

EMERALD CITY #98

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Introduction

Well, here I am back in the UK for a while, and this issue I was hoping to bring you news of new novels from Al Reynolds and Mary Gentle. Both are slated for an October release, but there's no sign of them in the shops as yet. Thankfully there is no shortage of other good books to look at, and we have the promised held-over Foolscape report from last issue. This issue, thankfully, is less than 50 pages long. Much less.

What we do have in this issue is the rest of the reviews of World Fantasy Award nominees for Best Novel. The three that have been in previous issues are *Fitcher's Brides* (Gregory Frost, #94), *The Portrait of Mrs. Charbuque* (Jeffrey Ford, #89) and *The Scar* (China Miéville, #79). Books by Graham Joyce and Patricia McKillip in this issue complete the set.

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Silly Hats in Seattle

Being in possession of a free ticket on Alaska, courtesy of a bump coming back from Westercon, I decided that this year I would try out Foolscape <<http://www.foolscap.org/>>, a relatively new convention based in Seattle (this was

its fifth year). When the con was first mooted the marketing hook was that it was about “flat stuff and silly hats”. Foolscap is, of course, a size of paper, and a fool’s cap is a silly hat. So far so good, but what does it mean?

In essence, Foolscap is a generalist SF convention that does not include media stuff. So it has books, comics and art, but no film, no costuming, no Buffy panels. In addition I suspect that something of its reason for existence comes from the fact that it is Not Norwescon. I’ve never been to a Norwescon myself – it clashes with Eastercon. But if someone as broadminded and inclusive as Kevin (he’s an anime fan, remember) says he feels out of place at the convention it must be pretty far from the fields we know. I suspect that if I lived in Seattle I would want a regular not-Norwescon local convention too.

Foolscap runs over the weekend. Programming starts on Friday afternoon and runs until late on Sunday – a sure sign of a con that expects most of the attendees to be local and not have to rush off and catch planes on Sunday afternoon. This year there were up to four tracks of programming on a range of subjects that you might expect at a general SF con.

This year one of the main attractions of the con was in fact not flat. Kim Graham, the sculptor lady who made that famous dragon at ConJosé, lives near Seattle and she came in to do a demonstration. All through the weekend she and her assistant, Dee, were busy creating a dragon skull. There are abundant photos on the web site.

I was on four program items, two of which were a complete bust from my point of view. The first was about technology in the Third World. I’d volunteered for the panel in case people

started talking nonsense about renewable energy (or even worse nonsense about microwave energy beams), but in fact they talked mainly about other stuff instead. The second was “What excites you about writing?” I was the only non-author on the panel, and as the discussion quickly got into story-writing techniques I was pretty much a spare wheel. I told jokes instead. Thankfully both panels went well without me.

A much more interesting panel was the one on running small conventions. I’ve never been at the sharp end of anything small (unless you run things like San Diego Comicon and regard Worldcon as small) and it was fascinating to listen to the very different problems that small cons have. I was there largely as a pseudo-Kevin able to talk about how organizations like SFSFC (the ConJosé parent corporation) can help small cons get established.

Finally I was on a panel on Literature v SF, which was great fun. We all piled mercilessly into Margaret Atwood. Sadly I had to run to catch a plane before it was over. However, I did get to catch Greg Bear’s views on how the split originated. Much of the current literary prejudice against SF can be traced back to a dispute between Henry James and HG Wells over appropriate subjects for fiction. James held that the only valid topic for a novelist is character, and that therefore the sort of idea-focused fiction that Wells wrote was inappropriate. The literary establishment sided with James.

Bear suggested two reasons for this. Firstly WWI had made people very wary of science (for all that Wells had warned them what might happen). Secondly people at the time felt that a novel about character had to be about the upper

classes, because of course only the upper classes had lives interesting enough to write about. Wells's novels were about engineers and scientists, who are tradesmen.

The Guests of Honor were Greg Bear and Sergio Aragonés, both of whom were very friendly and accessible all weekend. Greg brought the whole family, and he and Astrid gave an update on the progress of Paul Allen's SF Museum. I did an interview with Greg about the museum for *Strange Horizons*. That should be online soon.

The Dealers' Room and Art Show were surprisingly large for such a small event (only around 100 people). Patrick Swenson of Talebones said he had done rather well, but I suspect that most of the dealers had a very quiet weekend.

One of the difficulties of a small, local convention (and this came through very clearly on the small cons panel as well as being proved in practice) is that you have to pay for function space. There simply are not enough non-local people to take up a sizeable room block. Paying for function space means that the hotel pretty much has you over a barrel as regards doing food functions. So Foolscape spent much of Sunday morning with almost their entire function space converted for a banquet that cost \$25/head but served food that was almost identical to the \$9/head lunch buffet in the hotel restaurant. This is not good.

Furthermore, the banquet was followed by a charity auction, the purpose of which was to raise money for the convention as it doesn't get enough money to cover costs. This is great if you have a proper job, but I don't and the small number of items I was interested in went for way more than I could have afforded. In

particular, Kim Graham put the artist's proof plaster cast of the dragon head up for auction, and it went for \$500.

So most of Sunday was a bust for me, which is a shame because it was a nice little convention. The hotel was great. When I ran out of batteries for my camera, the concierge not only told me where I could find a Radio Shack, but drove me over there himself. There were plenty of good places to eat nearby, including a nice Mexican restaurant just next door. Access from the airport was easy - a \$2 local bus ride dumped you outside the hotel. And the people were really great too.

My conclusion was that Foolscape is a convention that desperately needs to be bigger. With more people it would be less dependent on food events and the auction, and you could have some decent programming on Sunday morning. Plus you could support 4 tracks of programming, which I not sure 100 people really could. Next year the GoH will be George R.R. Martin, so it should be well worth going to. If nothing else, look upon it as a post-Worldcon relaxacon. And don't forget to take a silly hat.

