (*Synners*) are now credited with having foreseen computer viruses and spam. Philip K. Dick's work is currently hugely popular as a reflection of modern society, though people thought him paranoid when he wrote his books. But perhaps the most prescient SF book ever

written is also one of the least known, at least outside the environmentalist movement. Now at last it has been reissued by a small press company in the US. In 1972 when it was released, John Brunner's *The Sheep Look Up* seemed an unlikely nightmare vision of the future. These days it is scarily prophetic.

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*I am especially pleased to see [...] The Sheep Look Up reappear in a fine edition. Its warning, and stark, terrifying beauty, are just as relevant today, even if its message has been partly heeded. For we need reminders that the ultimate decision is ours.*

David Brin  
from his Introduction to the new edition

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At its most basic, *The Sheep Look Up* is an eco-disaster novel, much like *Oryx and Crake*. However, there is no mad scientist plotting the downfall of the human race. It is a book entirely about incompetence, greed, and the remarkable fragility of our modern world when faced with disaster. Brunner did not consider the possible collapse of power grids — his agenda was purely in the area of biosciences — but his awareness of the type of trouble we could get ourselves into was striking.

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*More cows had died in the night, bellies bloated, blood leaking from their mouths and nostrils, frozen smears of blood under their tails. Before the children were allowed to go to school they had to dip their rubber boots in pans of milky disinfectant. The same had been sprayed on the tires of the bus.*

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The book has an innovative structure, being made up of a monthly diary of

seemingly unconnected events that eventually coalesce to form a coherent plot. Many of the entries under a particular month are quite short: a news report or extract from a political speech. Others follow the declining fortunes of a range of well-meaning but largely ignorant characters as their world falls apart around them.

The story begins with an horrific outbreak of violence in a small African state caused by a shipment of food aid that turns out to have been contaminated with an ergot-like hallucinogen. The Africans, used to a long history of American economic imperialism (if you don't think that happens see the quote below, and yes I suspect the EU is just as bad), assume that they are being deliberately poisoned.

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*US cotton subsidies [...] Oxfam claims, are distorting the world market with payments worth \$4bn a year – more than America spends on aid for the whole of Africa – enabling America's 25,000 cotton farmers to dump their produce on the international market and get rich in the process. World cotton prices are now lower than at any time since the 1930s Depression, causing an economic and social crisis in sub-Saharan Africa and tipping the 10 million people who depend on cotton for their livelihood below the poverty line.*

*The Independent Magazine*  
16 August 2003

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The tale of how the contaminant got into the food, and the impact this has on US society, forms the backbone of the novel. Along the way, the US President, a character portrayed as a bumbling idiot who speaks in tabloid newspaper headlines, claims that terrorists have

attacked the US with biological and chemical weapons. A war on terrorism is declared and draconian security measures are instituted.

Meanwhile, in the US, public health is becoming a major issue. More and more children are being born with diseases such as asthma, and even physical deformities. Tap water is unsafe to drink. Medicines cease working, as bacteria become resistant to antibiotics. The cost of health insurance skyrockets. Does any of this sound familiar?

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*"You bastard," she said. "You smug pompous devil. You liar. You filthy dishonest old man. You put the poison in the world, you and your generation. You crippled my children. You made sure they'd never eat clean food, drink pure water, breathe sweet air. And when someone comes to you for help you turn your back."*

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Thankfully much of what Brunner foresaw has not come to pass. *The Sheep Look Up* was significantly instrumental in the founding of the environmental movement (Brunner himself was one of the founders of CND). As a result, DDT is no longer commonly used as a pesticide (at least not in countries with firm environmental regulations), supersonic planes do not over-fly the US causing avalanches in the Rockies and the Mediterranean is not a fetid cesspool. Of course as a result we also have extremists like the Animal Liberation Front to deal with. But Brunner foresaw that too. In the novel his environmentalist hero, Austin Train, despairs at the violence done in his name.

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*Even this far from shore, the night stank. The sea moved lazily, its embryo waves aborted before cresting the layer of oily residues surrounding the hull, impermeable as sheet plastic: a mixture of detergents, sewage, industrial chemicals, and the microscopic cellulose fibers due to toilet paper and newsprint. There was no sound of fish breaking the surface. There were no fish.*

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There are also elements of *The Sheep Look Up* that will jar with a modern readership. Although Brunner demonstrates a social conscience throughout, characters in the book express attitudes regarding race, gender and sexual preference that are likely to be the cause of a discrimination suit if uttered in public in a Western society today. But of course Brunner is only commenting on society as it was in his day, like any good SF writer should.

