

# EMERALD CITY #105

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## Introduction

Hello Wiscon. If you are reading this at the World's Only Feminist Science Fiction Convention, welcome. I don't think that I can claim that this is the world's only feminist SF&F book review magazine, but it is the only such publication that is nominated for a Hugo Award this year and with that I am more than happy.

I've tried to find some Wiscon-type books to review for this issue, including Matt Ruff's wonderful Tiptree-winning novel, *Set This House in Order*. We've also got fiction covering gender and paganism issues by Anne Harris and Storm Constantine, and an academic review of gender in science fiction from Brian Attebery. Plus there's a whole load of other stuff that is less Wiscon-focused but I hope you will find interesting all the same.

To everyone else, welcome back. You know what to expect (although I admit that four event reports is a little over the top). So I won't keep you from this issue any longer. Enjoy!

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## Conventional Piracy

Arr, me hearties, here we be in decidedly un-piratical Newbury doing our best to bring a Caribbean flavor to science fiction conventioning. There be panels, there be superfluous technology, and there be parrots, pieces of eight, and oceans of ale. Arr!

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### The Venue

Fortunately for you folks, I am not intending to write this entire review in Pirate. Nor will I be writing everything in the present tense, even though all self-respecting pirates will use no other. Indeed, I intend to concentrate mainly on the thing for which the Plokta Cabal is most famous: superfluous technology. When these guys run a convention they don't do so by halves. On show in Newbury over May Bank Holiday weekend was the very latest in electronic gadgetery. You don't get stuff like this in Silicon Valley; California is positively Neanderthal by comparison.

To start with the hotel was fitted with all of the latest gadgetery conveniences. Every room had an adjustable bed, and consequently Steve and Giulia were kept very busy training convention members in

the use of said voracious beasts. As far as we know, no one was actually been eaten, but Colin Harris was present on Saturday and no one has seen him since, so we are a little worried.

Something that no amount of application of technology seems to be able to fix is the poor quality of British plumbing. However, the hotel tried hard to ease the problems this causes by providing an electronic water condition meter attached to the shower. This will tell you the state of the water pressure and whether the resulting output will be warm, cold or scalding. In my room the meter seemed to be stuck on a setting of "eccentric", but the hotel staff assured me that it was working properly.

A rather more impressive innovation was the automated beer dispenser in every room. The idea was that no one should ever be caught in need of a pint of their favorite real ale. In theory you could dial up the pint of your choice and have it delivered freshly to you. What convention could possibly offer more? Unfortunately it seemed that there were still a number of bugs in the system, the most serious of which being that no matter what type of beer you ordered it seemed to come out tasting exactly like hot, black Earl Grey tea, but doubtless the manufacturers will fix that one in good time.

Because of the minor shortcomings of the in-room beer dispensers most fans still spent the entire convention in the bar. This meant having to deal with the newly installed robot bar staff. They were sourced from a company in South Africa and, whilst perfectly capable of pulling a pint, were notably deficient in some areas of their programming. Among the missing elements of their vocabulary were "bourbon", "large one" and "shandy".

Thankfully they were also incapable of translating the traditional British greeting of, "stuff a capacitor up your arse, you ignorant metal git!"

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### **The Program**

Ever keen to reduce the cost of conventions, the Plokta Cabal had instituted a system of virtual panels. Roughly 80% of the programming at the convention took place entirely in cyberspace, largely through the medium of IRC chat forums. This solved an awful lot of scheduling problems and allowed us to manage with a hotel with rather less function space than might otherwise have been required.

The main problem with virtual panels was that they have attracted a lot of unwelcome attention from the MLU, the Microphones' and Loudspeakers' Union. These groups of technology workers have, for many years, relied upon science fiction conventions for regular employment. They see the rise of virtual panels as a serious danger to the future of their trade, and according to the fliers being distributed by pickets outside of the hotel they intend to do whatever is necessary to prevent the spread of virtual conventions. The most serious incident that we suffered during the weekend was a feedback protest that disrupted part of Charlie Stross's Guest of Honor panel. Thankfully Cory Doctorow, who was interviewing Charlie, is adept at strike-breaking and dealt severely with the offending items of technology.

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### **Other Events**

Much of the rest of the convention was also virtual. The dealers' room was

provided by Amazon.co.uk and the art show by the National Gallery Online. The games room, however, was physical. It was filled with top of the line model Playstations. The main game on offer was "Super Giulia Kid Stomp" and it featured Giulia de Cesare, dressed as Super Mario and ably assisted by the ghost of George the cat, trying to rid the convention of small children by jumping up and down on them. The game was reportedly quite difficult and poor Giulia often ended up captured and forced to play with the kids, particularly in the higher level of the game where she was up against the deadly Jonathan and Marianne.

