

# EMERALD CITY #101

Issue 101

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## Introduction

So, issue #100 is over and done, and it is back to normal, more or less. There are, however, a few things I should say straight away. Firstly, to those of you who joined the *Emerald City* mailing lists as of last issue, please note that you won't get a stellar list of guest contributors each issue. I'd love to have them, but those people who contributed articles last time have better things to do with their lives than write for me each month. This time we are back to just me. I hope it isn't too disappointing.

The other thing I must do is give a huge "thank you!" to all of the people who signed the guest book, who wrote me kind emails, and who said kind things about me on their web sites. You don't get a lot of feedback in this business, so what you do get is all the more welcome.

I did, however, notice a strange phenomenon with #100. More people wrote me private emails of congratulation than were prepared to sign the guest book. And more people wrote kind things about *Emerald City* on their web sites without telling me that they had done so than said those things directly to me (I find out about such things by looking at the referrals data in my web logs). I found this a little odd. Maybe this is another

symptom of the "Bowling Alone" phenomenon, with people somehow trying to Balkanize themselves within their own little corner of the Internet. Weird.

Still, having as a result of all this got to read a number of other people's web logs, I decided that it was about time I had my own. It seemed to make a good New Year's resolution. There are various reasons for this. Perhaps the most telling is that it encourages me to actually get on and write something every day. This is kind of important when you are self-employed. It is all too easy to fall into lethargy. Also it gives me the opportunity to write about things that I would not normally want to put into *Emerald City*. There will, of course, be some overlap. Much of what you find in the Miscellany section here is news, and that news will get posted to the web log when I get it as well as being stored up for the next issue of the 'zine. I may also mention books that I am reading if the mood takes me, although the reviews will only ever be posted here.

There is, of course, a plague of web logs and live journals on the Internet these days. I suspect that most of them are not very interesting, and I have an awful feeling that mine will be one of those. But, as I said, it is a useful discipline, so I'm going to keep it up for a while. It not

being specifically SF-related, I have hosted it on my personal web site rather than on *Emerald City*. You can find it at: <http://www.cheryl-morgan.com/blog/blogger.html>. There is also a direct link from the "Hot Sites" section of the *Emerald City* pages.

Finally one small but important announcement. I think I may have lost some email during the swap-over of ISPs when I got back to the UK. If you sent email to my *Emerald City* address, or put your name on one of the subscriptions lists, around January 13/14 and you haven't had a reply please re-send the message.

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## In This Issue

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## Best of 2003

Last year I sort of fell accidentally into producing a "year's best" list in response to an editorial by David Hartwell in the *New York Review of Science Fiction*. This year I thought I should do the job properly. As *Emerald City* is primarily a novel-review magazine I'm going to start off with top ten lists of SF and fantasy novels. I'll follow this up with some discussion of other things that might be Hugo-worthy.

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## Top Ten SF

This was hard. Very hard. In no particular order, except that the three that made my Hugo list are given first, we have:

*Natural History* by Justina Robson - a fabulously imagined post-human future in

which machines are people. Great cover too.

*Maul* by Tricia Sullivan – sex, guns and shopping. The most innovative thing done in feminist SF for a long time. And another great cover.

*Quicksilver* by Neal Stephenson – yes, it irritated Clute to distraction, and I can see why, but it had me laughing out loud much of the time and some of Stephenson's writing is just gorgeous.

*Ilium* by Dan Simmons – sadly only half a book but still a monumental conception that seems to be as much about literature as anything else. Fabulous comedy droids. Can't wait for part 2.

*The Poison Master* by Liz Williams – one of the most original ideas of the year, Liz invents alchemical-punk. John Dee talks to angels and discovers that they are aliens offering the gift of space travel. Parts of the universe work on cabalistic principles. Wonderful.

*Pattern Recognition* by William Gibson – a strange and beautiful book that confirms Gibson has his finger on the pulse of popular culture. It didn't make my Hugo list only because all the time I was reading it I kept thinking, "wow, that bit was really great," and then going back and being unable to understand why.

*Blind Lake* by Robert Charles Wilson – a writer with outlandish ideas who keeps getting better and better. Not on my Hugo list because there is so much other good stuff, but I'd be prepared to bet it makes the final ballot.

*The Ethos Effect* by L.E. Modesitt – rather too much of SF is based on ill-thought-out and rather childish political attitudes. Modesitt asks very difficult questions and makes it even harder for the reader to

answer them. A refreshing breath of sanity in a sea of simplistic solutions.

*Absolution Gap* by Al Reynolds – The vast scope of the Reynolds imagination continues to dazzle me. How can I not enjoy a book with vast mobile cathedrals? And I love the pig.

*Mockymen* by Ian Watson – It takes both imagination and bravery to write a book in which the reader starts to understand the motivations of a Nazi collaborator.

There was lots of other great stuff as well. I'm astounded that I ended up dropping Jon Courtenay Grimwood's *Felaheen*, and that was probably only because *Effendi* was such a hard act to follow. Karin Lowachee's *Burndive*, L.E. Modesitt's *Archform: Beauty* and Chris Moriarty's *Spin State* also got serious consideration.

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## Top Ten Fantasy

This one was rather easier. Perhaps I haven't been reading as much fantasy as I should, but then again a lot of it is really bad right now.

Again there is no particular order except that my two Hugo nominees are listed first.

*1610: A Sundial in a Grave* by Mary Gentle – still my book of the year. Hugely entertaining, interesting gender role stuff, and great history. I'll never be able to think about King James I again without giggling.

*The War of the Flowers* by Tad Williams – Williams proves that he can get a story done in one book, albeit a fat one. And he shows that out and out fantasy – fairies, would you believe – can be put to use to tell a very serious political story.

*The Etched City* by K.J. Bishop — one of the best debut novels I have seen. And she's from Melbourne too. Bishop has a very bright future ahead of her.

*Veniss Underground* by Jeff Vandermeer — seriously weird, with some of the best imagery I have seen in a long time. What does go on inside Vandermeer's mind? I suspect we are better off not knowing, or the squid would have to kill us.

*The Salt Roads* by Nalo Hopkinson — something of a departure for Hopkinson, being more magic realism than fantasy, but still beautifully written and full of fascinating history.

*Finding Helen* by Colin Greenland — yes, I am one of those sad people who still enjoys the music that they listened too back in the 60's and 70's. Greenland's bittersweet tale of obsession just struck a chord with me, if you'll pardon the pun.

*Fudoki* by Kij Johnson — I'm not a great one for talking cat stories (except if they are by M. John Harrison) or for Japanese culture, but this tale of a sad old princess regretting the lack of freedom in her life was so beautifully done that I had to include it.

*The Light Ages* by Ian R. MacLeod — I might deplore MacLeod's politics, but there is no denying the beauty and skill with which this book tells its depressing, defeatist story.

*Midnight Lamp* by Gwyneth Jones — the *Bold as Love* series continues to entertain as Gwyneth turns an accurate and satirical eye on California.

*Mirror Mirror* by Gregory Maguire — a wonderfully inventive re-telling of a classic fairy tale. I'm going to be working my way through Maguire's previous novels as soon as I can.

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## Short Fiction

I really don't read enough short fiction to do a "best of" list, and I continue to be utterly underwhelmed by most of what I do read. Jeffrey Ford's "The Empire of Ice Cream" is something that everyone is talking about, and quite rightly so. I really enjoyed "The Catgirl Manifesto" from *Album Zutique #1*, written by a tongue-in-cheek, pseudonymous Richard Calder. I'm also very impressed with everything I see from Zoran Živković. A couple of the stories from *Firebirds* might make my Hugo ballot. But I read a whole collection by Ursula Le Guin (*Changing Planes*) and found only one story that I felt was Hugoworthy. That must say something about me and short fiction.

Annoyingly by far the best short fiction I have read this year was from 2002 or earlier. Liz Hand's collection, *Bibliomancy*, and Mark Chadbourn's *The Fairy Feller's Master Stoke* were both excellent.

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## Related Books

We have seen some really good critical work this year, including *The True Knowledge of Ken MacLeod* and *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*. I'm also a real sucker for John Clute reviews so having an entire collection of them in *Scores* was just luxury.

*The Thackery T. Lambshead Pocket Guide to Eccentric and Discredited Diseases* is not exactly non-fiction, but neither are its entries short stories. It is also one of the most beautifully designed books I have seen in a long time. It deserves a Hugo, and Best Related Book is the only category that fits.

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## Dramatic Presentations

Aw, forget it. I've seen two movies this year, and no TV SF at all. But I would love to see *Cowboy Bebop: The Movie* get a Hugo nomination.

There is, however, one item that I definitely want to get onto the Short Form ballot. Gollum's acceptance speech from the MTV awards is uproariously funny. It also beautifully highlights the magnificent job that Andy Serkis and WETA did in bringing Gollum to the screen.

I confess special interest here too. If, by some chance, you kind but foolish people manage to get me nominated again this year, and we get Gollum on the ballot, then I might get to meet Gollum at Noreascon 4. Wow! <swoon>

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## Editors

The usual suspects will doubtless dominate this category yet again, and I shall continue my campaign to give this Hugo to a book editor rather than a magazine editor just for once. David Hartwell is still my top pick because he unerringly signs up authors who give me a lot to think about (even John C. Wright causes me to devote masses of column inches to his work).

This year, however, I want to put in a good word for Juliet Ulman. She is a new editor at Bantam and this year she has purchased work from M. John Harrison, Jon Courtenay Grimwood and K.J. Bishop. These are all authors that most US editors think of as "too difficult" (and in the case of Grimwood also "too violent") for the tender American reader. Ms. Ulman has decided to try treating American SF fans

with the respect she thinks they deserve. I do hope she is proved right.

Also I'm putting in a nomination for Mary Anne Mohanraj for her final year as Editor-in-Chief at *Strange Horizons*. It is a wonderfully successful magazine and she deserves huge credit for having made it happen.

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## Artists

I'm not really competent to judge art, nor do I pay much attention to it. However, I do want to put in a good word for Steve Stone who has produced some wonderful covers for Macmillan in the UK (*Natural History* and *The Meq*, for example). And it is about time we gave a Hugo nomination to Kim Graham for her marvelous sculptures and the great entertainment she provides at conventions.

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## Semiprozines

I write for *Locus*. I'm biased.

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## Fannish Things

*Mimosa* is technically eligible for a Hugo again this year because it did have an issue out just before Torcon. When I talked with Richard Lynch in Toronto he reckoned that he'd be forgotten by now, but the voting in the fannish categories is so fossilized that I would not be surprised to see *Mimosa* get enough nominations to make the ballot in Glasgow even though it will be ineligible.

I can't remember when I last saw a *File 770*. Did one appear in 2003? Mike?

*Plokta*, of course, continues on its merry way and is long past due a Hugo. I'm also

very impressed with a new British 'zine: *Zoo Nation* by Pete Young.

Also in the fanzine category I want to put in a good word for *SFRevu*. Ernest Lilley has worked hard to turn his online zine into an all-round SF magazine. I modestly submit that *Emerald City* has better book reviews, but *SFRevu* has much broader coverage and a much wider appeal. Besides, it would be nice to see another electronic 'zine on the ballot.

The Fanglord will once again dominate the Fanwriter category for the very simple reason that he is way better than any of the rest of us poor scribblers. Sue Mason and Frank Wu are the hot favorites for Fan Artist. Both of them are good friends and both have contributed artwork to *Emerald City*. Can they both win?

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### The Campbell

Believe it or not, K.J. Bishop isn't eligible. She's been publishing short fiction for some time, but the Campbell has a minimum print run requirement and even a novel from Prime doesn't meet that limit. Next year, when the mass-market versions *The Etched City* are out, we can all vote for her.

Karin Lowachee and David Levine stand a good chance of repeating their nominations. I can include one Aussie with Jay Caselberg (even if he does live in the UK, the mad fool). But my pick of the year is Chris Moriarty. Read the review of *Spin State* in this issue and you will see why.

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## Honor and Duty

A new year has dawned, and what better way to celebrate it than with a new novel from Gene Wolfe? What is more, *The Knight* really is a new novel, not a further episode in a thirteen-part series stretching over two decades of publication. This one, we are promised, will have only two installments. More of that later, but first some background.

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Somewhere in the backwoods of America, two young brothers are camping in the wilderness. The elder, Ben, has a date with his girlfriend and has to go home. Left to his own devices, the younger boy takes a long hike, gets lost, and finds himself somewhere else entirely.