Economic Warfare

Charlie Stross is the Next Big Thing in science fiction. It is official. Or at least so it says on the cover of his debut novel, *Singularity Sky*. The back cover blurb has comments from Gardner Dozois, Michael Swanwick and James Patrick Kelly all explaining how important and cutting edge Stross is. Elsewhere Stross grumbles that people have been talking about how he and Cory Doctorow are the vanguard of a new literary movement. Well, they are

both young men with an above average understanding of politics and computers, and a sense of humor. That's enough to get some publishers asking for "more like this". Hype is a dreadful thing to have to live up to. Thankfully Stross does very well.

The interstellar empire known as the New Republic is, of course, anything but republican. It has rather more to do with being Republican, but mostly it is based on Tsarist Russia. The defining fact of its existence is a rigid control over technology and education, thereby ensuring that the peasantry has neither the knowledge nor the ability to challenge the status quo. It is, more or less, an amalgam satire on all Stupid White Men patriarchies, and its upper classes have speech patterns that at times are reminiscent of the Huntin', Shooting' and Fishin' wing of the Conservative party and at times of Texans. As long as those in control can keep control, all is well and nothing changes.

In the sky above the distant colonial backwater of Rochard's World, something new and dangerous is about to arrive. It calls itself The Festival, and it is a collection of AIs and uploaded minds possessed of fearsome weapons. Some of them are only mildly dangerous, such as the gray goo nanomachines that ate their way through the local defense force. Others are rather more worrying. Nanotech manufacturing plants, commonly known as cornucopia machines, have been illegal in the New Republic for centuries. But the really scary thing that the Festival has is small, handheld and covered in buttons. It is called a telephone. The cunning invaders dropped millions of them on Rochard's World, and then called up the inhabitants with a

devastating offer, "we are prepared to give you anything you want in return for new and interesting stories."

It wasn't intentional malice; they'd simply matured in an environment where information didn't go away unless someone wanted it to, where death and destruction were reversible, where magic wands worked and hallucinations were dangerous. The real universe played by different rules, rules that their horrified ancestors had fled as soon as the process of migrating minds into a distributed computing networks had been developed.

The Festival's attack does not go unnoticed on the New Republic's home-world. Soon a mighty battle fleet is dispatched to deal with the invaders. On board are two people from Earth. Martin Springfield is a contract engineer employed to perform some engine upgrades on the fleet's flagship, *Lord Vanek*. The other Earthling is a UN diplomat forced upon the fleet by political necessity. This Colonel Mansour is almost certainly a spy, probably an atheist and undoubtedly in possession of forbidden technology. Far worse than that, however, Mansour is a type of dangerous alien being that all red-blooded New Republican naval officers know should never be allowed on a warship. Colonel Mansour is a woman.

As I mentioned earlier, Stross has a sense of humor. *Singularity Sky* is not a comic novel as such, but it is full of pointed satire and the occasional respectful nod in the general direction of Terry Pratchett and Monty Python. Rachel Mansour's self-propelled luggage plays an important part in the plot. Of course the New Republic is all too easily satirized, but Stross makes some interesting political points along the

way, and the communist revolutionaries on Rochard's World are no more immune from his barbs than the establishment that they oppose.

Along the way there is much discussion of cosmology and fleet tactics. Stross knows enough about relativity and quantum physics to worry about things like time travel and causality violation. His universe is one in which forces exist that prevent such potentially universe-destroying events as a time travelers changing history, or the Cubs or Red Sox winning the World Series. I'm not entirely convinced about his method of ensuring this, but it makes for interesting reading.

Stross's take on space fleet tactics is fascinating. David Weber fans will probably suspect that the type of fiction they love is being mercilessly spoofed, and they are probably right. But at the same time Stross's view of interstellar battle as analogous to submarine warfare is eerily effective.

I have some reservations about this book. Martin Springfield, the engineer as hero, is uncomfortably reminiscent of the "Fans are Slans" philosophy. The idea that people with a wealth of scientific knowledge are naturally superior to all other forms of life, that they can outwit any politician or lawyer, and that pretty girls will notice this, is sadly misguided. But the book is great fun and very thought provoking. I don't think that Stross is going to take the SF world by storm, but he is certainly worth watching, and reading.

Singularity Sky - Charles Stross - Ace - hardcover

Coventry Sendings

I'm a little late getting to this one. *Locus* listed *The Facts of Life* by Graham Joyce as one of their top books of 2002, but although the review copies may have been out in good time it was hard to find a copy in the shops before 2003. This rather scuppered the book's Hugo chances, but it hasn't stopped it turning up in the Best Novel shortlists for both the British Fantasy Awards and the World Fantasy Awards; and quite right too.

Probably the best way to describe this book is as a ghost story, although it contains little actual haunting. Martha Vine is one of those old British women who can "see" things. There are knocks on the door. When she answers them, strange, wizened people or visitors from beyond the grave leave messages for her. Much to her relief, none of her first six daughters inherited her talent, for all that the twins, Ina and Evelyn, play at spiritualism. But then there was Cassie.

Cassie, poor dear, is touched by the fairies. Not only can she see the dead like her mother, but she is prone to fits of absent-mindedness. She seems to have little understanding of the world, but rather drifts through it. For a time, this was useful, if scary. Cassie knew when air raids were coming. But she also had no inhibitions, either with respect to bombs, from which she appeared to have a protective charm, or American servicemen, from which no charm on Earth could save her.

She retreated to the white stone steps under the portico of the National Provincial Bank and looked at Broadgate aflame. The drone of the bombers, the snigger and the howl of the bombs, the leather wings, the roar and crackle

of the flames was not going to go away. The planes in the night sky became demons, exulting, stretching their wings in effortless displays of aerial prowess, gloating, making merry. They fanned winds with their wings to make the flames dance higher. Was this hell, then? Cassie thought.

And so, at the end of the War, the family was reunited, and there was Frank. Cassie was, of course, entirely unsuited to motherhood. But Frank had six aunts with various degrees of willingness to help, and varying degrees of suitability. Aida's husband was an undertaker and consequently quite creepy. Olive already had three kids of her own, and her William had not been quite right since the War. The twins, of course, had their spiritualism, and as for Beatie, why she had got all sorts of foolish notions about education, had gone off to Oxford, and was consorting with Communists. Only Una and Tom's farm seemed a safe haven. But of course they could not be expected to have the boy forever, and Martha had no idea that the farm would be where young Frank's inherited talent would manifest itself most powerfully.