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*"What frightens me in retrospect about The Sheep Look Up [...] is that I invented literally nothing for it, bar a chemical weapon that made people psychotic. Everything else I took straight out of the papers."*

John Brunner

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You won't find any comfort in reading *The Sheep Look Up*. Brunner is unrelentingly bleak in his prose. Although his "sheep" do finally decide that the way their world is going is not what they want, and that they must take action, it is far too late for them. Possibly the planet can be saved, but for individuals there is no hope. There are books (including *Oryx and Crake*) in which the author destroys the world in some spectacular cataclysm or disaster. But *The Sheep Look Up* is the only novel I can think of in which almost every

character you meet dies alone, unheroically, and often through some stupid accident or mistake. But that, as David Brin says, is the terrible beauty of the book. It is a stark and uncompromising warning of what can happen to a world that puts short-term comfort and political expediency before all else. Just as in 1972, we can read it and think, "it couldn't happen to us." But in the intervening years much of it has. And it could yet get worse.

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*The growing trend around the world to drink water from underground sources is causing a global epidemic of arsenic poisoning. Tens of thousands of people have developed skin lesions, cancers and other symptoms, and many have died. Hundreds of millions are now thought to be at serious risk.*

*New Scientist*  
9 August 2003

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*The Sheep Look Up* - John Brunner - Benbella - softcover

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## Short Stuff

### Happy fantasies

Charles de Lint is one of the nicest people I've met in the SF&F business. He's friendly, approachable, always ready with a smile and generally willing to play and sing for a fannish audience. His books reflect his personality, which is to say that if you are looking for dark fantasy then de Lint is not a name to turn to.

De Lint's latest collection, *Waifs and Strays*, is devoted to tales with teenage

protagonists. As with his novels, many of them are based in his native Canada. "Merlin Dreams in the Mondream Wood", for example, is set in Tamson House, the sprawling Ottawa mansion that formed the setting for de Lint's early novels. Several other stories are set in the fictional city of Newford, which may or may not be in Canada. All of the stories are pretty much the same. The heroine (most of de Lint's viewpoint characters are female) is having some trouble with life. She also encounters something supernatural. And because all of the good people are nice, they all live happily-ish ever after.

I have to say that *Waifs and Strays* was one of the easiest pieces of reading I have found in short fiction in a long time. I sat down and read it pretty much straight through. That is generally impossible for me with collections and anthologies. There is no doubt that de Lint is eminently readable. But he is also not in the slightest bit disturbing. You get to the end of one story and you think, "hmm, that was nice", and go straight on to the next one.

And this is why, Canadian special issues notwithstanding, I have given up reading de Lint. His stories are just too nice. They have no edge. They don't say anything except "we should be nice to each other." Now granted that is a powerful and important message, but unlike in de Lint's fiction it doesn't always work. *Waifs and Strays* is a charming and accessible piece of comfort reading. For many readers, of course, that is exactly what they are looking for. But it is not for me.

*Waifs and Strays* - Charles de Lint - Viking - hardcover

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## Canadian Assortment

Looking at top rated novels will give you an impression of the cream of a country's writers, but to get some idea of the depth of talent available the best place to look is in anthologies. Tesseract Books, a leading Canadian small press publisher, has been producing such things for some time. The latest, called *Tesseracts 8*, was edited by John Clute and Candace Jane Dorsey. It contains a range of stories and poems from many different writers. All of the works are in English, but three of them have been translated from the original French.

The list of contributing authors includes several well-known names, some of which have books reviewed above. I'm not going to talk about Cory Doctorow, Karl Schroeder and Ursula Pflug - you should know that they are good by now. But what about the rest of them? Speaking as someone who doesn't normally go for short fiction, I was favorably impressed.

For some unexplained reason, the book contains several stories with the sea as a theme. "Speaking Sea", by Sally McBride, starts off as a tale about lack of communication between wife and husband. It then morphs into a what initially seems to be a rather silly SF story about an alien nanotech life form invading our seas, and then very cleverly switches back to being about male-female communication after all. "The Edge of the World" by Sara Simmons is an eerie fantasy about running away from an overbearing family that has some marvelous imagery about approaching the point where the world ends. I really liked both of these stories.

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*When she went back on deck the scene had changed utterly. The sky filled the whole world. The islands and the sea had melted finally together. The water was strangely opaque, and Soltys's wake held glimpses of rocks and trees. The world was crumbling. Gaps of nothingness opened in the water, but Soltys and the waves flowed smoothly around them. A ship couldn't sail into what wasn't there.*

from "The Edge of the World"

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With translated stories it is often hard to separate the skill of the original author from the skill of the translator. Yves Meynard is clearly a very talented fellow. His own story, "Within the Mechanism", is a haunting tale of a decayed far future written in English, but he is also the translator of "The Energy of Slaves" by René Beaulieu. There are flaws in Beaulieu's story, but these are a result of it being a bit of polemic that really only makes sense if you are a Socialist fueled by righteous indignation. That should not have affected Meynard's translation. The best translated story, however, is "Umfrey's Head" by Daniel Sernine, translated by Jane Brierley. I loved this in part because it is so refreshing to read SF that has gendarmes in moustaches and kepis rather than American cops, but it also had a point to make and some neat descriptions. I'm not sure how much of this is down to M. Sernine and how much to Ms. Brierley, but it is good all the same.