Wolfe, of course, has created worlds aplenty in his time. Urth and The Whorl are clear and vivid examples of subcreation. But the world of *The Knight* is a salutary lesson for would-be fantasy authors in the economy of its description. It is a complex place, composed of seven separate but inter-linked sub-worlds with time running differently in each (shades of Vernor Vinge's *A Fire Upon the Deep* Here). Wolfe never gives us more than infrequent hints and asides as his hero finds his way around his new environment, and yet we quickly feel at home there. There is no need for a couple of extra volumes to establish the background.

Our hero, then, wakes up in a place called Mythgarthr, the middle of the seven worlds. Below it is Aelfrice, which is fairyland, and Muspel, where the dragons dwell in fire. Above are Skai, the abode of the Valfather and the other gods, and Kleos, of which we as yet know little. The ultimate worlds on either end of the sequence are Niflheim and Elysion. The

latter, we discover, is inhabited only by God, and therefore we must presume that the former is the home of Satan.

Immediately we can see that Wolfe is playing a complex game here. Mythgarthr is presumably Midgard. Odin the Allfather lives in Skai with his brood of fractious gods. We meet with elves, frost giants and a character called Setr. It is all very Norse. And yet Odin is only a god, not God. Above his realm is Kleos, and all that the book tells us of it is that the beautiful winged man called Michael came from there. Wolfe, we recall from his sun book series, is a Catholic. This is not going to be a *Dungeons & Dragons* style Norse fantasy world. It is once again a book about God, and our relationship with him.

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*Then I thought about the highest world, Number One. It seemed to me that living way up there and looking down on the rest of us would make him proud. After a while I saw where that was wrong, and under my breath I said, "No, it wouldn't. It would make you kind instead, if there was any good in you at all." [...]*

*What I had thought was what if it was me and I was all alone up there, with just rabbits and squirrels? Or the only grownup, and the rest were little kids? Sure, I could strut around and show off for them, but would I want to? If one was bad, I could smack him and make him cry. But I was a knight. What kind of victory would that be for a knight?*

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Gene Wolfe books are generally, at root, about responsibility. Severian grows up to be the Autarch and the man destined to save his world by ushering in the New Sun. Silk is already a priest when we meet him, and slowly becomes a major civic

leader. Horn is just an ordinary guy, but his friendship with Silk causes his fellow citizens to place great responsibility on his shoulders. And now, in *The Knight*, a young boy finds out what it is really like to be a great warrior. Thanks to an encounter with the Queen of the Moss Aelfs he acquires a magnificent adult body and he soon becomes famous as a fighter, Sir Able of the High Heart. But he is still a small boy at heart, and as an outsider to the medieval world he has entered he is able to constantly question its social structures and mores.

There is much more to the book than that, of course. There is a quest, which is kind of de rigeur for a fantasy book. There are puzzles. The book is cast in the form of a long letter sent by Able to his brother, Ben, when he finally finds a means of getting word back to America. This allows Wolfe to play his usual game of hint-dropping. Indeed there are times when Able sounds remarkably like Horn and his predecessors as Wolfe heroes. There is humor (Able ends up assisted by a talking dog and a talking cat, who hate each other as a point of principle.) And there are exciting fights against giants and dragons. And all of it is just so much more wonderful than your average fantasy novel.

Of course your average fantasy reader will not necessarily like this book. Able's narration is too full of gaps and obfuscations. Characters go by different names at different times, and plots take place off-stage. This is all usual Wolfe faire. But for those of us who enjoy fantasy, and who despair of how badly much of what is published as such today is written, *The Knight* is a breath of fresh air.

<rant> Or rather, it is half a breath. Once again we have got a giant book almost arbitrarily chopped in two, with the conclusion offered to us in about a year's time. I am beginning to get to the stage where I won't read these half-books until I have both volumes in my hands. If publishers want authors to write smaller books they should make sure that they provide a conclusion to each volume, not just cut the damn thing in half and publish. </rant>

*The Knight* - Gene Wolfe - Tor - hardcover

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## A Greater Evil?

Space Opera as we know and love it generally has little space for ethical discussion. There are good guys and there are bad guys and the bad guys have to be destroyed. That's a given. But science fiction is occasionally a literature of ideas. It can be used to discuss both political and moral issues. So what L.E. Modesitt has done with *The Ethos Effect* is write a space opera that hosts precisely those discussions. It is, of course, also highly relevant, being about a republican society that goes bad and starts throwing its weight around in the wider galactic society. And this being Modesitt rather a lot of the warfare is conducted using economics rather than guns. But I am getting ahead of myself. Time for a quote.

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*Traditionally, one of the fundamental questions behind every considered attempt to define ethical behavior has been whether there is an absolute standard of morality or whether ethics can be defined only in terms of an*

*individual and the culture in which that individual lives.*

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See what I mean? That is not exactly your ordinary, run-of-the-mill space opera material. Yet space opera of a sort it is. Here is some background.

Van Albert is just the sort of clean-cut, decisive, competent guy who gets to be the hero of military SF books. As a Commander is the space navy of the Republic of Tara it is his job to safeguard his planetary systems from attack and keep pirates away from commercial shipping. He is very good at his job. Of course this makes him unpopular with the PR guys back at HQ, because he kills people and there is always someone in the media who is prepared to decry overzealous, blood-thirsty military types. But Albert has much bigger career problems than that: he is black, and he was raised by gay parents. This does not go down well in the navy.

Eventually high command gets a stroke of luck. As Albert destroys yet another pirate raider a stray torpedo in the exploding enemy ship goes off and blows up the cruise liner that the pirate was attacking. The court martial clears Albert of any wrong-doing, but he can now be safely assigned to dead-end, out-of-the-way jobs. Which is perhaps how he ends up as a military attaché on an out-of-the-way planet and starts to learn about the realities of galactic politics.

The galaxy is, of course, a dangerous place. The most dangerous group in it are the Revenants: a culture centred upon Aryan good looks and absolute devotion to a prophet-based religious cult. The Revenants believe that is their moral duty to convert the rest of the galaxy to their



religion. The other major galactic cultures disagree, but they don't necessarily trust each other well enough to do anything about it, nor are they prepared to risk the vast cost of open warfare.

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*History has also demonstrated most clearly that the majority of individuals are uncomfortable in accepting a moral code that is not based on the "revelation" of a divine being, because in matters of personal ethics, each believe that his or her ethics are superior to any not of "divine" origin.*

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After a certain amount of adventuring and attempts on his life by persons unknown, Albert is "retired" from the navy and ends up working from a small, independent information consultancy called IIS. The primary purpose of this organization appears to be to encourage galactic stability by promoting freedom of information and diversity of economic power. This again calls for a cool head, heroism and helping the down-trodden, all of which things Albert is very good at (although I find the ease with which he picks up economics a little hard to believe). And yet IIS may not be all that it seems. To start with its director, Tristyn Desoll, has a very murky background. He may once have been an intelligence officer for the powerful Eco-Tech Coalition. And he may be much older than he looks. Then again, IIS has suspiciously close links with the galaxy's only known non-human culture, the Farhkan.

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*The Farhkan laughed. "You are correct. Societies must develop rules. Rules that are imposed in the name of a deity are always flawed. They are flawed because they are*

*inflexible. The universe changes. Even the laws of the universe are not inflexible."*

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When he first told me about this book Modesitt said that there would be something in it to offend everyone. That's not a bad objective for a discussion of ethics. Of course some people may be more offended than others. If, for example, you belong to a prophet-based religious cult that has a reputation for practicing polygamy and has a fondness for "Brigham" as the first name of male children then you are going to be very offended indeed. But actually the Revenants are only straw men thrown up to make other people look good. They are, if anything, the Nazi-analog of the book. What I mean by that is that they are so manifestly and unequivocally wicked that declaring war to stop their expansionist activities is easy to justify. But it is not the evil of the Revenants that Modesitt is writing about. It is the evil of what comes in their wake. Yes, we must stop them. But how? Who must we kill? How many of them? What can we justify doing in the name of "national security"? Are we, in fact, any better than them, or are we just less honest about our evils? Do we have an army of spin doctors convincing ourselves that we are doing good while the Revenants just shrug and say they are doing God's will?

As the Taran Republic moves from being an America-like society to a military dictatorship, all in the name of national security, Albert is forced to make some difficult choices about his homeland. Then he has to live with the consequences of those choices. We readers are fortunate enough not to have to make those decisions in real life. But Modesitt does an excellent job of presenting Albert's

thought processes to us. We know why he did what he did, and why he thought it was right. Modesitt also supplies arguments as to why he might have made a mistake. But he leaves it to us, the readers, to judge Albert, to say what we would have done in his position. There should be more science fiction like this.

*The Ethos Effect* - L.E. Modesitt - Tor - hardcover

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## God's First Draft

Even God had to start somewhere. Of course the scriptures generally hold that His creation was perfect from day one, but sadly reality doesn't always match up to the legend. It did not take Robert A. Heinlein very long to become a top-rated SF writer, but he did have a few stories rejected before he got the hang of what the market wanted, and his first novel was never published at all, until now.

The book, *For Us The Living*, appears to have survived attempts by Heinlein to destroy it. Quite why he didn't want anything done with it is not clear, but he is dead now and fans and scholars are happy to have any relics that they can lay their hands upon. Spider Robinson, in his introduction, is clear about the flaws of the text. Spider seems to worship the ground that Heinlein walked upon, but even he has to admit that *For Us the Living* is not really a novel. It is a set of lectures on economic and social policy, thinly disguised as a Utopian fiction. Certainly it is incredibly dull reading — whole chapters are given over to discussion of economic theory. But it is also a very valuable historical document that sheds new light on the development of one of

science fiction's most adventurous and influential thinkers.

The big shock for contemporary readers (and doubtless many Heinlein fans) is that the Master's politics changed fairly radically through his career. This should not be a surprise to us. Heinlein is well regarded in many different quarters. *Starship Troopers* is beloved of militarists everywhere. Libertarians delight in *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*. And *Stranger in a Strange Land* became a Hippie bible. Three more different sociopolitical groups would be hard to find. And *For Us The Living* adds a new element to the mix, for it was written in 1939 when Heinlein was still a disciple of the great American Socialist politician, Upton Sinclair.

Yes, that is right, Socialist. Heinlein's vision of a future America has an economic system based on the "social credit" theory developed by Scottish economist, C.H. Douglas. The system includes a nationalized bank providing loans at a much lower interest rate than commercial bankers, a living wage paid to all citizens by the government, whether they work or not, and a free national health service.

This isn't an economics journal so I'm not going to go into details here. Suffice it to say that, as with any utopian tract, it is very easy to be proved wrong by hindsight. Heinlein's easy confidence that a government-run health service would operate for the benefit of society rather than become a gigantic bureaucracy and pork barrel has hardly stood the test of time. His view that a fair living wage can be provided to all because advances in science and technology have made society immeasurably more wealthy would be fine provided that by a "fair living wage" people would accept what was the

average standard of living in 1939 America. And if massive population growth had not thoroughly re-set the supply-demand curve for things like housing and food. Doubtless Heinlein noticed such things during his lifetime, and this may explain his drift towards more right-wing politics. I'm not an expert on his views, but there are plenty of such experts out there and I'm sure that papers are already being written.

Meanwhile, *For Us The Living* has Heinlein sounding remarkably like China Miéville at times (for example on the subject of destruction of food surpluses to keep prices high). He is also very firm on the subject of campaign finance reform (having just stood for the California State Assembly himself, as a Democrat, he was well aware of the issues). And it is hard not to like someone who has such utter contempt for religious fundamentalists. The Heinlein of 1939 would utterly despise George Bush's America.

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*We look with disfavor on a church which fills children's minds with sadistic tales of a cruel vengeful tribe of barbarians under the guise of teaching them the revealed word of God. We disapprove of exhibiting pictures and statues of a man spiked to a wooden frame. [...] The most popular sects of your day practiced a form of symbolic cannibalism. Is the state obligated to stand in awe of that rather nauseating myth?*

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Other aspects of Heinlein philosophy are also clear in the book. His preference for nudity and for free and open sexual relationships unfettered by things such as marriage are very clear, and must have been far more shocking in 1939 than when he returned to them in *Stranger*. His views on suffrage are also beginning to develop.