Cassie wandered down Cross Cheaping, alongside the remains of a department store and saw a tailor's dummy hanging from a window. Amid a pile of rubble an ironwork lamp stand boasted an untouched sign reading 'Buses for Kersley Stop Here'. Beneath it was the twisted, melted skeletal frame of a double-decker.

I have made an effort in the above to paint *The Facts of Life* as a fantasy/horror novel, but there are times when reading it that you wonder quite why Joyce put the

supernatural elements in. It works very well as a mainstream story about a complex and beautifully observed extended family in post-WWII Britain. Joyce is a superb writer, and I'm sure he could have got away with it. But I am also sure that without the fantasy themes the book would have been much less powerful and much less moving. As a consequence we have a very fine book that stands up well in both the fantasy and mainstream markets, which is a considerable achievement. I can quite see why the *Locus* reviewers thought so highly of it. I do too. It is, if nothing else, remarkable that a book that is so thoroughly British in nature would appeal so much to a bunch of Americans. I am, of course, still backing China Miéville's *The Scar* for both fantasy awards, but having read *The Facts of Life* I have come to the conclusion that China has some pretty stiff competition.

The Facts of Life - Graham Joyce - Gollancz - hardcover

Picture Perfect

There are a lot of bad book reviewers around, without even considering the so-called "customer reviews" on Amazon, but I only get really mad about incompetent reviews when I see them in supposedly quality literary magazines. One such review dealt with a Patricia McKillip novel, I think it was *Winter Rose*. The reviewer concluded that McKillip was an inept fantasy writer because she didn't do any of the complex world building that you find in proper fantasy books. Aargh! Thunder rolled. The sky went indigo and black as plumes of noxious smoke coiled

from my ears and nostrils. My eyes burned like rubies. There was a stench of sulfur. If the unfortunate reviewer had been within spell range she would undoubtedly have dropped dead on the spot. Instead she probably suffered from dreadful migraines for weeks afterwards.

Let's get this straight, people. Patricia McKillip is one of the finest fantasy writers operating in the field today. She's a past winner of a World Fantasy Award, and her 2002 novel, *Ombria in Shadow*, is on the Best Novel shortlist for this year's awards. This is entirely justified, because there is a lot more to fantasy than most of what is published in the genre would have you believe.

Patricia McKillip novels are easy to spot. They are small (both in page count and page size) and self-contained. They have exquisite and fantastically detailed covers. Ace seems to have settled on a particular branding for McKillip that makes her books look like a complex miniature by some famous Renaissance artist, and it is entirely appropriate. You won't find anything flabby here; there are no chicks in chain mail; no dragons or elves; no pointless meandering through The Map in search of plot tokens. What you get instead is something strongly reminiscent of a fairy tale, but somehow new and fresh at the same time.

In the city of Ombria, Prince Royce Greve lies dying. His heir, Kyle, is still a boy, and the only other likely claimant for the throne, Kyle's bastard cousin, Ducon, seems to be trying hard to stay out of court politics. He affects the role of a drunken wastrel interested only in painting. Most courtiers expect Domina Pearl to appoint herself regent, which is terrifying because she has been old longer

than anyone can remember and shows no sign of senility. No one expects Kyle or Ducon to live long. As for Lydea, the old Prince's commoner mistress, she's as good as dead already. The Black Pearl has reportedly had her thrown onto the streets where she will probably be murdered for her posh clothes and jewelry before the night is out.

Yet there is more to Ombria than meets the eye. It has a shadow, which Ducon sees and tries to capture in his painting. And it has a past that you can visit, deep below the city where the sorceress Faey dwells. All of this is known to Mag, Faey's servant, but having recently discovered that she is human, and not made from wax as Faey had claimed, Mag takes an interest in goings on above ground as well. In befriending the outcast Lydea, Mag soon discovers that Domina Pearl has plans that extend far beyond mere political power and threaten the very being of the city itself.

There is your miniature: a simple, fairy tale plot with a boy prince, a wicked witch, plotting courtiers, and a beautiful woman. There is magic beyond mortal ken, and bravery and love that seek to rise above what courtiers and wizards do. It all works well, in under 300 pages, without a single elf in sight, and without a wedding at the end.

If I have a reservation about this book it is because it is too steeped in fairy tale tradition. It accepts without thinking the idea that True Royalty is Good by definition, and that the land will sicken if the succession is disrupted. There are writers who have taken on fairy tales and have crafted them to their own ends. That is not what McKillip does. She doesn't stretch the genre in that way. Instead she

takes an existing tradition and sets her own exquisite stories within that framework. Nobody does that better.

Ombria in Shadow - Patricia McKillip - Ace - softcover

Dead Again

When last we saw Captain Laurent Zai and the crew of the frigate *Lynx*, they were about to be smashed to pulp by a giant Rix Battlecruiser. Scott Westerfeld's *The Risen Empire* was quite clearly half a book, and having finished the sequel, *The Killing of Worlds*, I have come to the conclusion that someone at Tor decided to publish it in two parts rather than risk testing the public with a 700-page blockbuster. The two books should be read as a single entity in sequence, and will provide much less frustration that way.

Of course the whole thing could have been shorter. Westerfeld spent much of the first volume describing the interesting political set-up of his world, which I found riveting. A good half of the second book is devoted to the space battle between the *Lynx* and its Rix opponent. I suppose that there are people who enjoy long, in-depth discussions about weapons technology and detailed explanations of how the engineering crew cannibalizes parts of the spacecraft during the battle to give them a tactical edge. I'm not one of those people. But I did want to find out what happened next, and that dragged me through to the second half.

Here I must make an apology to Westerfeld. In my review of *The Risen Empire* I suggested that you would not get much cutting-edge physics in these books,

but Westerfeld has clearly been reading Wil McCarthy and *The Killing of Worlds* is right out there on the edge of quantum dot application. The politics comes back in the end as well, with Westerfeld doing a nice job of describing the power balance between an elected government and an undead Emperor. Fans of Roman history will enjoy this.