I hesitate to mention the masquerade because I'm not sure whether anyone will believe me, but Sunday night was Pirate Night and the cream of British con-running fandom could be seen dressed as pirates. Particularly splendid costumes were seen on Fran and John Dowd, and on Alice and Steve Lawson, not to mention the Plokta Cabal themselves. It was all very impressive, Arrr!

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### **Bid Session**

The meeting to decide the location and theme of next year's convention was held late on Sunday night. As Kevin wasn't able to attend I chaired the session. This meant that it was conducted according to Captain Morgan's Rules of Order rather than those of General Roberts. My rules are rather shorter, comprising mainly of, "do as I say or you will walk the plank." Poor Ben Yalow got very wet indeed.

By this time the consumption of conspicuous amounts of warm beer and grog had resulted in a serious decline in the quality of the pirate accents. The assembled fans often sounded rather more

like West Country farmers. Consequently next year's event will be called plokta.combine and will be held in Wincanton, Zummerzet, a town that is twinned with Ankh Morpork. The Guest of Honour will, of course, be the famous British fantasy writer, Jack Yeovil.

The Plokta Cabal is already working hard on an all-inclusive program. Sue and Giulia will present the literary panels, which will be devoted to the new fashion for pirate/farmer slash. Dr.Plokta will present a comprehensive history of agricultural technology. And Alison and the kids will provide a live demonstration of how to milk a cow. Ian Sorensen is being rather coy about his potential starring role on the Adge Cutler Memorial Filk Concert, but I'm sure he'll come round in time.

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## From Science to Fashion

As related previously in these pages, the Arthur C. Clarke Award was made homeless this year when a cut in funding and a 700% rise in facilities costs forced it to abandon its traditional home in the London Science Museum. Not being able to browse the serried ranks of steam engines, difference engines and rocket engines (not to mention Mika Hakkinen's McLaren) will have undoubtedly caused a certain amount of deprivation amongst the assembled geeks (or in my case petrol-heads), but the new venue at the English Heritage Lecture Theatre was hugely successful on its trial run. A big round of applause, please, for Maureen Kincaid-Speller who managed to locate the new facility in the nick of time.

Arriving at the Lecture Theatre is a little adventurous. Location-wise it is just superb, being just a few minutes walk from Oxford Circus tube station. The theatre is in a small alleyway running between the busy fashion centers of Regent Street and Saville Row. There was some fairly serious construction going on at the time, resulting in a nearby building being reduced to nothing more than a splendid Georgian façade, behind which new shops will presumably be built. The builders' equipment and narrow alley location gave the place a rather secretive look, as if we were sneaking into a concealed back street to attend a seedy transvestite club, but once we were inside all worries were put aside.

The great thing about the Lecture Theatre is that it is purpose built for the occasion. No more traipsing through endless galleries of Great British Inventions to reach the supplies of free wine. No more tramping up flights of stairs to get to the theatre. Everything is right on hand, and the venue was just the right size to seem very busy without being overcrowded. It seemed, from everyone I spoke to, to have been a great success.

Sadly we were a little short on nominees this year. Despite the short list having six names on it rather than the usual five, only two of them made it to the ceremony. Three of them (William Gibson, Greg Bear and Neal Stephenson) had the very good excuse of living in North America (though I point out that Elizabeth Moon did make the trip last year). Tricia Sullivan apparently had personal problems and could not attend, and that left only Stephen Baxter and Gwyneth Jones to grace the ceremony. It would have been nice if one of them had won.

Instead the prize, much to everyone's amazement, went to Neal Stephenson's *Quicksilver*. The smart money had all been saying that as a part of a series and containing only homeopathic doses of SF, the Stephenson book didn't stand a chance. And we pundits were all wrong.

Obviously I am disappointed for Tricia Sullivan, because I think that *Maul* is a wonderful book. However, I note that *Quicksilver* is the only other novel from my Hugo nomination list that made the Clarke shortlist, so I'm absolutely delighted that it won.

As usual there was a good crowd of people. As with everything else in the country, a large proportion of the British SF&F community is based in and around London. But I was particularly delighted to see that we had a visitor from the other side of the world. K.J. Bishop's husband, Stuart, is in Europe on business, and she decided to come along with him and meet people. Pan Macmillan are busy looking after her, and brought her along to the ceremony. Sadly I don't think that they can stay around long enough for the Commonwealth SF conference in Liverpool in August, but it was great to get to meet them.

Talking of things Australian, I discovered that Darren Nash (late of *Earthlight*, now of *Orbit*) is a fellow long-suffering Richmond Tigers supporter. Naturally we immediately fell to discussing how much we hate Collingwood.