In *Starship Troopers* he creates a world in which people can only vote if they are prepared to serve in the military. *For Us The Living* has an earlier and somewhat more reasonable view on this. Wishing to prevent imperialist wars of aggression, Heinlein argues that the USA should only be able to declare an aggressive war following a referendum, and that anyone who votes for the war will have automatically agreed to serve in the armed forces to help prosecute it. Heinlein rightly has contempt for warmongers back home who yell about the need to fight but expect young servicemen to take all of the risks on their behalf.

Unfortunately he has to admit that if the US is attacked then the President should have the right to declare war without reference to the people. So what would have happened with Iraq under this system? Bush would have "found" overwhelming evidence linking Iraq to the 9/11 atrocity and would have therefore claimed justification for the invasion. Not that he probably couldn't have won a referendum anyway with a little help from Fox News. Heinlein is well aware of the ability of the media to manipulate public opinion, having seen smear stories destroy Sinclair's attempt to become Governor of California, and his utopia is predicated on the ability of society to destroy such influences.

As should be clear from the above, *For Us The Living* is far more interesting from the point of view of the development of political and economic thought in America than as a piece of fiction. Someone somewhere must be working on a paper that compares Heinlein's idyllic view of a population not needing to work but choosing to do so for the fun of it, with Nancy Kress's nightmare scenario from *Beggars in Spain* in which the vast

majority of the population are unskilled, unemployable louts who have no interests other than junk food and sitting in front of the TV watching sport and soap operas all day.

The book is also interesting from the point of view of Heinlein's own development. While his opinions on subjects such as politics and space flight clearly developed through his early novels but are present at least in embryo in *For Us The Living*, his views on social issues, which did not surface again until *Stranger*, were also very clear in 1939. As John Clute pointed out in his review of the book, Heinlein almost certainly had to suppress much of his social politics to get his work accepted by the puritanical John W. Campbell. Only when he became popular enough to ignore editors, and general social mores had come more into line with his own, could he introduce them again.

The programming team for this year's Worldcon must be loving this. So much to talk about.

*For Us The Living* - Robert A. Heinlein - Scribner - hardcover

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## Mind and Body

Let us return for a moment to that terrible question that authors always dread at signings and panels: Where do you get your ideas from? Actually, if you hang around with authors for a while the answer becomes very clear. They get ideas from their experiences. Many of them carry notebooks in which to jot down things that have occurred to them. Ideas, in fact, are not the problem. It is turning those ideas into a rich and complex plot

that is hard. But let us follow the process for a while.

Imagine that you are Ian Watson. You are in Oslo. Perhaps you are on holiday, perhaps you are a guest at a local convention. But whatever your purpose you decide to spend some time sightseeing. Thus it is that you find yourself at Vigeland Park (<http://www.fortunecity.com/westwood/arch/769/Vigeland/>). This is a huge sculpture garden containing some 192 pieces of art comprised of more than 600 individual human figures. Most of them (at least all I have seen pictures of) are nude. In many of the pieces, in particular the spectacular 46-foot high monolith, the bodies writhe together. The park was constructed by Gustav Vigeland during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. I can't imagine that sort of thing being allowed in London at that time. Heck, I can't imagine it being allowed now. The Norwegians, Watson suggests, have a more relaxed attitude to nudity.

But as yet there is no story, merely a huge collection of strange, sometimes erotic but often disturbing statuary. Doing some more local research you come upon tales of the Nazi occupation of Norway and the great traitor, Quisling. Being a writer, it occurs to you that Vigeland Park would be an ideal place for those occult-obsessed Nazi loonies to summon Things The Like Of Which Man Was Not Meant To Know. (Well, Odin actually, but you get the idea.)

And so we have "Secrets", a short story (probably a novelette but I haven't counted the words) that appeared in *Interzone* in October 1997. This is a fine piece of horror writing in which a young British couple desperate for money take a strange commission from a mysterious gentleman, only to discover that they are

working for a ruthless ex-Nazi who hopes to use the power of the Vigeland Park rite to effect his reincarnation. Like most good horror stories, it ends in madness.

But Watson was not finished with the idea. Possibly the statues of Vigeland Park continued to haunt him. Perhaps he just wanted to know what happened to the baby that was Olav Frisvold when he grew up. Whatever the reason, a sequel was required. Therefore there needed to be a plot.

At this point Watson's training as a science fiction writer presumably took over. Reincarnation, he may have mused to himself, presupposes a mind-body dualism as proposed by Descartes. This is not a popular theory right now. Biologists and philosophers seem to agree that the mind is somehow a function of the physical body, not separate from it. And yet science fiction is full of stories in which minds are somehow decanted into computers or waveforms and perhaps transferred to other bodies (see Richard Morgan's excellent *Altered Carbon* for an example). Suppose, then, that Earth is visited by aliens who have mastered this mind-uploading trick, and note also that one human, Olav Frisvold, has accomplished the same trick through magic.

Hence we have *Mockymen*, a fine novel that contains "Secrets" as a prologue but then goes on to consider the aliens and the adult Frisvold. Once again this is a good book that has found publication through a small press: in this case Golden Gryphon. Fortunately for you readers it does have distribution through the major US chains so it should not be too hard to find.

Watson's future world is a classic piece of British Doom and Gloom SF. Thanks to the evils of private enterprise the world

goes to Hell in a hand-basket. Civilization starts to fall apart. But somehow Tony Blair manages to stay on as Prime Minister (probably because There Is No Alternative). There is no great justification for these events (other than the root assumption that private enterprise is evil and therefore such a decline is inevitable), but thankfully it isn't very important. The point is not how Earth gets into a desperate state, but that it is in one when the aliens arrive and therefore we have no choice but to accept their help.

There are a number of parallels with colonialism scattered about here. The aliens, known as Mockymen, come in with a pile of baubles (cheap food and medicines) and in return they exploit Earth for their economic needs. The thing that they are most in need of is bodies. So they supply us eager Earthlings with Bliss, a wonder drug that gives the addict a year of Nirvana before wiping the mind clear and allowing some lucky alien to download into the vacant body. This is a good deal, right?

Eventually, however, Watson has to drop the colonial parallels because he wants us Earthlings to be able to fight back. He does this through his heroine, Anna Sharman, who is part of a black project within British Intelligence to investigate the true intentions of the Mockymen. (It has to be a black project because Tony would never turn down a good economic bargain. I mean, swapping a bunch of druggies for a cure for cancer - how good does it get?) In due course Anna comes across a young Bliss addict who is able to resist the mind-blanking effect of the drug. Guess who?

For all this talk about alien take-over and heroines, *Mockymen* is not a comfortable book. Anna Sharman is by no means a

nice person. Sure she sponsors a poor child in Africa and wants to save the world. But you don't get to save the world without sacrifices, some of whom might end up being your friends and family. Furthermore Watson allows Frisvold to have his say regarding his activities during WWII. Norwegian readers may find some of this objectionable. But one of the questions that Watson asks in *Mockymen* (indeed the most important question) is whether Anna Sharman and her colleagues, faced by the arrival of an overwhelming alien superpower, might end up doing some of the same things that Quisling and Frisvold did in Nazi-occupied Norway. The reader is left to ponder what she would have done in Anna's place.

*The Mockymen* - Ian Watson - Golden Gryphon  
- hardcover

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## Pittsburgh in Space

As I promised in issue #99 I picked up Wen Spencer's first hardback novel to see where she was going after the Ukiah Oregon series. On balance I think probably too many places; but let me explain that, starting with the setting.

So the Chinese build something called a "hyperphase gate", which is designed to allow them to send spacecraft through a hole in space-time to other stars. But something goes wrong in the process, and the city of Pittsburgh finds itself inexplicably dislocated from Earth and dumped down on another planet entirely. The local inhabitants are tall, graceful, incredibly good looking, rather snooty and very long-lived. They also claim to be

able to do magic. Inevitably the humans call them "elves".

Luckily for the people of Pittsburgh the Chinese have to shut the gate down one day a month for maintenance purposes, and on these days Pittsburgh returns to its rightful place on the map. Thus a treaty gets to be signed and trade links are established. This is good news for the small number of humans who think it would be rather fun to live their lives on a distant planet surrounded by insufferably arrogant aliens. One such person is Alex Bell, known to her friends as "Tinker". She and her cousin, "Oilcan", run a successful scrap yard. Into that yard one Shutdown evening comes an elven warrior, with a pack of giant wargs hot on his heels.

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Hey, Spencer is nothing if not inventive. But here I think she misses a trick. Her previous series has very little in the way of additional background — just a small number of super-powered aliens trapped on Earth. In the new book, titled *Tinker*, she has a whole alien world to explore. What is elvish society like? How does being immortal affect them? How does the hyperphase gate work? How does elven magic work, why is it disrupted by magnetism, and why doesn't it work on Earth? All of these questions cry out for a fat fantasy book in which Spencer can develop her themes at leisure. But she's not a fantasy writer; she is at her best with fast-paced thrillers. Consequently she toys with all of these ideas, and then drops them.

Next up Spencer has decided to throw in a standard romance plot. She has a great set-up. The virginal Tinker (who is barely eighteen) is left to choose between the gruff, dependable but rather dim police officer, the good-looking, intelligent

student who is nearer her age, and the tall, dark handsome and arrogant elf lord whose life she saves. (Go on, guess which one she ends up with.) But this again she plays with and drops. There is none of the endless mental torture and indecision that romance writers inflict upon their heroines. Tinker is too smart for that.

Of course by that time 90% of male readers will have given up. Are they really going to finish a book in which the heroine gets to go shopping for clothes and gets endless lectures on dating from her friends and family? I don't think so. And yet two thirds of the way into the book we finally get back into true Wen Spencer territory. It is fast, it is brutal, and there are some really nasty torture scenes. Are the people who lapped up the clothes and dating stuff going to be happy with this? Again I suspect Spencer will loose a bunch of people here.

All in all I think that Spencer has thrown too many things into the pot, and hasn't done some of them very well. Maybe there is an audience for this, but I suspect she'd get more commercial success with more focus. As for me, parts of the book were fun, especially the end, but I'm really not interested in reading about a heroine who, although she is barely eighteen, is the smartest physicist on two planets, incredibly desirable to males of at least two species, and a brilliant shot with a bow and arrow as well. Characters like that bore me.

I also started getting serious reservations about the messages in the book. Tinker, bless her, is defiantly individualist. But elven society is monarchical and heavily class-based. There is a lot of Japan in there. The enemy aliens (yeah, there had to be some, didn't there) also have a noble class, but they are cruel and bloodthirsty

compared to the honorable elves. They are supposedly based on imperial China. Indeed, there is a suggestion that the Chinese are the evil aliens in disguise. There are two problems here. Firstly it sounds like we are being asked to compare modern America, feudal Japan and imperial China, and decide that this idealized view of feudal Japan is the best society of the three. Secondly it is very easy to read this book as a "yellow peril" story. I'm not sure that Spencer intended either of those things, but the messages are there nonetheless and they worry me.

*Tinker* - Wen Spencer - Baen - hardcover

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## Quantum Entanglements

Seeing recommendations from the likes of Stephen Baxter and David Brin on the back of a book is a sure sign that you will find some interesting science within. Hard SF, however, is notorious for its concentration upon technology to the exclusion of character. It seems that writers can only understand people or machines, not both at the same time. What then, is a recommendation from Nicola Griffith doing slapped on the front? *Spin State* by Chris Moriarty is, she says, "a non-stop, white-knuckle tour of quantum physics, artificial intelligence, and the human heart." Have we at last found the Holy Grail: a hard SF writer who can do characters as well? Is such a thing possible? Maybe, but before we can get there we need a little theory.

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For many years the Bose Einstein condensate was one of those curiosities of theoretical physics: a weird state of matter

that cannot be achieved in nature and has no practical purpose. Discovered by the Indian physicist, Satyendra Nath Bose, and published thanks to the support of Einstein who was one of the few people who could understand what Bose was going on about, the condensate (BEC hereafter) is a highly condensed form of matter that, at least in theory, can only exist at temperatures close to absolute zero. Just as molecules in a liquid are more mobile than those in a solid, so the subatomic particles rush about all over the place in normal matter but slow down as it gets colder. At absolute zero there is no motion whatsoever. The atoms are all in the same state and orientation, rather like the photons in a laser.

What possible use can this have? Well as it turns out, just like children, particles that are not rushing about at speed are much more biddable than those in constant motion. The atoms in a Bose Einstein condensate would be ideal for the construction of a quantum computer. Furthermore, they are ideal for setting up quantum entanglements, and therefore for teleportation devices.