In the end, of course, there is no end. These two books merely provide the first volume in a gigantic space opera that has only just begun to flex its muscles. Westerfeld clearly has a lot of interesting ideas, and with any luck future volumes will see him explore some of the other interstellar societies that, up until now, have remained offstage. I suspect we'll have to wade through a lot more of the military stuff in order to get there, but at the moment it is still worth it. Here's hoping it stays that way.

The Killing of Worlds - Scott Westerfeld - Tor - hardcover

The Age of Reason

One of the nice things about doing this 'zine is that people write to me and recommend interesting books and writers. A recommendation I've been getting lately is to check out John C. Wright. I guess I really should have spotted him myself, because he's another one of David Hartwell's hard SF stable at Tor, but at least I'm on the case now. Here's what it is all about.

Imagine, if you will, a far future world in which mankind has untold riches and is looked after by super-intelligent, benevolent AIs called sophotechs. Life is

lived mostly online in luxurious virtual habitats that can take almost any form the user wishes. And minds are downloadable into hardware, which provides immortality, and also allows for anyone's motives to be checked over. Crime is pretty much impossible, because the sophotechs know where you are and what you are doing at all times, and if anything does come to court they can replay your thought processes at the time of the alleged incident to see whether you were guilty or not. This is *The Golden Age*. But the trouble with living in paradise is that the better life is, the less risks anyone wants to take.

"I submit that we have reached a golden age, a time of perfection and utopia: to maintain it, to sustain it, no further changes can be allowed. Adventures, risks, rashness, must receive no further applause from any voice in our Oecumene. Only then will we be able to keep our wayward sons at home, safe from harm."

Thus speaks Helion before his colleagues in the Seven Peers, the group of aged plutocrats who are the effective rulers of the society of *The Golden Age*. It is a classic piece of Conservatism, and exactly what one might expect from such a group no matter what Age they are actually in. But what you can't tell from the above quote is that the matter of wayward sons is very important to Helion, because it is his own brilliant son, Phaethon, who is the most headstrong and wayward member of their society.

When the book opens Phaethon is just discovering that there is a hole in his memory. It would appear that he has done something truly terrible, and in order to

appease society, as embodied by the powerful College of Hortators, he has agreed to have decades, perhaps even centuries of his life removed from his memory banks. His family sophotech tells him that he had agreed to this drastic step because the alternative would have been complete expulsion from society, including a denial of all basic necessities such as food, water, air and computer time.

(By the way, some of you will have spotted some references to Greek mythology here. Yes, they are important. Indeed I suspect that they form a massive clue to the entire plot. Don't dig too deep.)

This is a book that I very much wanted to like. Firstly this is because it is very inventive. Wright has got a lot of great ideas that he is exploring, many of which have deep philosophical and political consequences. As you might have guessed from other reviews, particularly those of Brian Stableford's Third Millennium series, I enjoy this sort of thing. In addition the essential point he is trying to make – that risk and change have value – is one that I am very sympathetic to. Unfortunately, the book has problems.

To start with the book is classic SF in that it is full of expositions and meaningful dialogs. The science isn't at all difficult, but there are long explanations of the technology and the nature of the society that might have been better handled (or even skipped over). And there are times when the book seems more like one of Plato's dialogs than a novel. These things, however, are forgivable, at least within the genre. As SF readers we are used to that sort of thing. A much more serious problem, however, is that to write this sort of book the author needs to have some sort of political perspective. Wright has a

pair of lead-lined blinkers. His ideal society (as expressed by Helion's choice of virtual environment) is Victorian England. He believes in Adam Smith the way that others believe in the literal truth of the Bible. And he comes over as something of a Grumpy Old Man.

It is useful to compare Wright's work with that of Ken MacLeod, because they touch on similar themes. Both authors discuss societies in which freedom is supposedly paramount but the clash between freedom and the good of society is a major issue. MacLeod vacillates between Communism and Libertarianism, and examines several different models of society. He is occasionally dismissive, for example in his attitude to Luddite Environmentalists, but even so he presents an environmentalist society as an option in *The Sky Road*. Wright is much less catholic in his political tastes.

Compositions generally talked all the same way. Mass-minds were the last refuge, in modern times, of that type of person who would have, in earlier eras, turned to collectivist political or religious movements, and drowned out their individuality in mobs, in mindless conformity, in pious fads and pious frauds. Just the thought of it made Phaethon weary with disgust.

And, one suspects, the author as well. Later on in the book he informs us that almost the entire populations of Asia and South America have joined such composite minds, presumably on the grounds that Johnny Foreigner is too weak-minded to survive in a thrusting, manly, Capitalist society. (Africa, as far as I can make out, is never mentioned at all in the book.)

Wright also has little time for conservationism. I'm sure he would have no regrets at all about seeing the Alaskan National Wildlife Refuge, or the Amazon rainforest, converted into seething hotbeds of industrial activity. Who cares about caribou when you can recreate then virtually and exterminate them over and over again? Indeed, for Wright such issues are quite trivial compared to the scale of industrial development he prefers. Phaethon, and by the extension the author, seethes with anger that popular sentiment will not allow him to dismantle Saturn for raw materials just because people think that the silly rings are pretty.

Meanwhile, back with things thrusting and manly, there is a very clear gender divide in Wright's society. Although it is apparently possible for people to change gender with ease, almost everyone of power and position chooses to present as male. The only characters of influence who present as female have connections with bioscience or Things Emotional. It appears to be normal for men to make wives for themselves.

Indeed, one of the main villains of the book, though she is never openly presented as such, is Phaethon's wife, Daphne. She is the sort of person who prefers to spend all of her life immersed in the contemporary equivalent of formula fantasy and romance novels. She is terrified of leaving home, and when Phaethon finally does something dangerous she refuses to ever see him again. (I'm skirting a little around spoilers here.) In many ways it is Phaethon's red-blooded outrage at his wife's desertion rather than his business plans that gets him into such trouble with society. For all his talk about freedom and liberty, Wright apparently sees nothing wrong with Phaethon treating his wife as property.