Of course one of the best things about the Clarke Award ceremony is that it is blessedly short. Paul Kincaid does his obligatory introductory speech praising the quality of British SF. This year he also added some profuse thanks to all of the people and organizations that came through to help the Award through its

funding and locational crisis. If you are reading this at Wiscon, go find some of the people from the SF3 board and thank them profusely on behalf of the British SF industry. It is seriously generous of an American fan group to help fund a British award (even if the award is open to writers of all nationalities). After Paul is done, the envelope gets opened, usually by the previous year's winner (in this case Chris Priest). And then the winner makes a very short speech that doesn't mention pets or personal trainers. Afterwards we all get to go and eat. As a result of the move from Kensington we will have to find other excuses to visit Daquise, the very fine Polish restaurant. However, gastronomic expert Roz Kaveney introduced us to the local branch of the very excellent Masala Zone and good curry was had by all.

Which just leaves me to say that if you are reading this at Wiscon and you have not yet read *Maul* by Tricia Sullivan, then go find a copy now. It is the best piece of feminist SF I have read in a long time (and it is on the Tiptree shortlist).

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## Thrilling Wonder Tales

One of the good things about being involved with the Speculative Literature Foundation is that I get to meet people from outside of the SF community. This month we put on an event in San Francisco that brought together a Pulitzer Prize winner, a Hugo winner, a creative writing teacher and a musician. And why not?

The event took place at Valencia Street Books, an independent bookshop in San Francisco. Staff for the event came from

bookstores and from a bunch of literary magazines of varying genre-ness from the highly literary to, well, *Emerald City*. Charlie Anders of *other magazine* did a splendid job of MCing the event in the face of an on-going uncertainty over whether we were getting a microphone. If ever you need someone to keep an audience busy, and indeed killing themselves with laughter, while your tech crew are playing with cables backstage then Charlie is your girl.

SF Writer Carter Scholz opened the readings with part of "A Catastrophe Machine", a story from his 2003 collection, *The Amount to Carry*. In a review in *The Agony Column* Rick Kleffel described this story as combining "the humorous effects of the best R. A. Lafferty stories with the intellectual rigor of Stanislaw Lem." I confess to not having been concentrating too hard on the intellectual rigor, but it was certainly amusing.

Claire Light is well known in San Francisco as a creative writing teacher. She is also the literary editor of *Hyphen Magazine*, which caters to the Asian-American community. This is perhaps not the sort of person you would expect to write stories about being abducted by aliens and landing on a planet where the natives give off interesting scents when you bump into them. The story fragment that Light read is from an unfinished work, but one that would grace the pages of any SF magazine if it were submitted to them.

Next up was Terry Bisson who read a hilarious tale of two aliens expressing their surprise and disgust at having discovered a planet on which the local life forms are made of meat. This was one of the funniest things I have heard in a long

time. I really must review some of Bisson's work here in the near future.

Finally our top-billed writer, Michael Chabon, read from "The Martina Agent, A Planetary Romance," the alternate history steampunk story he contributed to his recent anthology *McSweeney's Mammoth Treasury of Thrilling Tales*. In introducing the tale Chabon commented that it is the first part of a series and that he will be producing another McSweeney's anthology, including the second part of the story, soon. One of the invited writers for the new anthology is China Miéville. That will be worth looking out for. (And yes, I know I should have reviewed the first McSweeney's anthology long ago. Sorry...)

Finally we had a panel discussion hosted by Jeremy Smith of the Independent Press Association. For the most part this was the usual "is genre literature?" stuff that you will have heard a lot of from me before. Chabon commented that he had always wanted to write genre-type work and that even when he was trying to excise it from his work as his teachers demanded, they could still detect traces. He recalled being told to go to classes given by Greg Benford because that was where strange people like him belonged.

One area where we did touch on new ground was music. Carter Scholz composes music as well as being a writer and he was able to talk about how musical styles suffer from the same sort of genre snobbery as literature, but that modern composers such as Steve Reich use jazz themes in their work because that's the music that they were brought up on. Terry Bisson noted that the world owes a debt to great jazz musicians for proving to the world that popular culture can produce seriously good art.

Because the audience was predominantly made up of mainstream readers we didn't get the sort of sophisticated discussion of the nature of genre that you might expect, say, at a convention panel with John Clute, Gary K. Wolfe and Farah Mendlesohn. There were times when I was just itching to be on the panel myself so that I could respond to some of the points made, especially when someone in the audience came out with the old line about SF needing to disassociate itself from fantasy and horror because SF was serious and the other genres were not. Sigh. Still, I did shamelessly rip off Paul McAuley's excellent point about how we now live in a science fictional world and that any fiction that claims to be "realistic" has to be SF. Much to my astonishment, everyone just nodded in absolute agreement.