The use of quantum entanglement as a communications device is now common amongst science fiction writers as a means of providing faster-than-light communication. Spacecraft take with them a quantity of entangled material, leaving the linked paired particles back at base. When an entangled particle is observed the entanglement collapses and exactly the same behavior is observed with the paired particle, regardless of how far away it is. The great thing about a BEC is that the matter is so dense that you can poke individual atoms with individual photons very precisely, hence you can send complex messages instantaneously.

Quantum teleportation requires something more of a leap of the imagination, but essentially all things are patterns of particles. Thus, if you stimulate your BEC in a certain pattern, you will create a copy of that pattern at the other end of the entanglement link. As with *Star Trek's* teleportation system, the method doesn't actually move the original, but rather recreates it from the subatomic particles upwards.

The trouble with all this stuff, when it comes to practical engineering, is that a BEC can only exist at close to absolute zero. Physicists have actually created BECs in laboratory conditions. The first successful experiment was, as far as I can discover, done at the University of Colorado in 1995 by Eric Cornell and Carl Wieman. They cooled rubidium atoms to less than 170 billionths of a degree above absolute zero. That is serious cold and, as Cornell said at the time, "This state could never have existed naturally anywhere in the universe." But let us suppose that it could. Let us suppose that there is just one planet in the whole of the galaxy that has the right conditions for a BEC to form naturally. Then, just as with the Spice on Dune, you have an economic problem, and you have a plot for a science fiction novel.

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Phew! So much for the theory. Now for the book. Compson's World, then is the only place where BEC deposits can be found. They cannot be made artificially, and they are so darned fragile that they have to be dug out of the mines by specialist human workers. Unfortunately the BEC crystals are generally found in amongst deposits of coal, and coal mining, as we know, is a filthy and dangerous business.



The BEC mines are controlled by a private corporation, AMC, which is in turn overseen by the United Nations. The UN jealously guards its treasured resource, in particular from the Syndicates: societies of clone people who exist in a sort of hive society where every cog knows its place and cannot think of doing other than its duty. The Syndicates are the natural result of allowing biotech companies to produce people to order, but they can produce ruthless and efficient armies as well as workforces. Only their control of the quantum teleportation network allows the UN military to keep the enemy at bay.

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*"I was still conscious when you arrived," he went on. "I remember that your captain's insignia was ripped off another uniform and sewn on with mismatched thread. I remember your smile – quite a lovely one, by the way. I remember you talking to your lieutenants. They asked you what to do with the wounded. Do you recall what you told them?"*

*"I told them to shoot everyone still breathing."*

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Major Catherine Li is a UN Peacekeeper and a hero of the Syndicate Wars. These days most of her work is of the form of *Mission Impossible*-style raids on illegal biotech operations, but she does more straightforward police and security work as well. When Hannah Sharifi, the physics genius whose work made the quantum teleportation network possible, dies in a suspicious mine accident on Compson's World, Li is sent to investigate. She is an ideal candidate for the job, as she was born on Compson's and is therefore familiar with the local population: primarily émigré Irish Catholics. She also understands local politics in which the Church and the Union fight a constant battle against the mining company for

workers' rights, and where the IRA lurks menacingly in the background.

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*In every rescue or battlefield cleanup Li had ever worked, there came a point of diminishing returns. It might come after only a few hours, or it might take days to arrive, but sooner or later it always did come. Then the rush of saving survivors was replaced by the grim obligation of retrieving bodies, and you started to wonder just what it was you were risking your own life for. Li always felt sorriest for the dogs when it got to that point, and this rescue was no exception. There was a shattering sincerity in their actions: the hesitation, the doubtful whining note that slipped into their barking, the worried licking of hands and faces that were long past reviving. Even at the end, even after every human rescuer had shut down and given up inside, the dogs couldn't stop hoping.*

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There are just two problems with the UN's thoughtful plan: Li and Cohen. Li because she has not exactly been truthful with her employers. Many of the workers on Compson's world are clones, albeit free of the Syndicates. Li's parents are fully human, but she is adopted and has had her DNA tweaked by a back-street surgeon to make her seem naturally born. She no longer fully matches any known clone template. If she is ever found out she will be dismissed from the service in disgrace, and Compson's world is the only place where there are people who know the truth. Given the degree of social prejudice against clones, someone may well decide to turn her in.

Cohen is the oldest AI in the world, and by far the most eccentric. He was "born" on Earth, back when it was inhabitable, and is now a consortium of 48 separate minds. He is probably the richest

corporation in the galaxy, and he has a taste for adventure. Therefore he hires himself out to the UN for special hacking projects. Generally these involve humans and wetware that allow Cohen to “ride” a physical body so as to get him inside carefully isolated networks. He also uses the “riding” technique to present himself to human company. He can, after all, afford to hire the very prettiest bodies available. Male or female, it doesn’t matter to him, as long as they are overwhelming sexually attractive. It helps keep the monkeys on their toes.

Being amongst the top operatives that the UN has available, Li and Cohen are very familiar with each other from past missions. Once they even had a relationship. Cohen still claims to be in love with Li. She, however, found it hard to relate to someone whose mind is so inhuman and complex as Cohen’s. He might look like a cute boy, or a stunning girl, but that is only a shell. The real being is vast and unknowable. Besides, Cohen has recently started agitating for AI rights. The UN authorities are suspicious of his motives. He has failed Li on missions before, and now it seems like that may have been deliberate.

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*The trouble with friends was that you couldn't get rid of them. There was no way to take back a friendship in the wake of betrayal or disappointment. The friendship, and everything that went with it, stayed. It just became unreliable, like an abandoned house; you still knew where all the rooms were, and which stairs creaked underfoot, but you had to check every floorboard for rot before trusting your weight to it.*

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So there we have it: cutting edge quantum physics, an all-action heroine with a

murky past, Gibsonesque cyberpunk, Socialist politics, a love interest who is an AI, racism, a murder mystery and the threat of a galaxy-wide war. Have we found the Holy Grail? You have seen the extracts above.

The Philip K. Dick Award jury has picked *Spin State* as one of the best original paperback releases in the US last year. I have no quarrel with that. I even think that Moriarty will give Richard Morgan a run for his money. I think I would still give Morgan the edge because his book is tighter and less contrived. *Spin State* often gave me the impression of the hand of the author pushing the characters around. But Chris Moriarty is very good indeed, and I can’t wait to see what he does next.

*Spin State* - Chris Moriarty - Bantam - softcover

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## Bugs Galore

Another of the finalists for the Philip K. Dick award is *Clade*, by Mark Budz. This one immediately struck resonances because Budz is a Bay Area author and much of the action is set in San José. It is a little disconcerting to find the area where you used to live transformed into a dangerous Latino ghetto, but given that the book is set several decades into the future that is entirely plausible. Especially so because the world of *Clade* has undergone some major transformations from the one that we know.

To start with there was the “ecocaust” (Budz has a Gibsonesque talent for coining words), which resulted in the die-off of vast numbers of species. Possibly related was the rise in sea level resulting

from global warming, which has placed the high tide mark some 10 meters higher. (And yes, I checked, San José is elevated enough to survive.) These disasters appear to have led in turn (although Budz isn't too clear about this) to a collapse of national governments and their replacement by "politicorps", multinational corporations that also function as a form of government.

By far the biggest change, however, is a rapid expansion in biotechnology that has had significant impact on lifestyles and global politics. A growth in genetic engineering (which may have helped trigger the ecocaust) also caused a massive rise in allergic reactions and diseases. Seeking to counter this, scientists developed the ability to tailor human beings to specific biological environments or "ecotectures". People with the right type of bodily chemicals can survive happily in one particular area, but suffer immediate reaction if they stray too far from home. The word "clade", in our world, simply means a group of organisms evolved from a common ancestor. In Budz' world it means a group of humans tailored to survive in a particular ecotecture. Thus a Latino gang from San José cannot burgle rich houses in Menlo Park for the simple reason that they would be way too sick from allergic reactions before they got anywhere near them.

The consequences of clading for social structure are immediately obvious, and Budz briefly develops the idea. He explains that in North America and Europe there are many different clades in any given region with the differences between them quite small. The possibility of movement between social classes (not to mention the use of lower class workers in low grade jobs) therefore persists. In

Africa, in contrast, there are few clades. The rich are rich and the poor are poor and never the twain shall meet.

Budz' hero, Rigo, is a social climber. His family live in San José and his brother, Beto, is a gangster working for a black market "pharm". But Rigo was always a bookish kid and is unable to run with the *tígueres*. Instead he gets a job as a vat rat with the biotech company, Noogenics, and through diligence, loyalty and an unfailing ability to never question orders he has risen to a junior management post. Shortly after the book opens he and his team (who are effectively high tech gardeners) discover that the new product they have been looking after is destined for the bioengineering of a comet as a home for post-human settlers. Rigo and his crew will need to go up to the comet to help get the plants settled in. (By the way, the fact that the comet is called Tiresias seems to have no obvious bearing on the story.)

Rigo's girlfriend, Anthea, is a psychotherapist specializing in working with disturbed children, of which there are rather a lot around in gangland. At the same time as Rigo learns about his big opportunity Anthea is given charge of a little boy called Ibrahim who is deeply anti-social, malnourished and desperately ill from all sorts of allergic reactions. Anthea believes that the kid has escaped from an illegal testing program at a biotech company (you have to test all these new chemicals on someone, right, so why not just kidnap poor kids off the streets?). When agents of the all-powerful Bureau of Ecotectural Assignment and Naturalization (a sort of UN version of the INS) claim that Ibrahim is a terrorist loaded down with illegal "pherions", Anthea smells a rat.

We, of course, know better. Sadly it doesn't take a great deal of smarts to work out what is going on. Rigo and Anthea are being set up by someone who wants to sabotage the Tiresias project, and they are naïve enough to fall for it. Halfway through it also becomes very obvious how the plot will resolve. This is an indication of an inexperienced author, and I'm sure Budz will get better at plotting as time goes on.

Perhaps a more serious complaint is with the resolution. *Clade* appears to be a set in a dirty, dangerous, Gibbnesque future where the world is dominated by mega-corporations, but with biotech rather than electronics. Other reviewers have already coined the term "biopunk" for it. But in that sort of world little people who go against the system generally get screwed and stay screwed. They don't suddenly discover long-lost rich relatives who can make it all right in the end. Nor are the paramilitary wings of human rights organizations necessarily full of kind people doing their best for humanity. They are just as likely to be full of bitter, vicious lunatics like Sally Welham from Jon Courtenay Grimwood's *Felaheen*. *Clade* might look like bio-punk, but it reads like formula fantasy with the usual themes of good v evil and the inevitable contrived happy ending. It is, in effect, just the sort of wet-behind-the-ears view of political activism that Ian R. MacLeod was criticizing in *The Light Ages* (although of course MacLeod was implying that all political activism was of this type).

Having said that, however, *Clade* is Budz first book, and the futuristic setting that he has created is enormously rich and full of potential. An ad in the back of the book says that he is working on a further novel in the same setting, and I'm sure that with a bit of experience he will get a lot better. I

don't think this one is a Dick winner (certainly not up against the likes of *Spin State* and *Altered Carbon*), but it is a worthy finalist and I'll certainly be watching to see what sort of work Budz produces in the future.

*Clade* - Mark Budz - Bantam - softcover

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## Career Progression

Well, this was an interesting one. *The Affinity Trap* is a first novel from British author, Martin Sketchley. It is a book that took me on a roller-coaster ride of opinions. More of that later, but first some background.

Far in the future, most of Earth's inhabitants have moved out of the dangerous "real" world into the sealed safety of the vast Myson Habitats, enormous towers providing for all of their needs. All seems prosperous, even though the planet is ruled by a military dictatorship headed by General William Myson, a descendant of the original habitat builder. Yet there are rumors of war amongst the stars. Some sort of alliance with the three-sexed Seriatt seems essential. Myson proposes to cement the agreement by marrying a Serriat princess, but when his intended bride absconds to join a mysterious religious cult there is little choice but to call in Military Intelligence's crack special agent, Alexander Delgado.

Not that Myson was happy about this. Delgado was loyal to Earth's previous ruler, General Smythe, whom Myson deposed in a bloody coup. Delgado has been in disgrace ever since. Yes, he is the best operative Earth has. But

unfortunately even the best agents can fail when working for a man that they despise, and when faced with the irresistible sexual attraction of an alien princess.