Which brings us to the question of Phaethon as a hero. A strong will and boundless self-confidence are, of course, typical characteristics of most heroes. Phaethon, however, is a certifiable lunatic. He cares nothing for the rest of society as long as he is allowed to do exactly what he wants. While other characters make well-reasoned arguments for what he is doing, all that Phaethon is able to say is that he knows he is right and that his rightness justifies everything he does. I'm sure that the likes of Hitler and Stalin felt much the same way about themselves. But, in just the same way that MacLeod engineered a sneak attack by extremist Jovians in order to justify the genocide at the end of *The Cassini Division*, so Wright is creating an external threat that will provide an excuse for saying that Phaethon was indeed right and that the end justifies the means.

There is yet time for Wright to redeem himself. Once again we have been given only half a book. The rest of it, going under the title of *The Phoenix Exultant*, has already been published and I will track down a copy to see what twists we get in the tail. However, I am not hopeful. Wright's work is certainly fascinating reading, but you can't help but come away thinking that if he was less set in his ways his arguments might be more convincing. Reading Wright is a bit like going to a feminist meeting and having some nutcase stand up and say that the only solution to our problems is to wipe out all men immediately. All you can do is sigh and try to pretend that you are nothing to do with this person.

The Golden Age - John C. Wright - Tor - softcover

Mean Streets

I reviewed Richard Paul Russo's *Destroying Angel* in the Bay Area special edition of *Emerald City* that I published for ConJosé. You may recall that the book is the first in a series of three cyberpunk crime novels set in a grimy future San Francisco featuring the police detective, Frank Carlucci. The nice people at Ace have seen fit to issue a collected edition of all three novels. This is great news because the books had been out of print and they are well worth reading. In order to encourage you to check out the new edition, here is a look at the second book in the series, *Carlucci's Edge*. (The third novel, *Carlucci's Heart*, is also in the collection.)

Frank Carlucci was only a supporting character in *Destroying Angel*, the lead being taken by ex-cop Louis Tanner. But in *Carlucci's Edge* Frank takes center stage for a very good reason; the book is about police corruption, so Russo needed a hero who was still inside the force. At the beginning of the book, Carlucci is busy investigating the high profile murder of William Kashen, the nephew of the city's mayor. Then he is approached by Paula Asgard, the bass player for an all-girl thrash rock band. Her boyfriend, Chick Roberts, has been murdered in what looks like a drug deal gone bad. Surprisingly Paula can get no sense out of the officers investigating her case. Telling her that little can be done she might believe, but they seem to be actively discouraging any interest at all.

Carlucci talks to the officers involved and they admit that they have been ordered to bury the case. Carlucci smells a rat. How come the death of some dirt-poor druggie and musician is so important that city officials want it covered up? Roberts must

have known something. Finding out what it is might help Carlucci solve his other mystery, but it might also cause him and the other officers involved to lose their jobs. Given the professional and efficient way in which the mayor's nephew was killed, it might also cause them to lose their lives.

Various characters from *Destroying Angel* get cameo appearances, giving the series a sense of cohesion, and the street punk, Mixer, has a starring role. However, as with the earlier book, the biggest star of the story is Russo's far future version of San Francisco's Tenderloin district, the city within a city into which most policemen dare not go and even the street folk can only enter with the correct friends or password.

St. Lucy took his arm, guided him into a narrow alley that wasn't as crowded as the street. Half a dozen barrel fires were burning, several people clustered around each one. A dogboy crawled past them, barking, the metal tail wagging through his pants.

There are times when Russo's Tenderloin sounds like something Jeff Noon might have seen in a feather-induced dream. At others it is a very much a real place driven by the same poverty and racial violence that afflicts present day American cities. Police corruption is a very real issue as well, as anyone who lives in the Bay Area will be well aware. Russo doesn't pull any punches, nor does he have any pat answers. But he makes his points, makes them well, and provides an entertaining story in the popular hard-bitten-but-soft-hearted detective mode. The Carlucci books are classics of the genre. Snap up the collection now while it is available.

Carlucci – Richard Paul Russo – Ace – softcover

Do ya ken Ken?

At the Science Fiction Foundation conference in Liverpool last year people were suggesting that the works of Ken MacLeod might one day become as much studied in universities as those of Ursula LeGuin. That might seem a little strange for a bunch of stories about Communists in space, but you only have to start reading some academic analysis of MacLeod's work to realize just how much there is to talk about. The Foundation has now produced a collection of essays and articles called *The True Knowledge of Ken MacLeod* (this is a jokey reference to the supposed Communist utopia in *The Cassini Division* that required all citizens to believe in a doctrine called The True Knowledge). Some of the material in there was presented at the Liverpool conference and there is new stuff as well. It makes fascinating reading.

Some of the best material is that in which the nature of MacLeod's invented "utopias" is discussed. The *Fall Revolution* series examines four different societies: Norlonto in *The Star Fraction*, New Mars in *The Stone Canal*, The Solar Union in *The Cassini Division*, and an anarcho-environmentalist society in *The Sky Road*. Each succeeding book effectively criticizes what has gone before in different and interesting ways. Farah Mendlesohn and Joan Gordon do a fine job of elucidating MacLeod's arguments and along the way discussing the place of MacLeod's work in the wider context of utopian fiction.

Another fine piece of work is the paper by John H. Arnold and Andy Wood on the

relationship between MacLeod's work and Leftist thought. In a world in which Communism is supposed to be dead, it seems rather odd for MacLeod to be writing about how the future will be Communist, but Arnold and Wood do a good job of explaining why this might be so. Elsewhere James Brown provides a fascinating contrast between MacLeod's visions of the future and The Culture, the utopian society created by MacLeod's close friend, Iain Banks.

One of the problems of a book like this is that the academics in question have to understand a range of topics, from anarchist theory to the history of science fiction, and they have to be able to explain this to their readers. Mostly this works well. Even if we haven't read Marx, Trotsky or Bakunin most of us do at least have some idea of what they stood for, and most of us will know SF well. On the other hand, parts of James Brown's paper assume some knowledge of the literary theories of Darko Suvin, something that makes a lot of SF academics look queasy.