Anyway, it all went well and much money was raised for SLF, all of which will go to ensure that this year's Fountain Award is well funded. My main disappointment for the evening was the lack of SF people there. I know the publicity didn't go out until after the last issue of *Emerald City* so I wasn't able to trail it here, but it was on the blog, on *Locus Online* and on *Write Hemisphere*. And Kevin plugged it at BASFA for me. You missed a good event, folks.

Finally I should say thanks to all of those non-SLF people who gave their time for free, especially our speakers, Amanda and the staff at Valencia Street Books, Alan and Cary from Borderlands Books who did a fine job taking money at the door, Danielle of Watchword Press for providing and serving the wine, and Kevin for staffing the SLF sales table.

So, now the Bay Area has managed two successful events on behalf of SLF. How

about the rest of the country? Hello, does anyone live in New York these days?

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## Penguins R Us

Penguins Create Chaos and other events at Penguicon 2.0

by Anne Murphy

I had a truly delightful time at this year's Penguicon. I was attending the convention in three capacities. As Neil Gaiman's Liaison I was assisting Neil with his schedule and trying to live up to my promise to his personal assistant, The Fabulous Lorraine, that I would take good care of him; as Chair of ConFusion, another Detroit-area convention, I was also responsible for setting up ClubFusion, our weekend-long party; and as Secretary of the Science Fiction Oral History Association I was theoretically helping make sure we taped as much of the con as possible. That last being my lowest priority, I wasn't as on top of coordinating it as I should have been and, well, let's just say we'll do a much better job next year.

I should probably start by explaining that Penguicon (<http://www.penguicon.org>) was conceived as a combination Linux Expo and Science Fiction Convention. It was started very successfully last year by co-founders Rob Landley (computer geek) and Tracy Worcester (sf geek and smof), not to mention an impressively enthusiastic committee. Steve Gutterman took the helm this year and in most ways it went very well. This is despite the fact that their hotel closed and they had to shift location in the middle of the year, and one of their headline guests, Wil Wheaton, was caught by a scheduling

conflict and had to pull out shortly before the convention. They ended up at the Detroit-Novi Sheraton, a site that worked perhaps medium well, and took full advantage of their remaining guests: Neil Gaiman, Jeff "Hemos" Bates, Steve Jackson, and Jon "maddog" Hall, as well as a cadre of "Nifty Guests": Eric Raymond, Pete Abrams, Rob "CmdrTaco" Malda, Fred Gallagher, John Ringo, Howard Tayler, Vince Locke, Sandra L. Brewer, Tom Smith and Luke Ski.

April 16-18 was an earlier time slot this year than last year, which worked out all right except that put it uncomfortably close to both Minicon and the deadline for U.S. taxes. So some people were unable to come, and due to taxes I went into the convention already sleep-deprived. (A theme, you'll find, of this report.)

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## Thursday

Because my car had substantial issues with the shifting and the suspension, not to mention the doors, I borrowed my husband Bill's car for the weekend, and he drove mine to work. Thursday evening after I learned that Neil was definitely not going to make it that day, Bill informed me that my car was in much worse shape than he'd thought and he wasn't going to be coming that day, either. I headed on to the Concom/GoH dinner, somewhat sad, but wanting to get oriented and into the swing of the con. Bill stayed up until 3 pm fixing my car and joined me at the con after work on Friday. Which is entirely a side story but serves to illustrate what a wonderful husband I have.

At the ConCom/GoH dinner I was pleased to sit across the table from Steve Jackson and his guest Michelle Barrett, who runs the Steve Jackson Games online

store (<http://www.sjgames.com>). Steve was the only GoH able to come to dinner, but "Nifty" guest Pete Abrams was there with his assistant Trillian, and an impressive amount of the concom was there despite being short on guests. Have I mentioned this crew is enthusiastic?

Pete and Trillian have been to ConFusion and Penguicon before, so when we were done eating I went over to say "Hi". Across the table was Chuck Firment, who headed Consuite at ConFusion this year and is one of the most wonderful people I know. Chuck had agreed to take Wil's place as Master of Ceremonies and was also to stand in for him running the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund (CBLDF) Charity Auction Saturday night. With very little prompting, Chuck handed me a cell phone connection to our friend Rennie, so that I could confirm that despite recent knee surgery, she was coming on Friday and would room with Trillian. There was much rejoicing.

I touched base with my head of Publications, Matt Arnold, about party and con flyers. Matt was also Pubs head for Penguicon, as well as their guest liaison for con mascot Tux the penguin, later to be seen wandering around the con in his red Starfleet uniform. I recruited Matt to ride back with me to the hotel and unload a car full of ClubFusion stuff up to my room, and then met back up with the gang in the Consuite. Many of us went downstairs for a while to watch Aegis Consulting demonstrate swordplay, but when it became clear that no one would be allowed to play with the cardboard swords whom had not had 3 months' training, we returned to the Consuite and there entertained ourselves well into the night.