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If this is starting to sound silly to you, then you are dead right. When, on page 12, Myson says, "Earth is relying on you, Delgado," you just know that you are in E.E. Doc Smith territory. And when you discover that Vourniass Lycern, the Seriat princess, is irresistibly attractive to all human males (despite being fat and ugly) you realize that Sketchley has bred 50's pulp with that 70's SF from when being able to talk about sex in books was new and exciting so everyone did it, lots. Quite what the offspring is does not yet become clear, but you are beginning to think Lovecraftian thoughts.

It is very hard to take the beginning of the book seriously. Myson is some sort of bizarre cross between Dick Cheney and Robert Maxwell. Delgado is an arrogant jerk who would be a complete disaster as a secret agent were it not written into the plot that every stunt he pulls always succeeds. And as for poor Lycern, it appears that every man she sleeps with becomes fanatically addicted to her and follows her round forever afterwards consumed with feelings of violent lust. I don't know about you, girls, but as far as I'm concerned that's one super power that I'd rather not be blessed with.

By the way, the blurb says that the book explores gender roles. It doesn't. Not once. Not in the slightest.

So, by half way through I was still trying to make up my mind whether Sketchley was writing a parody or whether he expected us to take all this seriously. The

parody theory was definitely winning. When he introduced a pair of comedy droids who appeared to be based on Laurel and Hardy I figured that I finally had the whole thing sussed.

And then everything changed.

Crash-landing back on Earth, Delgado finds himself living among the dispossessed who are denied access to the habitats. Suddenly the book comes alive. We have characters who, if slightly stereotyped, are sympathetic, believable and have real lives. Even Delgado becomes human. We have a proper science fiction book after all.

And then, and then...

We have a stonkingly wonderful, sheer bloody genius ending that most authors wouldn't even dream of let alone write. Not a shred of expected outcome. Just dropping us back into good old real-world snafu territory with a resoundingly flat and discordant note. Brilliant.

So I really don't know what to make of this. The theme of the book is clearly that of Delgado's progression from a loyal and unquestioning thug in the service of Military Intelligence to a caring and angry person prepared to sacrifice his life to bring down a wicked regime and save the woman he loves, even if she is a fat, ugly alien who entrapped him with powerful pheromones. But alongside this development you can visibly see Sketchley growing in stature as an author as he gets the hang of this writing lark and turns a piece of silly space opera into a book that means something. Hopefully we are going to hear more from him.

*The Affinity Trap* - Martin Sketchley - Simon & Schuster - softcover

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## Knights in White Habits

I often question the value of banquets at conventions. After all, hotel banquet food is generally irredeemably awful and massively over-priced. There are so many good restaurants that you could eat at instead. But then again, a banquet often forces you to sit next to someone you have never met before and make conversation, and this seems to lead to my discovering good writers. At ICFA last year I found to my delight that L.E. Modesitt, far from being a purveyor of fat formula fantasy, was a writer of fascinating SF with an in depth knowledge of politics and economics. And at FantasyCon I was introduced to Chaz Brenchley. Chaz is from Newcastle, wears a lot of black leather, and has an admirable devotion to the San Francisco 49ers. His web site is called Northern Gothic. He's about the last person I would have picked as an author of medieval fantasy. But that, of course, means that the fantasy he writes is going to be good, doesn't it? I certainly hoped so.

So to the Outremer series, and the first of six novels, *The Devil in the Dust*. This is a good start. Someone who knows the name Outremer, and who sets much of the action in the awesome Krak des Chevaliers (subtly disguised as the Roq de Rançon in the books) is going to know enough about medieval history to get things right. This is not going to be soppy, and so it proves.

The hero of the novels, Marron, is a young man of poor but gentle stock seeking to better his fortunes by enlisting as a fighting monk in the Order of the Knights Ransomer. We meet him as he has just arrived in the Sanctuary Land. On their way to the Roq, his troop ran across a village of Catari heretics. Their confessor,

Fra' Piet, whipped his young charges into a righteous frenzy and ordered them to massacre the villagers, every one of them. Memories of having slaughtered helpless children will remain with Marron for the rest of his life. No, this is not Mills & Boon fantasy.

Of course women are major consumers of fantasy fiction, so there has to be a heroine and she can't be a wimp. The Lady Julianne is the daughter of the King's Shadow, a powerful political operator in Outremer. Being a daughter of a politician, there is little Julianne can do to avoid an arranged marriage. She would have been happier, however, if her intended had not been from a culture that required her to wear a veil and closet herself away. Still, she is not married yet. On the way to the wedding father gets called away by the King and Julianne is sent to the Roq for safekeeping.

On her way there Julianne encounters one of the more interesting innovations that Brenchley has added to his alternate version of the Crusades. We are, after all, in the Middle East, and we need magic, so there should be Djinni. And indeed there are. They are fearsome indeed. Manifesting as whirling dust storms, they are powerful enough to rip a man apart by merely touching him. And they are deliciously cryptic. You should never ask one a question, for if the Djinni deigns to give an answer that means it has done you a favor, and you are in its debt. Julianne, being young and ignorant, makes the obvious mistake.

At the Roq, Marron's above average ability with a sword comes to the attention of Sieur Anton d'Escreivey, one of the Knights Ransomer. Sieur Anton is a classic knightly hero: deadly in combat, kind and gentle outside of it, and with a dark secret

in his past that drives his devotion to knightly virtue. He makes Marron his servant with a view to developing the boy's obvious talent, but he cannot fully detach him from Fra' Piet's clutches and the zealous monk hates to have any of his charges escape even for a second from his brutal discipline. Marron's life becomes a nightmare of trying to please his new master while knowing that everything he does for Sieur Anton will earn him punishment from Fra' Piet.

Meanwhile a new commander has arrived at the fortress. Marshall Fulke (yes, Brenchley can be very tongue in cheek at times) is young and ambitious, and seeks to make his mark by striking a powerful blow for God against the heathens. His target is the legendary Folded Land of Surayon. The inhabitants of this region (who appear not to be the native Sharai tribesmen but at the same time are not part of Outremer) are sorcerers who have succeeded in hiding their home away from the mortal world. You can ride to where it was, but your horse may bolt in fear as you near it. You can cross the boundary where Surayon would have been, but you will find yourself overcome with nausea and mysteriously you find yourself facing a different direction from the one in which you walked. This is a really great description of a powerful spell at work.

Clearly there is a major plotline in development here. And we readers, being experienced in such things, can already sniff another strand of it. On her way to the Roq, Julianne picked up a mysterious local girl called Elisande who appears to know rather a lot about the Djinni and the Sharai. She talks about a mysterious grandfather, whom we suspect does not flit about the galaxy in a police telephone box but is rather a sorcerer from Surayon.

Still, there are another five books in the series to come yet, and it is time for some action.

Unbeknownst to Fulke, he has a much more pressing military problem than conquering Surayon. A charismatic leader has arisen amongst the Sharai tribes and has united them against Outremer. Even now a vast army of Sharai is marching on the Roq. Sharai servants inside the fortress have promised to give the attackers aid for a surprise night attack. With luck, the great fortress will fall.

In the UK the Outremer series was published as three fat volumes of around 500 pages each. Ace has chosen to package the series as six 250-page books, which is rather more manageable. I was a bit worried to begin with that this might result in cliff-hanger endings in the odd-numbered volumes, but *The Devil in the Dust* has a nicely engineered climax and a proper conclusion.

So far I am impressed. As yet there is no great philosophical message in the books, other than an obvious dislike for religious fanatics. However, Brenchley has created a fascinating alternate-world version of the Crusader kingdom and has set up a bunch of interesting plot strands. The addition of Arabian Nights-style magic is a very clever touch that promises much to come. OK, so there are another five books, but they are all short and buzz along at a fast and easy pace. You can expect one in each of the next five issues.

*The Devil in the Dust* - Chaz Brenchley - Ace - softcover

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## Wings of Doom

Given that I have the interview with Marc Gascoigne in this issue I decided I should also review one of Black Library's books. And what better one to choose than their first ever hardback novel, *Riders of the Dead* by Dan Abnett?

The first thing you note on starting the book is that Abnett can write. That should be obvious, because top-rated comics like *X-Men* and *Legion of Superheroes* don't get entrusted to just anyone, but if you had been thinking that game tie-in novel = cheap hackwork than you would have been very much mistaken. Abnett isn't going to be winning any World Fantasy Awards with this, but at the same time he knows what he is doing.

You will also notice how punchy the book is: short paragraphs, short simple sentences. That may be because it is a war novel, but it may also be deliberate tailoring to a young adult market. There is an absence of sex too until right near the end. Not that this is a publisher requirement: Kim Newman's vampire heroine, Genevieve, positively oozes sex. But Games Workshop is famous for targeting a market of teenage boys who have not yet discovered girls and motorbikes. They may have found that absence of yucky girl cooties is a good selling point.

So what do you get? A rollicking war story about two young men who ride out in search of glory and find much more than they had bargained for. The *Warhammer* world is a rough analog of medieval Europe in which the good guys live in a much strengthened fantasy version of the Holy Roman Empire and the bad guys are evil, chaos-tainted barbarians. Much of the purpose of

*Warhammer* is, of course, to sell toy soldiers. Landsknechts and the like make pretty nifty little figures. Abnett has his pulse acutely tuned to the marketing operation because he features some of the most gloriously bedecked military units of all time: the Husaria, Polish winged cavalry. (Interestingly Marc Gascoigne tells me that Games Workshop had taken little interest in the "Kislev" region of the *Warhammer* world until Abnett's novel pointed out how seriously cool the local military were – score one for the book guys!)

Our heroes are Gerlach Heileman and Karl Reiner Vollen. Heileman is of high noble birth and easily recognizable as the "arrogant Prussian" type. Vollen is a poor relative who is smarter and much more likeable. The pair serve together in a troop of imperial lancers sent east into the steppes to repel a barbarian invasion.

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*The battle of Zhedevka warrants little mention in the compended histories of the time. It is a footnote in *Anspracht*, a passing reference in *Ocoeld*. For it was just a small part of a much wider process called the Spring Driving. This mendaciously mild, general term encompasses a decisive horror – an onslaught from which the Empire barely recovered. It is notable that though the place name Zhedevka features infrequently in the general texts, it is woefully commonplace on tombs, memorial stones, chapel plaques and family lineages throughout the Empire.*

*For lives ended at Zhedevka. A great many of them.*

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Very soon our heroes get caught up in a great military disaster. The bulk of the book follows what happens to them afterwards, and how their lives are



changed by their experiences. Heileman escapes the battle and joins up with a troop of winged lancers, men who he had previously dismissed as scruffy louts unfit to serve alongside the Imperial forces. Slowly but surely he learns to survive on the steppes. Vollen meanwhile is captured by the enemy and made to fight as a gladiator for their entertainment. His fighting ability catches the attention of his owner, Zar Uldin, and he is offered a place in the war band.

This then is not the simple tale of buddyship in combat that you get from Hollywood war stories, it is a more sophisticated tale of how war can change a man, sometimes unexpectedly. I've seen character development done better, but again we have to remember that Abnett is probably aiming at a young adult audience. I should also note that magic is used very sparingly in the book. It is not a get-out clause the way it is in so many fantasy novels. For the most part the heroes win through thanks to strength of will and strong right arms.

Abnett's research appears to be excellent. The book is full of mention of different types of armor and weaponry, and of military tactics. And if you think that is just a game-book thing, remember what Mary Gentle did in *Ash*. Abnett also shows that he knows way more about the relationship between horses and pikes than Peter Jackson.

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*The hounds reached the pike wall. Hounds are not like horses, they do not quail and veer aside from obstruction. Whether this means horses are smarter than dogs, or dogs braver than horses, is hard to call. Hounds are unlike horses in other ways too: they are lower and smaller and fleeter, and much harder to strike*

*with a pole blade four spans long. And they have the teeth of meat eaters.*

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So where does this leave us? What does the book say? *Warhammer* is tricky material to work with. It has taken a Tolkien-like universe, grafted on the Moorcock theory of Lords of Law and Chaos, and then ossified the theology. In the *Warhammer* world Law, though stern, means goodness, righteousness, stability and the social order; while Chaos means change, revolution and ugly, barbarian foreigners. It is a deeply conservative philosophy, and the fact that the heroes tend to be Germanic doesn't do the image a lot of favors. It could so easily find itself alongside *The Lord of the Rings* in British National Party propaganda.