There are other subtleties as well. For example, when MacLeod talks about "Libertarianism" he appears to be generally referring to a strand of anarchist theory developed in the 19th Century. This doesn't necessarily have much to do with modern American Libertarianism, which rarely seems to rise beyond the childish dictum of, "I should be able to do whatever I want." With contributors from both sides of the Atlantic it is sometimes difficult to understand what an author means by "Libertarian", especially when one of them uses the label to describe Jerry Pournelle who, if his SF is anything to go by, is in favor of hereditary military aristocracies.

The weakest paper in the book is the one by Adam Frisch, which looks at MacLeod's more recent *Engines of Light* series. This is somewhat understandable because the series has only just finished and Frisch cannot have had much time to analyze it. Even so, someone should have told him that a starship called *Blasphemous Geometries* is a Lovecraftian joke, not some subtle ploy of MacLeod's to disorient the reader. There are other areas in Frisch's paper where he seems to read far more into the text than is there due to unfamiliarity with SF and/or relativity theory.

Overall, however, the book is very readable and informative. Those of you nervous about tackling an academic text should be reassured that most of the papers are understandable to the layperson and that the heavy stuff is interlaced with book reviews and interviews with MacLeod. Best of all, there are two articles by MacLeod himself. The first is a re-examination of Iain Banks's novel, *Consider Phlebas*, and the second is an essay on the relationship between science fiction and Socialism. If you have any sort of interest in political theory and its application to science fiction writing you are going to enjoy this book, and probably along the way come out of it feeling more hopeful about the future.

"Nothing is written. The future is ours to shape."

Myra Godwin

The True Knowledge of Ken MacLeod - Andrew Butler & Farah Mendlesohn (eds) - SF Foundation - hardcover

Perfumed Delights

Rikki Ducornet is not a name you will find on spines of novels in the SF&F shelves of a bookstore. Nevertheless, she has made a number of contributions to anthologies edited by Jeff Vandermeer so she clearly has an interest in fantastical fiction. I decided to try her latest novel to see just how close she was to genre fiction.

Elizabeth, the heroine of *Gazelle*, is the thirteen-year-old daughter of an American professor who, for complex reasons, has got a job at a university in Egypt. The date is somewhere in the 1950's. Elizabeth's mother, who is much devoted to beauty and pleasure, has been quietly going crazy in the small American college town where they used to live. Cairo, to her, is a sudden breath of freedom, a place full of enticing, handsome men ready and eager to be seduced by her exotic blonde charms. Before long she has left home and is busy working her way through all of the eligible upper class men in Cairo (as well as many of the non-eligible ones and the cutest of the lower classes).

Father, unable to cope with the shame and loss, retreats into an obsession with wargames, which he plays with his friend, the perfumer, Ramases Ragab. For Elizabeth this is a far from ideal environment in which to grow up. While she despises her mother's behavior, she is at the same time a young girl just discovering her own sexuality. She finds books like the *Arabian Nights* readily available and arousing. And her father's only friend is a man whose very profession is devoted to the creation of sensual pleasure.

The book is beautifully written with some very nicely drawn characters. At times it reminded me of John Fowles' *The Magus*

in that it expertly describes foolish Westerners being seduced by the myths of older societies. The section where Elizabeth's father hires an Egyptian magician to try to bring his wife back is particularly nicely done. But in the end I concluded that this book suffers from the classic mainstream failing of being art for art's sake. The plot is minimal, and the book has almost nothing to say. At one point Ducornet does attempt to contrast the freedom of the Westerners with the arranged marriages suffered by Egyptian girls, but this is done in such an off-hand and desultory fashion that it is hard to know whether Ducornet really cares. This book is a very small snapshot of the lives of some very sad people. If you are interested in the artistry of such snapshots you will enjoy it, otherwise I'm afraid you'll find it very unsatisfying.

Gazelle - Rikki Ducornet - Knopf - hardcover

Short Stuff

A Rum Do, Holmes!

Ask someone to name their favorite writer of short stories in crime fiction and they will almost certainly name Arthur Conan Doyle. Do the same thing with horror fiction and the answer will be H.P. Lovecraft. So here's an anthology idea for you: "I say Holmes, the damned thing has tentacles..." Ladies and gentlemen, I present *Shadows over Baker Street*.

Of course just because something sounds like a really good idea, it doesn't mean that it is going to work. It certainly gets off to a good start with Neil Gaiman rushing off at a tangent and giving us an entirely new view of Queen Victoria. The best

things about "A Study in Emerald", however, are the section headings that take the form of mock advertisements from Victorian newspapers. Mr. V Tepes, Professional Exsanguinator, with offices in Romania, Paris, London and Whitby, sounds like just the sort of guy to cure your arthritis. And there is plenty more like that. Gaiman clearly had a lot of fun with this story.

Many of the other stories, however, which include contributions from the likes of Brian Stableford and Poppy Z. Brite, are curiously ineffective. Eventually I decided that what was going on here was that the authors were trying to meld the styles of Conan Doyle and Lovecraft and coming unstuck. They would use the Cthulhu mythos for the basic plot, but take the prose style from Holmes. And somehow without Lovecraft's weirdly inept prose it just doesn't work.

Barbara Hambly manages one of the best attempts by adding a certain amount of twist in the tail. It is, after all, hard to write a Lovecraft story without the reader knowing exactly what was going to happen. Dick Lupoff also gets close to the right feel. But the best of the stories I read is the one by Tim Lebbon, a professional horror writer. I don't recognize the creature that Lebbon uses from the Cthulhu mythos, though there is no doubt that it is the sort of thing that Lovecraft could have dreamed up. Lebbon seems to have just thrown his hands up and written his own horror story with Holmes in it, and that works better than any attempt at aping other people's styles.

I haven't had time to read every story, so there may be some more good stuff in there, but thus far my judgment is that this one is only for the Holmes or Lovecraft completist. Shame.