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## Friday

Friday morning, having no immediate responsibilities and the day off work, I woke up at 6 a.m. My body likes to play these tricks on me. I took my laptop down to the lobby and eventually remembered something Steve had said the night before about Internet access and coupons. The hotel was fully set up for wired and wireless access in the rooms and the lobby, and they were to give us con guests coupons so we could connect for free. I informed the front desk staff of this and soon a group of us were sitting at one of the nice round tables that were plentiful, clicking and chatting away. My most memorable companion of the morning was Howard Tayler, creator of the on-line comic strip *Schlock Mercenary*. Howard positively impressed me throughout the weekend, more than I expected given his often businesslike demeanor.

Tracy and Susan Harris thankfully lured me to a real breakfast around 10, after which I ran some errands and then went to the airport to pick up Neil's son Mike. Mike is a computer science student and was attending the con both to visit with his dad and for computer geekery. It was nice to see someone honestly excited about a panel on debuggers. Seth Breidbart came through the arrival doors shortly before Mike, so I gave him a hug and a ride back to the hotel as well.

Neil himself was driving; he had started in Minneapolis the night before and on Friday got delayed getting out of Chicago. I spent the afternoon mostly helping get the ClubFusion suite set up — unexpected bed taken out, light bulbs replaced, room rearranged for slot car racing, conversational spaces, and a place to take registrations. The hotel was short on lamps but I had brought strings of tiny

lights to demo, so we were all right. I should have napped but I couldn't stay still. Regular updates from Neil and Lorraine made it clear that he would arrive, if we were lucky, right before his reading scheduled for 7.

That schedule wouldn't give us time for the original plan of printing something off Neil's laptop for him to read, so I was sent to the dealer's room to borrow a copy of *Shadows over Baker Street*. Larry Smith and Sally Kobee were still unpacking and Larry wasn't sure if he had one. "Yes, we have \*one\*." said Sally. "Yeah, but it's in box number 26!" returned Larry. I assured them that taking two hours to get to the book was just fine. In due time I fetched it from them so I could hand it to Neil when he arrived.

In the meantime, the con was having its only substantial hang-up of the weekend — the registration desk was failing to open. For an hour or more, there was an unchanging line of people along the main hallway, waiting to buy memberships. Actually, they were changing; they were growing more visibly tired of waiting. No one got unruly though and eventually registration got under way (pre-registered attendees were unaffected). As far as I heard, the cause had something to do with not having the badge numbering system finished on time.

At five to 7, Mike and I sat at a table outside Ballrooms A and B, and I called Neil. "It's tempting to worry you," he admitted, "but I'm at the corner" — I directed him around the hotel and Mike went out to greet him. Neil came in, took the book, went to the podium, set down his bag, and started his reading. He read his Hugo-nominated short story, "A Study in Emerald" and after I got him some water I mostly just sat back and enjoyed it.

I'm very sad to say we didn't record it. I had seen Aaron Thul running the sound equipment and assumed we were recording. It didn't actually occur to me to ask Aaron if he was recording in the Ballroom and the Theater until 3 a.m. Sunday morning/Saturday night. I feel awful about that, so here's my apology to everyone: you missed a wonderful reading, and I can't play it for you, and I'm sorry. That stands for everything else we failed to record at the con too.

After the reading, Neil stayed on stage for Opening Ceremonies while Mike and Bill and I took his luggage up to his room. We returned to hear roaring and merriment coming from the Ballroom. It turned out that Steve Gutterman had, before all assembled, proposed to his girlfriend Dawn, and she had accepted him. The two of them were glowing all weekend and were the focus of much affection.

We had an hour to feed Neil some sushi and then deliver him to a panel on the CBLDF. Then Bill and I headed off to McDonald's for dinner with Mike and Brendan Durrett, who had been Wil Wheaton's Guest Liaison but was now just The Ribbon God. He was handling it well, really. Back to the end of the panel, which had run over and been very successful not only in teaching people about the Legal Defense Fund and issues it addresses, but also in recruiting further donations for the Auction. At this point I met Jon Manzo and Louis Sather, who were at the con partly to sell some of Neil's recently released rare material on behalf of Dreamhaven. They had lots of advice for me, having had Neil as their guest at a couple of Madison cons. It was mostly about protecting and rescuing him because, in case you haven't noticed, he's very, very, nice. Even when cornered by

an overzealous fan or overburdened at a signing.

Jon and Louis accompanied us up to the green room, where Neil thoroughly established his reputation as an entertainer by singing sections of *Jerry Springer: The Opera*.