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*Much further away, gathering momentum as it rushes inward from the edge of the planetary system, a vessel gains speed with each passing second with a little help from the sun's gravity. Matter and antimatter, magnetically confined in its reaction chambers, annihilate*

*each other as in the first moments of the universe. By the time it crosses the control station's orbit at nearly lightspeed, the vessel has become an aberration, a moving point in space where time slows down and where the laws of physics are pushed to their very limits.*

*The universe shrieks like a blackboard scratched by a nail.*

from "Umfrey's Head"

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If you are looking for a Canadian SF sampler, *Tesseract 8* is a good place to start. Doubtless the book will be available somewhere in the Torcon dealers' room.

*Tesseract 8* - John Clute & Candas Jane Dorsey (eds.) - Tesseract - softcover

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## Miscellany

### World Fantasy Award Nominees

The nominees for this year's World Fantasy Awards have been announced. Nominations are based on the votes of people who have attended recent World Fantasy Cons, but the final choice is made by a panel of judges. The awards will be presented at this year's WFC in Washington DC. And the nominees are...

**Novel:** *The Facts of Life*, Graham Joyce (Gollancz); *Fitcher's Brides*, Gregory Frost (Tor); *Ombria in Shadow*, Patricia A. McKillip (Ace); *The Portrait of Mrs. Charbuque*, Jeffrey Ford (Morrow); *The Scar*, China Miéville (Macmillan; Del Rey).

**Novella:** *Coraline*, Neil Gaiman (HarperCollins); "The Least Trumps", Elizabeth Hand (*Conjunctions* #39: *The New Wave Fabulists*); "The Library", Zoran

Zivkovic (*Leviathan* #3); *Seven Wild Sisters*, Charles de Lint (Subterranean Press); *A Year in the Linear City*, Paul Di Filippo (PS Publishing).

**Short Story:** "Creation", Jeffrey Ford (*F&SF* May 2002); "The Essayist in the Wilderness", William Browning Spencer (*F&SF* May 2002); "Little Dead Girl Singing", Stephen Gallagher (*Weird Tales* Spring 2002); "October in the Chair", Neil Gaiman (*Conjunctions* #39: *The New Wave Fabulists*); "The Weight of Words", Jeffrey Ford (*Leviathan* #3).

**Anthology:** *The American Fantasy Tradition*, Brian M. Thomsen, ed. (Tor); *Conjunctions* #39: *The New Wave Fabulists*, Peter Straub, ed. (Bard College); *The Green Man: Tales from the Mythic Forest*, Ellen Datlow & Terri Windling, eds. (Viking); *Leviathan* #3, Jeff VanderMeer & Forrest Aguirre, eds. (Ministry of Whimsy Press); *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror: Fifteenth Annual Collection*, Ellen Datlow & Terri Windling, eds. (St. Martin's).

**Collection:** *City of Saints and Madmen*, Jeff VanderMeer (Prime Books); *The Fantasy Writer's Assistant and Other Stories*, Jeffrey Ford (Golden Gryphon Press); *Figures in Rain*, Chet Williamson (Ash-Tree Press); *The Ogre's Wife*, Richard Parks (Obscura Press); *Waifs and Strays*, Charles de Lint (Viking); *Water: Tales of Elemental Spirits*, Robin McKinley & Peter Dickinson (Putnam).

**Artist:** Kinuko Y. Craft, Tom Kidd, Gary Lippincott, Dave McKean, John Jude Palencar, Charles Vess.

**Special Award Professional:** Paul Barnett (for Paper Tiger art books); Ellen Datlow (for editing); William K. Schafer (for Subterranean Press); Gary Turner & Marty Halpern (for Golden Gryphon Press);

Gordon Van Gelder (for *F&SF*); Terri Windling (for editing).

**Special Award Non-Professional:** Peter Crowther (for PS Publishing); Gavin Grant & Kelly Link (for Small Beer Press); Sean Wallace (for Prime Books); Michael Walsh (for Old Earth Books); Jason Williams, Jeremy Lassen & Benjamin Cossel (for NightShade Books).

No prizes for guessing which novel I want to win, although I've given positive reviews to both the Frost and the Ford. I'll try to include reviews of the other two books before the awards are announced.

The novella award will doubtless be another in a long list of well-deserved prizes for *Coraline*, but I'm delighted to see Liz Hand's story in the lists. Most of the short stories are unfamiliar me, but I do know that Neil's is very good. The anthology prize will, I suspect, go to *Conjunctions*, and Jeff Vandermeer won't be too upset because he'll win the collection award. Goodness only knows about the rest of it, but I'm rooting for Nightshade Books.