Shadows over Baker Street - Michael Reaves & John Pelan (eds.) - DelRey - hardcover

A Giant Anthology

Jeff Vandermeer's Ministry of Whimsy press has been in the forefront of pumping out anthologies full of weird stuff. The series is called *Leviathan*, and the third book of that name certainly lives up to the title, being over 450 pages long and including some 27 stories. There is plenty of reading material there.

Of course with any anthology you are going to find stuff that you like and stuff that you don't. There are some big names, and there are some new ones, and thankfully both groups come up trumps.

One thing I shall definitely take away from this book is the sure knowledge that Stepan Chapman has an utterly perverse and distorted imagination and that I need to seek out more of his writing immediately. What possessed him to create a cloud world full of weird imaginary beings and then give it such a deeply disturbing ending I do not know. But I do know that whatever secret is required to do this offbeat stuff, Mr. Chapman has it.

The counterattack was organized by Queen Ellen the Whicker-work Giraffe and her blood brother, the Great Stone Wheelbarrow - mighty sorcerers both. Queen Ellen loosed her venom goats against the glacier. The Great Stone Wheelbarrow assailed it with iodine kites and friendly shark robots. The Bronze Man and his crew of stained botflies flew their pirate blimp into the thick of the battle and fired off cannonades of melon rockets at the ice wall. Two rival gangs called the Chromium Drain Bandits and the Hungry Jars joined

forces that day. They fought the glacier with snow chains and cheese scorpions.

“State Secrets of Aphasia”
Stepan Chapman

Cheese scorpions??? You see what I mean?

Meanwhile there are a couple of pieces by Michael Moorcock. One of them is a Jerry Cornelius story and is therefore amusing and incomprehensible in equal doses. There are three translated pieces. One by Russian author Eugene Dubnov gives a very bizarre take on life in the USSR. The other two are by well-known French writers from the 19th Century Decadent Movement, both translated by Brian Stableford who is an expert on that literary tradition. Stableford also provides his own story, which is another triumph of the imagination. Who would have thought that you could construct a story about a plastic surgeon that somehow involves the devil, the Vatican and mediaeval conspiracies?

If the devil existed, then God presumably existed as well, and that possibility was too horrible to contemplate.

“The Face of an Angel”
Brian Stableford

The whole book is hung together by a linked series of stories about libraries, all by the very excellent Zoran Zivkovic. Obviously in such a big anthology there will be a few duff entries, but this one has plenty of good stuff. I’m not surprised that this one has got a World Fantasy Award nomination for Best Anthology. Zivkovic’s library epic (which altogether forms a novella) and Jeffrey Ford’s superb short story take on subliminal advertising, “The

Weight of Words”, are also deserving award nominees.

Leviathan #3 - Forrest Aguirre & Jeff Vandermeer (eds.) - Ministry of Whimsy Press - softcover

And a Little One

With *Leviathan #3* Vandermeer has handed over a successful project to co-editor Forrest Aguirre, but he can’t seem to shake the anthology bug. Presumably finding something as big as *Leviathan* too much of a distraction from his own work, Vandermeer has settled for something much smaller. *Album Zutique #1*, his latest project, has small pages and less than 200 of them. And it has only 15 stories. The name is another reference to the French Decadent Movement, whose members were known as Zutistes. The “Album Zutique” was a blank book that would be taken to café meetings for members to write stories in.

(I don’t know, it all sounds a bit like *Le Weird Ancien* to me, Jeff.)

This one, I’m sorry to say, was a bit of a disappointment. It has another wonderful piece of strangeness by Stepan Chapman who is busy populating a zoo with bizarre creatures named after famous authors - quite what poor Samuel Beckett (“the Irish Slime”) has done to upset Mr. Chapman is beyond me. There is also an extract from Elizabeth Hand’s forthcoming novel, *Mortal Love*, which I will certainly be reviewing as soon as it is due for publication. Most of the rest of the stories, even those by people whose work I normally like, were disappointing, except, and this saves the whole book, for “The Catgirl Manifesto: An Introduction”, by Christina Flook.

So here is a weird idea for a story. In 1997 some unknown person publishes "The Catgirl Manifesto", an underground document about how a supernova caused a race of mutant human females of unusual prettiness and sexual appetites to be born. The document is railed against by right wing politicians and moralists, and is seized on with glee by counter-cultural movements. In no time young women all over the world are seeking to ape the behavior of these supposed mutants. And lo, by the magic of the media, an imaginary conspiracy turns into a real one and we return to the days of witch hunts. It is beautifully done, especially the documentary tone of the prose and the linking back to mediaeval millenarian cults. I loved it.

Album Zutique #1 - Jeff Vandermeer (ed.) - Ministry of Whimsy Press - softcover

Miscellany

British Fantasy Award Nominees

These awards will be presented at FantasyCon at the end of November.

Best Novel (the August Derleth Fantasy Award): *The Darkest Part of the Woods*, Ramsey Campbell, PS Publishing; *White Apples*, Jonathan Carroll, Tor; *The Devil in Green*, Mark Chadbourn, Gollancz; *The Facts of Life*, Graham Joyce, Gollancz; *The Scar*, China Miéville, Macmillan.

Best Short Fiction: *The Fairy-Feller's Master Stroke*, Mark Chadbourn, PS Publishing; *Cape Wrath*, Paul Finch, Telos Publishing; "Open the Box", Andrew Humphrey, *The Third Alternative* #29; *The Tain*, China Miéville, PS Publishing; *Firing*

the Cathedral, Michael Moorcock, PS Publishing.

Best Anthology: *The Year's Best Fantasy & Horror: Fifteenth Annual Collection*, Ellen Datlow & Terri Windling, eds, St Martin's; *Keep Out the Night*, Stephen Jones, ed., PS Publishing; *The Mammoth Book of Best New Horror: Volume Thirteen*, Stephen Jones, ed., Robinson; *Dark Terrors 6*, Stephen Jones & David Sutton, eds, Gollancz; *Art of Imagination: 20th Century Visions of Science Fiction*, Frank M. Robinson, Robert Weinberg & Randy Broecker, eds, Collectors Press; *Fantasy: The Best of 2001*, Robert Silverberg & Karen Haber, eds, ebooks.