After delivering our tired author GoH to his room, I finally stopped by what Jeff Beeler was calling my party: ClubFusion. I am really grateful to Jeff, and to Brendan, and Kathy Becker, and Dennis Tabaczewski, who ran ClubFusion for the weekend along with our event hosts Gabe Helou, Tammy Coxen, John Guest, and Aegis (who provided the Turkish coffee, Livejournal discussion, and Scotch and Port tastings on Saturday). I was hardly there. But I did get to be there Friday to gift Rennie with a sparkly maroon cap, and to return there with Trillian, giggling madly, after we went for our cruise around the con – with the shoe-kicking and the cartwheels and all. I was having so much fun Friday night that I didn't get to bed until after 5 in the morning. Then, predictably, I woke up at 7. My body, you see, is pleased with its own sense of humor.

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## Saturday

Saturday at 11 a.m. I attended Neil's panel, "Gender of SF," and experienced one of the most noticeable drawbacks of the hotel – it didn't really have medium sized function rooms, just large ones and small ones. The room was overcrowded and got very warm. However, the panel – Sarah Zettel, Jane Irwin, Neil, Jason Ahlquist, and Steve Piziks – was a delight. (The order they were seated in was quickly analyzed as a gender pattern that seemed to have Neil in a crossover

position, representing the GLBT crowd that he's friends with and included as key characters in Sandman.) It started out on the question of whether or not stories have a particular gender perspective, touched on stereotypes and things to avoid or try for, and spent a fair amount of time on everything except bisexuality, which I only managed to bring up just at the end. We all tolerated the couple of times Sarah got on her soapbox about writing women ("I am not a mystery, dammit!"), and the panel wandered freely over various topics of gender and sexuality and how to write real people that you and the readers will care about as characters.

For those of you keeping track of outside events, I believe it was sometime between that panel and the next scheduled item that Neil did various things to ensure that Harlan Ellison received an acceptance speech to deliver in case *Coraline* won the Nebula (which it did). I'm tickled to be able to say I proofread the speech before he sent it. I suspect Neil had Mike and I read it mainly because he wanted to see at least someone's reaction to it, and partly to be sure it was funny (which it was). He responded to my very minor suggestions with "I see why Cheryl has you do this," which was one of the nicer compliments I've received.

At 2, Neil started what was to be a 3-hour autographing session. When we arrived at the ballroom we realized the programming department had made no plan for crowd control. So we got some more tables and set up an area off to the side so people could line up along the wall, walk past the Dreamhaven stuff for sale, and get their books signed by Neil, while other people could walk in and freely approach any of the other authors who were there to sign things. Seth advised me on how to organize things,

and just as I was about to announce that the room full of seated people who were waiting to have Neil sign something should get in line row-by-row, a volunteer in the middle of the room stood up and announced just that. Then she enforced it! Self-organization is great. Katie Merritt joined the table also, setting up beside Neil to collect donations and hand out pamphlets about the CBLDF (see <http://www.cbldf.org/>) and the women and comics advocacy group Friends of Lulu (<http://www.friends-lulu.org/>). I didn't have much to do for the next 3 hours other than to announce and enforce a 3-item limit, take pictures of people with Neil, and visit with people who stopped by. Which was actually a lot of fun.

At 6, Trillian and I delivered our charges to the Banquet and shortly thereafter fell into the car and let Bill drive us to his favorite Greek restaurant for dinner. Trill and I were both zombies and I especially had no choice after dinner but to nap.

When I woke up I put on a pair of black wings for flair and scouted around. Neil and Chuck had the CBLDF Auction in full swing, and it was obviously going to go on for quite a while. Penguicon had cleverly decided to sacrifice a printer cartridge to make full color pictures of all the items to be auctioned. Those hung on a prominent first-floor wall throughout the day Saturday, drumming up interest. There were quite a lot of nifty things involved, which helped. Also, Chuck and Neil made a really good team. When Chuck caught up with the rest of us at Trillian's pool party just before 1 a.m. he happily reported they'd raised \$4,300 for the CBLDF.

I went back upstairs around then and with the able assistance of the green room staff (as was true all weekend), I made sure

Neil was cared for. I'll feel lucky if I can emulate Penguicon by having certified massage therapists on staff at other conventions I run. Jennifer Hoyer was a terrific help, not only with her professional skills but also in providing an electric pot so we could make tea properly (that is to say, by pouring boiling water over the tea).

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## Sunday

Sunday morning Neil had an 11:00 panel on "Blogs as Literature". I sent him there and spent most of the hour arranging to have his readings printed and sushi brought in for lunch. I did catch the end of the panel, where Neil, Steve Jackson and Jeff Bates were discussing blogs as an alternate to news media, especially noting that while voluntary online reports have no authority forcing them to be accurate, mainstream news is chronically inaccurate and not necessarily better.