Abnett, however, seems well aware of this. Whilst his Kurgish barbarians are often wildly grotesque and deeply villainous, the fact that Vollen spends time amongst them and befriends some actually makes them far more human than Tolkien's orcs. There is honor amongst thieves, even if they do worship Chaos.

Where the game world does intrude on the novel is that Vollen's life path is seen as a result of magic rather than a natural progression. He falls in with the Kurgs, not because they offer him the comradeship and respect that he never got from his snooty Imperial colleagues, but because he is touched by Chaos. Heileman, on the other hand, is free to find his own path. This rather dilutes the psychological message of the book. But Abnett actually makes little of it and someone who doesn't know *Warhammer* philosophy might miss it.

All in all, then, a good book. Like I said, it is not going to be winning literary prizes,

but at the same time it is competent, thoughtful and well targeted to its audience. It also rips along at a fair pace, which is essential for books like this. And it is a lot better than much of the formula fantasy being churned out by big name publishers.

*Riders of the Dead* - Dan Abnett - Black Library  
- hardcover

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## Interview: Marc Gascoigne, Black Library

So what exactly is going on here? Games Workshop's Black Library Imprint produces game tie-in books, right? This is not the sort of thing that normally appears in *Emerald City*. And yet in their time Black Library have published books by such luminaries as Kim Newman, Ian Watson and Brian Stableford; and their new sister imprint, Black Flame, has a Pat Cadigan novel in production. Besides, I have known GW's book editor, Marc Gascoigne, for very many years, and I have great respect for his good taste. It was he who first suggested that I read John Crowley. And anyone who says on his company web site that his current favorite authors are China Miéville and Jonathan Carroll isn't going to be publishing any old crap. So I thought I should find out what Marc was up to with his publishing business.

**CM:** How long has Black Library been going (including the previous Pringle era)?

**MG:** The Black Library formally cracked the champagne bottle against the bows on April 4th 1997. GW had once had an earlier novels division, run by David

Pringle and crew from Brighton, which had run late-80's to early 90's, but this had no bearing on the establishment of BL. They were not connected in real sense.

**CM:** How did things get back going again after the Pringle incarnation died?

**MG:** The basic concept came from a slightly left-field place. Rick Priestley, the creator of *Warhammer*, had long nurtured a dream of issuing a GW annual: a collection of cool WH-related stuff to be issued at Xmas each year. This might have rules and adventures, painting and modeling articles and the like, but also stories, comic strips and plenty of cutaway diagrams. (Anyone from the UK familiar with the sort of *Blue Peter* or *Thunderbirds* annuals one would get for Xmas in the 1970s would know instantly the sort of thing he meant.)

**MG:** Rick was way too busy working on the games side, so he asked Andy Jones, GW troubleshooter and unusual projects man, to get involved, and in turn he roped me in. By the time BL started formally and I joined, the annual had turned into a defiantly pulp anthology called *Inferno!*, a collection of stories, comic strips and features that has come out every two months without fail for the last forty issues.

**MG:** The experience of commissioning comic strips stood us in good stead for launching *Warhammer Monthly* comic at the end of our first year, and the experience of commissioning fiction (and reintroducing the idea to a new generation of GW fans) helped prepare the ground for when we launched our new novels in August 1999. Since then we've gone from strength to strength. We produced 26 new novels last year, plus various re-launches, as well as art books, comics, graphic novel collections and assorted merchandise.

Sales of our novels are well over 1.5 million copies, and still increasing, both in the UK and US.

**CM:** Pringle got some of the UK's best SF&F talents producing books. Is there any of the back catalogue that you are particularly proud of?

**MG:** The back catalogue has, if anything, proved in some ways to be a distraction from our generally far stronger and certainly more prolific current output. While some old-time fans clamored for reissues from the moment we announced our novel range, many younger *WH* fans were barely aware of the earlier titles. As we made our plans to move from alternating a *Warhammer* and *Warhammer 40,000* (aka '40K') title every other month to one of each every month, it was obvious that a reissue plan would buy us some much-needed development time, and also allow us to fulfill the demands of those old timers. We weren't able to reissue Ian Watson's novel *Space Marine*, which had been left too far behind by changes to the *WH40K* universe over the previous thirteen years, and there were a few *Warhammer* stories that were similarly creaky, but we got pretty much everything else out again.

**MG:** Having long been a fan of Kim Newman's fiction over the years, I admit I did jump at the chance to reissue the Vampire Genevieve titles. Discovering he was a joy to work with, and that he was keen to help round out an anthology of uncollected Genevieve tales with a splendid new novella, was more than I could have hoped for. Top fellow. Slightly more obscurely, the various short story anthologies held a wide array of some very famous names, though some were hidden behind pseudonyms. Finding we had published early stories from the likes

of Steve Baxter, Storm Constantine, Charlie Stross and Paul McAuley was rewarding, and it was fun to get back into print all that were not rendered unusable by changes in the *WH* worlds. Oh, and the day I found an unpublished John Brunner *Warhammer* story in the archive was a particularly cheery one. Must decide what to do with it at some point.

**MG:** But, as I implied, the back catalogue has been far from central to our main plans, and now it has been reissued it has to be said that most of the fans have been decidedly more in favor of the newer stuff. The reissued titles have not been our highest sellers, but sales have been solid enough, and I'm glad they are out there again.

**MG:** On the other hand... the Pringle era did attract early stories from some unknown writers who are now regular novelists for us, in the form of Alex Stewart (writing as Sandy Mitchell) and Neil McIntosh. It's great to have them producing quality work for us, after the slight delay in their development program.

**CM:** Do you anticipate getting top names to do *Warhammer* or *40K* stuff again?

**MG:** "Top names" is a tricky phrase to define. A "top seller" would be wonderful, but most of our unknowns sell better than any previous "names" we have featured anyway. Dealing with a "name" is often fraught with that most horrible of problems: ego. At its worst, the question then comes out as: would most of our fans prefer to read a bang-on story by an unknown name (who once they'd proved themselves will quickly be elevated to "top name" status for BL fans anyway), or an awful piece of fudge that ignores the pre-established universe by a barely well-

known, comparatively poor selling but allegedly “proper” SF writer?

**MG:** The “top names” for WH fans would actually be world-famous GW game designers like Gav Thorpe and Graham McNeill, both of whom who have written multiple titles for us already, even though their names may go over the heads of your average literary SF fan. So what do you actually get with a “top name” from the SF&F world? The chance to sell *Warhammer* fiction to someone who is otherwise too snooty to bother with it, regardless of merit or quality? That’s fairly low down on our list of priorities.

**MG:** We have just two rules for writing for BL: be true to the worlds in which the stories are set, and be good. Writers who have approached us with an established career behind them usually fall down on the first of those two rules, and as a result compromise the second. It’s disturbing that so many “name” writers profess to be keen to work within the franchise, are certainly happy to take the cash, but then moan because they aren’t allowed to change absolutely everything about the background. I do find myself wondering whether they would be quite so cavalier if writing, for example, a new Sherlock Holmes adventure. Worse, and certainly most troubling, a few we looked at but then declined have obviously benefited from damn talented editors elsewhere, because frankly their raw work has been embarrassing. Perhaps they get by on the quality of their ideas, because their writing, character development, scene setting and more have not been up to the standards we expect.

**CM:** Quality writing is very important to you, then?

**MG:** Damn right. We have a defiantly pulp ethos, but we work damn hard to

ensure our books are also high quality. I want someone who reads one of our books to read more, not to fling it away as unreadable tripe. These things are subjective of course, but we try to uphold our side of the deal.

**CM:** How about the new writers you are bringing forward? Is there anyone in particular you would like to highlight?

**MG:** Some of the writers we’ve turned into top-sellers were successful in other areas already. Our top 40K author, Dan Abnett, spends the other half of his time writing a wide range of classy comic books, such as *Legion of Superheroes* for DC, and *Durham Red* and *Sinister Dexter* for 2000AD. We get the benefit of his easy skill as a novelist, and he’s a bright, adaptable writer with a great talent for plots. Always a pleasure. Our top WH fantasy author, William King, had worked for GW as a game developer before trying his hand as a freelance writer and selling stories to the likes of *Interzone*. He’s an unashamed swords-and-sorcery writer of the old school, not to mention something of an expert on the field who has been an infallible advisor to me over the years. His writing has a wicked dark sense of humor to it, which is the ideal counterpoint to the apocalyptic situations in which his hapless heroes continually find themselves.

**MG:** Newer writers like Ben Counter and C.L. Werner have been a delight to develop. Ben’s imagination is pretty wild, and he’s not afraid to play with some pretty big toys. Clint, meanwhile, is a devil with a plot and draws in plenty of entertaining movie-inspired themes. Both of them have grown up with *Warhammer* as one of their formative influences, and are happy to use the setting to let their imaginations run away with them.

**MG:** There are over a dozen other young (and not-so-young) writers coming through as well. We're very open about the opportunities available to any interested and talented writer, and we also recruit through *Inferno!* magazine, which is explicitly a tremendous training ground. We introduced six new names to our catalogue last season, and have many more in development.

**CM:** You started doing hardcover editions with Dan Abnett; is that something we will see more of in future?

**MG:** Very much so. Dan's sales have certainly reached such a high level that fan demand for more durable editions has been very strong. His newer titles are now all appearing as hardback originals first, and William King's titles may. We've also anthologized some of Dan and Bill King's best-selling novels into hardback omnibuses, due to customer and retailer demand. If people want it and we think it makes sense commercially, we'll try it. With an expanded focus on having our own web store, in 2004 there'll also be high quality, short run items for fans, from hand-tooled leather limited editions and books that come with CD soundtracks, to a subscription service that will allow a reader to sub to every book in a series, from an author or the whole line. Again, doing what fans have asked for.

**CM:** Is GW likely to do new lines of game-related books in addition to *Warhammer* and *40K*?

**MG:** Quite possibly. There are a number of related and unrelated GW worlds, from *40K* hive city setting *Necromunda* to classics like *Talisman* and *Blood Bowl* that we're looking at. A certain cyberpunk-with-daemons setting by the name of *Dark Future* is potentially also ripe for reviving. That one will present some problems for

the editors, as I suspect its pre-millennial setting will require a very subtle updating, which will be a challenge. But the fact that there are at least two unpublished *Dark Future* novels from way back when does make the idea of such a project rather attractive. For successful areas such as the US book market, a new fantasy or SF setting from the guys who did the best-selling *Warhammer 40,000* books should prove an attractive proposition.

**CM:** Do you think we might see Kim Newman's *Dark Future* books back in print again one day?

**MG:** If we decide to go with a *Dark Future* re-launch it is a strong possibility.

**CM:** What about Black Flame, what's the new imprint all about?

**MG:** In brief, taking the BL approach to top quality but unpretentious pulp fiction to other peoples' properties, to produce new ranges of further adventures for, for starters, New Line Cinema and their SF&F and horror titles, and *2000AD* comic (*Judge Dredd*, etc). The intricacies of the deal with New Line are more complex than even you could imagine, but we already have a number of titles out, including the novelizations of *Freddy vs Jason* and *The Butterfly Effect*, with a clutch more in development including *Blade: Trinity* and Pat Cadigan's rip-roaring treatment of the upcoming Kim Basinger movie *Cellular*.

**MG:** The *2000AD* line will launch in June with a pair of *Judge Dredd* titles from names intricately linked to the comic over the years, and the start of an *ABC Warriors* series co-written by their legendary creator Pat Mills. We'll be covering many of the other most well-known *2000AD* characters over the next two years, wherever possible involving the creators and writers.

**CM:** Does that mean a prospect of Alan Moore novels?

**MG:** We don't have the rights to any creator-owned titles amongst their properties. However, Alan's are a gray area, clouded in ancient rights disputes and a nebulous bad feeling that has refused to quite go away. Some of his characters are also verging on the sacred (Ms Jones, of course). If Alan wanted to novelize and/or extend his series I'd be delighted, but that's unlikely right now with all his America's Best work. Ask me again in two years, once the *Dredd*, *Slaine*, *ABC Warriors*, *Strontium Dog* and *Durham Red* lines are chugging along nicely.