Best Collection: *Ramsey Campbell, Probably: On Horror and Sundry Fantasies*, PS Publishing; *The Virtual Menagerie*, Andrew Hook, Elastic Press; *Everything's Eventual*, Stephen King, Hodder & Stoughton; *Tales from Earthsea*, Ursula Le Guin, Gollancz; *The Emperor of Dreams: The Lost Worlds of Clark Ashton Smith*, Gollancz.

Best Artist: Lara Bandilla; Randy Broecker; Bob Covington; Les Edwards/Edward Miller; Dominic Harman; Chris Moore; J.K. Potter.

Best Small Press: *The Alien Online*, Ariel (ed); PS Publishing, Peter Crowther; *Roadworks*, Trevor Denyer (ed); Telos Publishing, David J. Howe; *The Third Alternative*, Andy Cox.

The Karl Edward Wagner Award (Special Award) will be awarded by the BFS Committee and announced at the awards ceremony.

Sunburst Award Announced

This year's Sunburst Award has been won by Nalo Hopkinson for her short story collection, *Skin Folk*. The Sunburst is a judged award for works by Canadian writers.

Torcon Corrections

It is, I suspect, impossible to write something as long and detailed as last issue's Torcon 3 report without one of two inaccuracies creeping in. Annoyingly, just a day or two after I had gone to press, Torcon came out with new membership figures which are much higher than those given out in the convention newsletter. The new figures are: 5065 Total members, 4760 Warm bodies on site.

Quite why these numbers are so much higher than the earlier ones is not clear. I suspect a lack of communication between registration staff (who will understand how the figures are derived and classified) and newsletter staff (who may not). Anyway, much higher figures has to be good news for Torcon's finances, which is a big relief all round.

The other correction I need to make is that the Torcon ribbons were sourced from a company in Rhode Island rather than one in Texas. Apparently the badges came from Texas, which probably explains how my informant got things muddled up. In any case the exact location makes very little difference to the story. Torcon claims that it is all the fault of UPS.

Liz Williams Interview

Those of you who have read and enjoyed Liz Williams's work, or have just been

intrigued by my reviews of her work, might like to know that an interview I did with Liz has recently been published on *Strange Horizons*. You can find it at: <http://www.strangehorizons.com/2003/20031020/williams.shtml>.

Frank Wu Competition

So far only one person has tried to identify all of the vehicles that Frank Wu put into his *Emerald City* artwork. I'm going to hold the competition open for another month just in case, but David Levine is getting a prize anyway for being so quick off the mark (not to mention getting most of them right).

International Awards

The *Locus* web site has been busy collecting news of SF&F awards from around the world. Recent reports have come in from France, Germany and Israel.

The French Grand Prix de l'Imaginaire went to the intriguingly named *Dreamerica* by Fabrice Colin while the prize for translated novels went to *Celtika* by Rob Holdstock. (Colin also won the Best Young Adult Novel prize, so he's presumably an author to watch.)

In Germany the Deutscher Phantastik Preis for Best Novel went to *Die Macht des Elfenfeuers* by Monika Felten while the translation prize went to *Black House* by Stephen King and Peter Straub. The awards were voted online by over 3,300 fans and included the expected media awards for *Lord of the Rings* and *Buffy*, plus a sadly amusing Best Flop award for George Lucas and *Star Wars: Episode II*.

Finally the Israeli Geffen Awards went to *Solaris* by Stanislaw Lem for Best SF Novel

and *American Gods* by Neil Gaiman for Best Fantasy Novel. Vered Tuchterman won the Best Israeli Novel prize for *Sometimes It's Different*.

Full details of these awards, including all of the other categories, can be found via www.locusmag.com.

Anyone out there care to offer reviews of the national language winners?

Meanwhile, in India

Yes folks, science fiction is alive and well all over the globe. I'm currently working on an article for *Locus* on the Indian National Science Fiction Conference. This is largely an academic event but was also attended by authors, critics, fans and even the IT editor of *The Hindu*, a national newspaper. The conference theme was women in SF, which was in part a tribute to Indian astronaut Kalpana Chawla who died in the Columbia disaster. Papers at the conference covered a wide range of writers from Asimov and Clarke through to, in view of the theme, Joanna Russ and Margaret Atwood.

Sadly most Indian SF being published today is not in English. There are 20 local languages in different parts of India, and most new fiction is published only in the local language.

Anyway, it is always good to hear about SF conventions happening in different places around the globe. All these interesting places I could visit...

Readership Statistics

I have been spending some time recently going through the *Emerald City* web site logs. There is quite a lot of interesting

information in there, but the one report I always love reading is the one detailing where in the world our readers come from. I've discovered that there are countries I never new existed before.

Most readers, of course, come from the US, though the figures are distorted by the fact that so many people outside the US are using an address with no country identifier. The second largest group is, unsurprisingly, from the UK, with Australia and Canada trailing behind. It occurred to me that this neatly maps onto the location of Worldcons. Next most frequent is a small group comprising the Netherlands, France and Germany, with Japan close behind. The Netherlands has had one Worldcon, so has Germany, and Japan is bidding for theirs. So judging by *Emerald City* readers we should be expecting something from France very soon.

Footnote

Lots of conventions next month. Novacon, the UK CostumeCon (which this year goes under the name of Wardrobe) and the British Fantasy Society's annual convention, FantasyCon. Plus, with any luck, we'll have those missing books from Al Reynolds and Mary Gentle, and perhaps a Nalo Hopkinson. Amazon UK is now listing late November for both the Reynolds and Gentle. Here's hoping they don't get delayed further as I'm off back to the US in early December. Hello, anyone out there at Gollancz that can help?

There will also be the results of the World Fantasy Awards (though sadly no con

report as I'm in the wrong country and can't afford to go). And I'm sure that there will be other stuff too. Hmm, #99 approaches...

Ciao,

Love 'n' hugs,

Cheryl