At 1 we were back in the Ballroom for Sandman Jeopardy, a game based on the American quiz show. Alice was still setting up the electronics and the wall of questions, so we took a quick turn around the Dealers room. Neil decided against buying a really cute unlicensed Sandman-characters-as-Manga T-shirt, and pleased Pete Abrams by letting him know he reads *Sluggy Freelance*. Then it was back to the game. Neil was set up as Alex Trebek, reading the answers to which the contestants had to provide the questions, Seth let himself be recruited to keep score, and I had the role of Vanna particular to versions of Jeopardy where the question category values have to be removed from the wall as you go along. Neil selected contestants from the audience and then ran a very engaging game, allowing the

audience itself to have a try and win or lose points collectively whenever the onstage contestants had given up on a question.

After that Neil dropped straight into his final Reading of the convention, which consisted of selected poems and a short story called "Forbidden Brides of the Faceless Slaves in the Nameless House of the Night of Dread Desire." It's a story about a writer struggling between a feeling he ought to write Real Literature with gritty realism and a desire to produce escapist fantasy... with a delightful twist on those categories. The audience laughed in all the right places and afterward Neil resumed his position by the wall of Saturday afternoon and signed more books while the convention Feedback Session started. I snuck off for a while to make my goodbyes to the *Sluggy* crew.

When he was finished there, Neil returned to the Dealers room to sign books for the dealers, went upstairs to the green room to give his last interview (he had granted a few short interviews to various members of local media), and had approximately 15 minutes to visit alone with his son before we had to leave to take Mike to the airport. They tucked me in the back seat for the ride, which was fun. Neil drives a black Mini Cooper with an in-dash GPS navigation system. I directed him to the South entrance of the new Northwest terminal at Detroit Metro, a maneuver which took us off the system's map and had it urging us to "Please return to planned route" – what it says, as Neil put it, when it thinks you're in a field.

On our return to the Hotel, we walked into the Lobby and Neil pointed out that this was the first time he'd actually made it to that end of the hotel. So I showed him the room that had been the computer

lounge, and he got to see Chaos. Chaos is a game/building set that Steve Jackson had brought for the Penguins to play with for the weekend. Imagine a huge Tinker Toy set with marbles running through it – a Chaos Machine.

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## Fin

Penguicon was over, and Chaos was packed up to go back to Texas. I had a lovely though tired dinner with my GoH and crashed for the night. A full night's sleep hardly made up for having had only 10 hours of sleep between Thursday and Sunday, but I had a nice breakfast with Neil and Steve on Monday, helped Neil carry his things to his car and went home to spend the afternoon in a happy daze outside in the sunshine. A fine weekend and a fine con. I'll be back next year, to be sure.

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## Better Living Through Alchemy

At last I can reveal the truth. Neal Stephenson's Baroque Cycle is not science fiction, it is fantasy. How do I know this? Because in common with almost every other fat fantasy trilogy ever written, the characters get to visit everywhere on The Map at some point during the story.

Now Stephenson, of course, is not so crass as to actually have The Map printed in the front of the book. But then he doesn't need to because the strange fantasy world through which his characters move is the 17<sup>th</sup> Century of our own history. Some of The Map is unfamiliar. Prussia, for example, comes into existence during the

story, only to vanish again long before our time. Much of North America is unexplored and inhabited only by warlike Indians. And parts of The Map, for example Terra Australis, are so unknown that only Enoch Root dares venture there. But a map there is, and between them Jack and Eliza manage to visit most of it, or at least have discourse with persons from the unvisited parts.

Much to my relief, the plot about the Duc d'Arcachon that I outlined last month only lasted around 250 pages, about the length of a sensible-sized book. Stephenson then follows this up with Numerous and Divers Sundry Plots, all of which are entertaining and padded in about equally large amounts. Jack, having been involved in nefarious and piratical exploits involving Spanish bullion, spends most of the book traveling eastward through Egypt to Hindoostan, Japan and finally New Spain. Much adventure is had along the way, and it is discovered that the natives have Strange Customs.

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*Jack had wondered how geometers could be so inventive as to produce so many types and families of curves. Later he had come to perceive that of curves there was no end, and the true miracle was that poets, or writers, or whoever it was that was in charge of devising new words, could keep pace with those hectic geometers, and slap new names on all the whorls and snarls in the pages of the Doctor's geometry-books. Now, though, he understood that geometers and word-wrights alike were nothing more than degraded and by-passed offshoots of the South-Asian weapons industry. There was not a straight blade in all of Hindoostan.*

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Eliza, for her part, is engaged in more intellectual pursuits, such as swindling large sums of money out of German bankers so as to save France from bankruptcy, and debating with Natural Philosophers the need for some new kind of science to enable countries to so manage their affairs that they do not run out of money. The people of London, or rather Those of Quality, seem to spend their entire lives sitting in coffee shops drinking exotic brews and bemoaning the fact that they are having to pay for this luxurious lifestyle on credit. Nothing much seems to have changed there.