**CM:** Anything else you are working on?

**MG:** There are likely to be further licenses signing up over 2004, all from the 'cult entertainment' side of the tracks. When people ask if we'll ever be in a position to publish original fiction, well, we get a fond gleam in our eyes, but not this year. On the other hand, if anyone has a desperate urge to have their forgotten SF or fantasy classic out again, and for some reason Malcolm Edwards hasn't already come a-calling, they're welcome to give me a call.

**CM:** Are you looking for writers? If so in what areas?

**MG:** We're always happy, as I intimated earlier, to hear from people who are talented and want to write for either of our imprints. Check out either website ([blacklibrary.com](http://blacklibrary.com) or [blackflame.com](http://blackflame.com)) for contact details and we'll send out guides and advise on more specific topics or settings in which we need more material. Note that these are all based on pre-existing worlds, of course, so either know your stuff or be prepared to learn it. It's solid writing work, for solid money, so

we're attracting a wide range of new and established writers, but there will always be room for people who are good to get a title or three.

**CM:** Where do you see the company going from here?

**MG:** We've reshaped BL slightly recently. Now we come under the banner of a division called BL Publishing, which covers all of Games Workshop's 'other' publishing activity. Thus Black Library and Black Flame nestle up next to *Warhammer Historical* and our thriving Partworks division (perhaps you saw *Battle Games in Middle-Earth*, so many weekly parts, all good newsagents, etc). Several other departments are taking shape and will be revealed in the near future. The consolidation means we can share support functions, such as accounts and design, while retaining the individual identity of the various endeavors.

**MG:** For the fiction side, I see Black Library staying steadily on course, and widening its reach without adding greatly to the volume of its novel output. In the US through Simon & Schuster and the UK via Hodder, our efforts are on taking our books out to more casual readers, a policy which is already bearing fruit. Black Flame has the opportunity to grow somewhat larger than BL, depending only upon the number and success rate of our lines. There aren't enough publishers trying this steady, pulp-inspired approach, the kind of "straight to video" or B-movie film studio method. In the US particularly, only *Star Trek* and the other game-related lines stand out. So where there's a gap...

**CM:** What are your personal ambitions in publishing?

**MG:** They are almost totally interlinked with all of the above; as publisher I like to think I embody the style and spirit of what we do; without my enthusiasm, energy and standard-setting BL and BF would be quite different. It's a delight to be producing the sort of material that inspires and excites teen lads, just as Moorcock and Leiber inspired and excited me. That we can do it without compromising quality and style is great too, but then I demand high standards of my editors and designers. We might be popular, we might be easy entertainment, but we're only Trash with a capital T.

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## Doctor in the House

Peter Ackroyd is a well-respected English writer with a long and successful career in mainstream fiction and poetry. I found *The House of Doctor Dee* quite by accident while browsing second-hand bookshops in Camden with Judith Clute. When a famous magician stares at you off the cover of a book and says "buy me" you ought to take notice. So I did, and here is the review.

The book is advertised as a ghost story, and so at least it seems to begin. The first chapter introduces us to the protagonist, Matthew Palmer, who seems to be a Lovecraftian sort of chap: gentle, literary, and with an annoying habit of being horrified of just about everything. His father has just bequeathed him a house in Clerkenwell, an inner-London district. In fact dear old Dad left everything to Matthew, much to the annoyance of his mother. Palmer's parents clearly hated each other. But it is the Clerkenwell house that fascinates Matthew because he had

no idea that his father owned it, and because it seems deserted and therefore liable to be full of horrifying things.

The second chapter takes us away from all this and into the 16<sup>th</sup> Century world of Dr. John Dee, alchemist, mathematician, spy-master and all round man-of-learning; the smartest guy in Elizabethan England. Ackroyd's portrait of Dee is fairly standard: a man obsessed with learning, bitter that his knowledge and power have not brought him the wealth and status that he thinks it deserves, and angry that the common people think him no more than a fraud or a sorcerer. Ackroyd also has Dee's way of speaking off pat. He admits later that he took much of the Dee sections of the book from the subject's actual writings, but as we shall see he has changed much about Dee's life so he must have written a lot of it himself. In addition at one point the book features a news clipping about an early 20<sup>th</sup> Century séance at Dee's house and Ackroyd has the language of that period off pat too.

As you will have guessed by now, the house that Matthew Palmer inherits did indeed belong to John Dee, and it is indeed haunted; or at least has a connection to the past which at times seems two-way as Dee and Edward Kelley see Palmer in the scrying glass. As you might expect, the two strands of the story come together at the end. Along the way Palmer learns rather more than he wanted to about his father, including why his parents hated each other, and about his own origins. The latter point is very clever, but much of the rest of the book falls flat.

To start with, as a ghost story or horror novel the book is not remotely scary. Dee is a rather pathetic figure who, despite his great learning, spent much of his life being

cheated by fraudulent scryers such as Kelley. It is quite impossible to treat him seriously as a black magician. Matthew's father turns out to have been a rather nastier piece of work, though why he found it necessary to have sex with transvestites in order to invoke Dee's magic is never explained. And if sex magic is so important to the mystery, as Ackroyd implies, why was there no mention of the famous incident when Kelley persuaded Dee that angels had commanded the two men to share their wives?

It is not as if Ackroyd was afraid to mess with the Dee legend in creating the book. To start with Dee lived in Mortlake, not Clerkenwell. His wife's name was Jane, not Katherine, and she was not poisoned by Kelley. She died of the plague many years after Kelley died trying to escape from prison in Prague, where he had been convicted of fraudulent practice of alchemy. Given that Ackroyd allowed himself so much licence, I don't see why he could not have changed things so as to make Dee and Kelley genuinely nasty rather than the gullible old professor and cunning moutebank that we know from history. This was an interesting book, but I have a sneaking suspicion that it would have been much better if it had been written by someone like Greg Frost, Jeff Ford or Peter Straub.

*The House of Doctor Dee* - Peter Ackroyd - Penguin - softcover

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## The Sound of "Spung"

Ever in tune with the rhythms of the universe, Dave Langford inscribed my review copy of his latest book, "for Cheryl

- in fear & trembling." And well he might. What, one might ask, will the Queen Bitch™ of SF criticism make of a book of reviews and essays by a mere sixteen-time winner of the Best Fanwriter Hugo? Cat food, perhaps? Shreddies? Trembling would seem entirely appropriate.

Of course I do have to begin this review by reminding you, dear reader, that any book by Langford is well worth the purchase for its humor value alone. Most of us humble critics (in which class I include John Clute and Gary K. Wolfe) have to get by on our piercing intellect. We are expected to say something clever about the book under the microscope. The reader of a Langford review, on the other hand, does not need to worry about such trivia. She knows well beforehand that even if Langford has nothing at all of interest to say about a book his review of it will still be uproariously funny. In lit crit circles this sort of thing is known as, "a devilish cunning plan that would be outlawed in any sane and rational society." Sadly, as we know all too well, our world is neither sane nor rational. More to the point, it is not fair. Hence there is Langford.

Armed with his vorpal rapier of wit (+666 forged of unbreakable mithril-adamantium alloy), the Fanglord is at his best when ruthlessly excoriating hubris, humbug and downright incompetence amongst the SF literati. He boldly exposes the plot fallacies of Larry Niven. He holds up the stylistic idiosyncrasies of Frank Herbert naked for public viewing. And he heaps bucket-loads of steaming, fetid scorn upon the hapless corpse of Robert A. Heinlein.

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*The book is an embarrassment; it is unremittingly awful; it is the first Heinlein novel I've found it a genuine effort to finish. [...]*

*Heinlein appears to have severed his links with the world of reality, locking himself in a mirror-maze where all of his reflections understand and agree with him perfectly. Our only way of registering protest is not to buy this terrible, terrible book.*

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No, there are no prizes for guessing which notorious stinker that was aimed at. (And the title of this review gives it away if you are puzzled.)

Unfortunately Langford's unremitting eye for inaccuracy and inconsistency sometimes ends up confusing the reader. Some of the reviews in *Up Through an Empty House of Stars* report a litany of embarrassing errors and idiocies perpetrated by the unfortunate author, only for Langford to conclude by saying that he really liked the book. Also the scientific precision of the analysis sits uncomfortably when the subject matter is not entirely scientific. There are very few reviews of out-and-out fantasy books in this collection, and those that are there (for example of Robert Irwin's *The Arabian Nightmare* and Tim Powers' *Earthquake Weather*) suggest that perhaps Langford doesn't quite "get" fantasy. It is one thing to pillory Lovecraft for his inept use of Greek ("Necronomicon" apparently means "Book of Dead Laws", not "Book of Dead Names"), but rather another to complain of the lack of scientific precision in something that was never meant to be rational in the first place.

There are, of course, exceptions to every rule. There is one writer in the SF&F pantheon whose work is so subtle, so complex, so wonderfully ingenious and

convoluted that even Langford cannot find fault with it and is instead reduced to awed paeans of praise. I am, of course, talking about Gene Wolfe. Some of the most entertaining and enlightening reviews in this book are those where Langford charts a clear and obvious course through the Gordian knots of Wolfe's plots, the contemplation of which had left the brains of us mere mortals in such a state of tangled befuddlement that only radical lobotomy seemed likely to be able to restore us to some semblance of normal thought.

If I have a serious complaint about Langford's ability as a reviewer it is that he rarely tries to do more than describe the book he is featuring. Sure he points out errors and inconsistencies, and highlights good writing and humor, but he makes little attempt to elucidate it at anything other than a surface level. It is rather like a food critic who spends all his effort on describing the appearance and presentation of the food, and on in-depth discussion of the method of preparation, without actually bothering to taste it. I know that there is no such thing as a "true" reading of a novel — meaning is always subjective — therefore Langford may have elected to avoid the appearance of being "wrong" that always results when someone else presents their interpretation of a book. However, it also leaves the book sounding somewhat shallow and uninteresting. Science fiction may not be a "literature of ideas", but it is certainly a literature in which ideas, be they scientific, political, philosophical, theological or whatever, play a major role in the text and, in my humble opinion, it behooves the reviewer to at least attempt to explain what the book is saying to her.

Meanwhile, back with the general theme, if fantasy is somewhat lacking from the

review collection then this is made up for by the presence of detective fiction. Langford claims to read it as welcome relief from all of the below-par SF&F he has to read for his commercial review columns, though how he finds the time is a mystery to me. He must read much faster than I do. I guess it is one of his demonic powers. The essay on Chesterton is not much about crime fiction at all, because GKC wrote fantasy-like novels as well. But there are also essays on Anthony Boucher and Ernest Bramah. And of course there is a lengthy piece highlighting the inaccuracies and implausibilities in a string of detective novels by well-known writers.

There are times when reading this collection that you wonder whether Langford actually likes SF at all. And I'm fairly certain he doesn't think much of fantasy. Nit-picking is, of course, his gimmick. People expect it of him. But collected together like this it can be overwhelming. There seems to be something obsessively fannish about it all. Perhaps that is what led Langford to include a certain quote from Chesterton on the subject of insanity.

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*If you argue with a madman, it is extremely probable that you will get the worst of it; for in many ways his mind moves all the quicker for not being delayed by the things that go with good judgment. He is not hampered by a sense of humour or by charity, or by the dumb certainties of experience. He is the more logical for losing certain sane affections. Indeed, the common phrase for insanity is in this respect a misleading one. The madman is not the man who has lost his reason. The madman is the man who has lost everything except his reason.*

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Have you ever had that experience at a convention?

Langford, I am sure, understands this. He notes earlier in the Chesterton essay, "the novel has the usual sacrifice of logic to mood," without excoriating poor Chesterton the way he might have done an SF writer. But in SF the nit picking is somehow required as if it is some curse set in motion by Gernsback that we cannot now escape from.

The other thing that occurs to me in reading Langford's hilarious and deadly put-downs is what a lucky escape we have had. What a fine dividing line there must be between finding all of this fault with SF yet still loving the genre, and with being filled with contempt for it. What if the young Langford had crossed that line? What if the *Daily Telegraph* now ran a regular column by D. Langford, Esq. in which the latest releases in SF&F were mercilessly pilloried and held up for ridicule? What if SF's most famous fan had instead become its greatest enemy? Who then in Britain would dare write such novels as would become prey for his deadly wit?

Oh, the horror! The horror!

Maybe we do live in the best of all possible worlds.