There has been some interesting discussion about what is actually meant by "professional" in respect to the Special Award categories. Jason Williams bravely volunteered the information that Nightshade is his sole source of income, which would seem to suggest that it is a professional operation. Peter Crowther and Kelly Link, on the other hand, both have writing careers, so while they themselves are both industry professionals, their publishing enterprises are perhaps only semi-professional. Mike Walsh has a "gasp" real job in addition to running Old Earth. But all of these activities appear at least intended to be profit-making rather than being done on

an amateur basis. Doubtless the judges have guidelines, but it would be nice to know what they are.

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### Earthlight Update

Pat Cadigan devoted her August soiree at the Oxford Street Borders to a retrospective in praise of the recently deceased Earthlight imprint. Many of Earthlight's authors, including Jon Courtenay Grimwood and Ian McDonald, were present, as were the imprint's founder, John Jarrold, and the now ex-editor, Darren Nash. There was also a fair representation from the rest of the industry, including Malcolm Edwards, Simon Spanton and Jo Fletcher from Gollancz.

Much of the discussion focussed on why Earthlight was closed down. Although Simon & Schuster corporate had requested that cuts be made in the UK operation, it seems likely that no detailed economic analysis was made and the decision to close Earthlight was more "aesthetic" than economic. Ian Chapman, the newly arrived managing director of Simon & Schuster, is known to have a low opinion of SF. Indeed Jarrold, who left Earthlight in 2002 not long after Chapman took charge of the company, said that when he left he bet a friend that Earthlight would close within a year to 18 months as soon as Chapman could find a suitable excuse to get rid of it. Chapman, it seems, would prefer to publish highbrow literary writers such as, er, Jackie Collins.

The lack of economic sense of the decision was reinforced by Edwards who pointed out that SF&F accounts for around 10% of all books sold in the UK. Furthermore, in the wake of the Harry Potter

phenomenon, fantasy is a really hot business right now. However, Edwards also said that he felt it unlikely that existing SF publishers could take up the slack caused by the demise of Earthlight. Although there are four other major SF publishers in the UK, none of them has the capacity to take on many more authors. The market probably won't shrink, which I guess is good for any authors not with Earthlight, but we'll perhaps get less choice.

Exactly what will happen to Earthlight's existing authors is still unclear. In his press release, Chapman promised that all of the contracted books would be handled by Simon & Schuster's mainstream lines and would get good support. Jarrold was deeply skeptical, advising everyone to jump ship as fast as they could. So far, to my knowledge, only one writer has actually done so. Michael Moorcock wrote pithily to *Ansible*, "I told them to fuck off." Then again, he will doubtless have no difficulty finding a new home. For everyone else it is probably a question of wait and see. However, everyone is very aware of the salutary lesson of Chris Priest's *The Separation* which, through mishandling by S&S's mainstream people, was practically unobtainable at the time it was winning every British SF award in sight.

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### Emap Fanzine Awards

UK publisher Emap is apparently intending to launch a set of awards for online fanzines. They wrote to Interaction asking for help identifying the best British/Irish SF e-zines. Goodness only knows what will come of this. I have no idea what criteria they will be using to judge the sites, or even how they will

define a "fanzine" or its Britishness/Irishness. If I find out more I will let you know.

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## Footnote

And so we must say goodbye to Canada for a while, though I have met many good writers in the process of compiling this issue and I'm sure some of them will feature here again. Thanks are due to John Clute for permission to reprint his articles, and to Roger Robinson and Guy Gavriel Kay for rushing me copies of *Scores* and *Beyond this Dark House* so that I could include them in this issue. Also to Candace Jane Dorsey for giving me an excellent primer in who's who in Canadian SF.

Next issue will of course include the Worldcon report. There should also be word of a one-day academic conference on SF in Toronto that takes place the day before Worldcon and features a certain Margaret Atwood as Guest of Honor. Plus there will be a bonus convention report because I'm going to Foolscape, a book-based convention that takes place in September in Seattle.

And there will be books. The US publishers often reserve their best offerings for release at Worldcon, but before I can get to those I have a fine collection of British books to cover. The authors featured will include Steve Cockayne, Cherith Baldry, Tricia Sullivan and Graham Joyce. I'm also delighted to say that the new Neal Stephenson novel is being published in the UK 2 months before its scheduled US release date, so I have got a copy already. Next month's

guest mainstream author will be Isabel Allende.

Then of course there is the not inconsiderable matter of *The Thackery T. Lambshead Pocket Guide to Eccentric & Discredited Diseases...*

So many books, so little time...

Ciao,

Love 'n' hugs,

Cheryl