*Up Through an Empty House of Stars: Reviews and Essays 1980-2002* - Dave Langford - Cosmos - softcover

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## Short Stuff

As we all know, children's fantasy is big business these days. Some publishers have special imprints for this type of book. At Penguin (USA) that is Firebird, headed by

Sharyn November. The anthology under review here, aptly if un-originally named *Firebirds*, is a collection of short stories by well-known children's and young adult authors, and very fine stuff it is too.

Of course being a middle-aged woman who loves books my first thought on seeing any such work is, "will that make a good present for some friends/relatives kids." I do like to corrupt the little darlings, after all. But parents are often excessively protective of their offspring, and such exercises are therefore fraught with danger, especially where an anthology is concerned. It is all too easy to fall foul of a taboo. Some parents try to shield their little ones from anything challenging, or even vaguely sad. Others are quite happy with stories about sex, but draw the line at violence. It all gets very complicated.

For example, there are two stories in *Firebirds* that feature an abandoned baby girl. Megan Whalen Turner's delightful "The Baby in the Night Deposit Box" will appeal to almost anyone (save for those with a political disposition to hate bankers as a matter of principle, and anyone who is a social worker). Who can fail to love a story in which the heroine defeats the wicked witch by pointing a baby's dummy at her and saying, "you are a bunny"? But Garth Nix's "Hope Chest" is a dark and bloody tale about a fascist cult in America whose heroine is a sort of female Clint Eastwood crossed with The Punisher. It has more dead bodies than the rest of the anthology put together. Lots more.

There are adult themes and less adult themes. Delia Sherman's "Cotillion" features a heroine who has sex with a mystery boy on their first date because he tells her that he's been kidnapped by

fairies. It is a good line, but I don't think I would have fallen for it, even if it were true. Lloyd Alexander's "Max Mondrosch" is a grim and depressing tale of the dehumanizing effects of the job-hunting process. Patricia McKillip, on the other hand, provides a classic (and typically beautifully crafted) story about Fairyland, "Byndley", that will appeal to all. And Diana Wynne Jones has a talking cat story, "Little Dot", in which the loveable fur-balls save their human from a monster.

My two favorite stories from the anthology are by Nancy Farmer and Nina Kiriki Hoffman. The former, "Remember Me", is a haunting twist on the changeling theme, and the latter, "Flotsam", is a guaranteed tearjerker about a lost fairy boy who brings comfort to a family whose daughter has just died. But all of the stories in this collection are good. As you might expect, all of them are fairly easy reading. And none of them talk down to the reader so much that they will not appeal to adult readers as well as children. Most importantly, there isn't a single one that I would class as "formula fantasy". The closest is Sherwood Smith's "Beauty", which is set in a medieval society with wizards and grand politics. But even that is a warm tale about a teenage princess discovering that personality can count for just as much as looks when it comes to finding a husband. All in all, this is a charming book, and thoroughly recommended.

*Firebirds* - Sharyn November (Ed.) - Firebird - hardcover

## Miscellany

### Issue #100 Addendum

John Clute has asked me to mention that in his article from #100, where he talks about equipoise, he should have noted the following:

“I should make it clear here that this definition was written well after Farah Mendlesohn articulated — in conversations with me — her concept of ‘knowingness,’ to be fully argued by her in papers yet to be published.”

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### Philip K. Dick Award Nominees

The Philip K. Dick Award ([http://philipkdick.com/links\\_pkdaward.html](http://philipkdick.com/links_pkdaward.html)) is for paperback originals published in the US in 2003. The list is:

*Hyperthought* by M. M. Buckner (Ace Books); *Clade* by Mark Budz (Bantam Spectra); *Dante's Equation* by Jane Jensen (Del Rey); *Altered Carbon* by Richard K. Morgan (Del Rey); *Spin State* by Chris Moriarty (Bantam Spectra); *Steel Helix* by Ann Tonsor Zeddies (Del Rey).

The winner will be announced and the award presented at Norwescon (<http://www.norwescon.org/>) in Seattle this coming Easter.

I see I have only reviewed two-thirds of the nominees, two in this issue. I will try to get through the rest of them before Easter.

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## Nebula Preliminary Ballot

SFWA has released the result of the preliminary ballot for the Nebula Awards. The items on these long lists will be voted on by SFWA members and the top five in each category will go on to the final ballot. The long lists are:

**Novels:** *Hidden Empire: The Saga of Seven Suns, Book 1*, Kevin J. Anderson (Warner Books, Jul/02); *Diplomatic Immunity*, Lois McMaster Bujold (Baen, May/02); *The Mount*, Carol Emshwiller (Small Beer Press, Jun/02); *Fitcher's Brides*, Gregory Frost (Tor, Dec/02); *Light Music*, Kathleen Ann Goonan (Eos, Jun/02); *A Scattering of Jades*, Alexander C. Irvine (Tor, Jul/02); *Maximum Ice*, Kay Kenyon (Bantam, Feb/02); *Chindi*, Jack McDevitt (Ace, Jul/02); *The Scar*, China Miéville (Del Rey, Jun/02); *The Speed of Dark*, Elizabeth Moon (Ballantine, Jan/03); *Fallen Host*, Lyda Morehouse (Roc, May/02); *The Return of Santiago*, Mike Resnick (Tor, Feb/03); *Humans*, Robert J. Sawyer (Tor, Feb/03); *Ruled Britannia*, Harry Turtledove (New American Library, Nov/02); *Red Thunder*, Varley, John (Ace, Apr/03).

**Novellas:** “The Potter of Bones”, Eleanor Arnason (*Asimov's*, Sep/02); “The Empress of Mars”, Kage Baker (*Asimov's*, Jul/03); *Coraline*, Neil Gaiman (HarperCollins, Jul/02); “Stories for Men”, John Kessel (*Asimov's*, Oct/Nov 2002); “Breathmoss”, Ian R. MacLeod (*Asimov's*, May/02).

**Novellettes:** “The Mask of the Rex”, Richard Bowes, Richard (F&SF, May/02); “0wnz0red”, Cory Doctorow (Salon.com, Aug/02); “The Empire of Ice Cream”, Jeffrey Ford (SCI FICTION, Feb26, 2003); “The Wages of Syntax”, Ray Vukcevich (SCI FICTION, Oct 16, 2002).

**Short Stories:** "Knapsack Poems", Eleanor Arnason (*Asimov's*, May/02); "Goodbye to All That", Harlan Ellison (*McSweeney's Mammoth Treasury of Thrilling Tales*, Apr/03); "Grandma" Carol Emshwiller (*F&SF*, Mar/02); "What I Didn't See", Karen Joy Fowler (*SCI FICTION*, Jul 10, 2002); "Lambing Season" Molly Gloss (*Asimov's*, Jul/02); "The Rose in Twelve Petals", Theodora Goss (*Realms of Fantasy*, Apr/02); "Taste of Summer", Ellen Klages (*Black Gate*, Feb/02); "The Tale of the Golden Eagle", David D. Levine (*F&SF*, Jun/03); "Will You Be an Astronaut?", Greg van Eekhout (*F&SF*, Sep/02); "The Last of the O-Forms", James Van Pelt (*Asimov's*, Sep/02).

**Scripts:** *Minority Report*, Scott Frank and John Cohen (*Dreamworks*, Jul/02); *Where No Fan Has Gone Before*, David A. Goodman (*Futurama*, Apr/02); *Spirited Away*, Hayao Miyazaki with Cindy Davis Hewitt and Donald H. Hewitt (English screenplay) (Studio Ghibli and Walt Disney Pictures, Sep/02 ); *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*, Fran Walsh, Philippa Bowens, Stephen Sinclair, and Peter Jackson (New Line Cinema, Dec/02).

The first thing you will be wondering here is what the heck is the nomination period. All I can say is that it is complicated. It is sort of two years, except that things released late in the second year don't have time to get considered. You will also note that there is a lot of good stuff missing. Some of that is explainable by the fact that the award is for US-published work only, so none of the wonderful PS Publishing novellas get in. The next complication is that works can only be on the long list in one year, which cut out a lot of the 2002 Hugo nominees. Even so, there's a lot missing. There's no place on the novel

long list for *The Years of Rice and Salt*, *Ilium*, *Quicksilver* or *Pattern Recognition*.

Another strange thing is that three categories – Novella, Novelette and Script – have five or less works on the long list. It takes just 10 recommendations from SFWA's supposed 1,400 members to get a work on the long list. This suggests that not a lot of people are voting, which might explain some of the strange novel results.

All in all, long lists like this don't give me much confidence in the Nebulas as awards, which is sad. I muttered about this in my blog when the long lists first came out and several other people took up on the theme. Mark R. Kelly, the editor of *Locus Online*, went as far as to compare the *Locus* Recommending Reading List for 2002 with the list of 2002 novels that got on the Nebula long list either last year or this. The differences are startling. You can find Mark's lists in the January 8 posting of his blog which resides at: <http://locusmag.blogspot.com/>.

It seems to me that the most likely reason for the strangeness of the SFWA lists is that many working SF writers simply don't have the time to read much fiction, or choose not to because they don't want other people's work to insinuate its way into their subconscious when they are trying to write. Consequently the level of participation in the Nebula ballot may be quite low. Certainly we know from Hugo experience that participation in the nomination stage is lower than the final ballot. And the assembly of the Nebula long lists is more akin to something like *Emerald City's* Hugo Recommendation List, where participation is even lower.

When I talked this over with Kevin he noted that if a Hugo category fails to get enough nominees to fill the final ballot

there are immediate demands for the category to be dropped. The script category in the Nebulas has always seemed a bit odd to me, but I wouldn't like to see novella or novelette go. Rather I suspect that SFWA should look at simplifying the voting process and encouraging more participation.

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### **BSFA Award Nominations**

Talking of stuff that requires nominating and may not get sufficient interest to produce sensible results, nominations for this year's British Science Fiction Association Awards will close at the end of January. If you are a member of the BSFA, please take a look at the list of nominees on the web site (<http://www.bsfa.co.uk/>) and cast your own votes. Nominations should be sent to Claire Briarley at [awards@amaranth.aviators.net](mailto:awards@amaranth.aviators.net).

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### **BSFA Open Evenings**

Those of you who live within easy striking distance of London may know that the British Science Fiction Association holds open meetings on Wednesday evenings once a month. The meetings generally feature an interview with a guest writer, and take place at the Rising Sun Pub, 38 Cloth Fair (nearest Tube: Barbican), beginning at 6:30pm. The schedule for the first half of 2004 is as follows:

Jan 28 - Geoff Ryman  
Feb 25 - Roger Levy  
Mar 24 - Steve Aylett  
Apr 28 - Steph Swainston  
May 26 - Ken MacLeod  
Jun 23 - Les Edwards (aka Edward Miller).

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### **Borders Night with Pat**

Still with London Pat Cadigan's SF Nights at Borders on Oxford Street kick into gear again shortly. The February 9<sup>th</sup> event will feature editor extraordinaire, Ellen Datlow, and Paul McAuley who will be reading from his new novel, *White Devils*. Festivities start at 6:30pm.

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### **Access to Ax**

Gwyneth Jones tells me that she's started doing direct sales of her *Bold As Love* series for the benefit of overseas readers who are having difficulty getting hold of them. She can't do credit cards, but she can do checks/cheques in US\$ and Euros, or traveler's checks/cheques. And you'll get a signed copy too. See <http://www.boldaslove.co.uk/TrailersML.htm>.

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### **Spec Fic goes live**

The Speculative Fiction Foundation that I briefly mentioned last month is now officially founded. More details on the smart new web site: <http://www.speculativeliterature.org>.

Of particular interest to those of you of a creative bent is that they are running a writing competition. The press release says:

"The first award we will present will be the 2003 SLF Fountain Award, \$1000 in prize money for excellence in short fiction. A select jury will accept nominations from magazine and anthology editors, and announce the winner and honorable mentions on June 1st, 2004."

Go for it!

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### **Worldcon Distractions**

With remarkable synchronicity the Museum of Science in Boston will be hosting Peter Jackson's traveling *Lord of the Rings* exhibition at the same time as Worldcon is in that city. Friends who saw it while it was in London tell me it is awesome. Hopefully the Noreascon 4 folks will try to arrange a con discount or group trip.

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### **Footnote**

Good grief, how did this one get so big? I'm starting to worry myself. Hopefully #102 will be a more sane size. But it should have reviews of books by Kim Stanley Robinson, Richard Morgan, Ted Chiang and Amy Thomson, amongst others, so don't miss it!

Ciao,

Love 'n' hugs,

Cheryl