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*"We have no mines, no El Dorado. If we want gold and silver we must look not to treasure-fleets from America. Yet if we conduct commerce here, and build the Bank of England, why, gold and silver will appear in our coffers as if by magic – or Alchemy if you prefer."*

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Doubtless Isaac Newton would despair of Roger Comstock's imprecise use of the term "alchemy", for mere commerce can only produce mere gold, and only alchemy can produce True Gold. Sadly that True Gold was all collected up by King Solomon centuries ago and shipped off east to some mysterious island kingdom whose location, say the sages, has since been lost. Except that exploration of the world is now proceeding apace, and gold may be found. Jack Shaftoe, you may remember, had had doings with certain quantities of Spanish bullion. What if it were to be discovered that said bullion, as attested by expert metal-smiths, was more dense than normal gold, and therefore clearly of alchemical manufacture. That would place the value of said cargo well above its fetching price on one of Eliza's commodity markets. It would be a thing

that Kings would move heaven and earth to obtain. Especially if one happened to be the King of France and therefore had good reason to want to see one Jack Shaftoe safely confined to one's deepest dungeon.

What if I were to say that Au-197 is the only known stable isotope of gold. Does that mean that *The Confusion* must be fantasy and not science fiction?

Goodness knows. Stephenson spends a lot of time joyously weirding the boundary between science and magic, something which is much easier in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century when people believed more easily in both of those things. Sometimes even the Jesuits had trouble telling the difference.

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*"I must know, cousine, if you invoked any of the fallen ones – if my death and resurrection were effected by dæmonic necromancy or –"*

*"Dæmonic necromancy is so tedious, and fraught with unintended consequences," said Oyonnax, "when syrup of poppies does the job perfectly well."*

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So there we are. Daring piratical adventure on the high seas. Thrilling tales of far-off Hindoostan, where our heroes are beset by divers Camels, Elephants, Crocodiles, Pirate-Queens and other beastly inhabitants of those parts too numerous to mention, the invention of economics, plus discourse on science, magic, al-chemy, al-jebra and of course history.

Somehow Eliza manages to wield her influence and be behind many of the great political developments of the day. Which is to say that she spends a lot of time intriguing amongst the royal families of Europe.

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*Whereas to a peasant family "loyalty" might mean slopping the hogs, to a royal it might mean marrying one, if that would help.*

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Not much change there either, by the sound of it.

But I am rambling, which is hardly surprising because I have just finished reading 800+ pages of very cleverly written rambling. I really didn't want to know the intricate details of how to make phosphorus, or Damascus steel, or how to navigate your way across the Pacific in a sailing ship. But then again I was continually entertained by humorous prose, interesting historical fact, radical plot changes, and the elegant ease with which Stephenson adopts the baroque style of the times he is portraying. He does, after all, love playing with words. And one of the things that he wishes to do with them is confuse.

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*"They cannot see the string at this distance," Jack commented, "and suppose you are doing some sort of magick."*

*"Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from a yo-yo," Enoch said.*

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Well, that settles it, then. The Baroque Cycle must be science fiction.

*The Confusion - Neal Stephenson - Heinemann - hardcover*

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## **The Age of Kali**

Once upon a time there was a land of many gods that lived along the banks of a river. It was a land too of many rulers, and

while they did not all share the same gods, they all shared the same river. Mother Ganges was for everyone. Then the British came and went, and when they went the land was one land with one ruler and the people's heads were filled full of notions of progress that had nothing to do with the leisurely nature (or downward spiral) of Brahma's cosmos. Before long, of course, the land became many again. First there was Pakistan, then Bangladesh. Now there are new countries: Bharat, Awadh, Kerala and so on. As for that "progress" thing, well...

To start with there is global warming. Not that it is at all the fault of the peoples of India, of course, but it affects all, including the monsoon. The rains do not come. In Bharat there is only the river. Progress also means a need for electricity. Everyone needs it. In Awadh they have built a great dam, on the Ganges. In Bharat the water flows more slowly, if at all. There is talk of war. And war, if it comes, will too be a creature of progress, for these days war is fought by proxy, by machines, by AIs. And thanks to progress, nowhere in the world is software as intelligent as it is in India.

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*Vishram goes naked onto the iron balcony. The air and the perfume of the city of Siva powder his skin. Clusters of winking aircraft lights move over the hazy yellow skyline. The soldiers who fly in the night. He tries to imagine a war. Robot killing machines running through the alleys, titanium blades in all four hands, avatars of Kali. Aei gunships piloted by warriors half a planet away coming in across the Ganga on strafing runs. Awadh's American allies fight in the modern manner, without a single soldier leaving home, without a single body bag.*

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Why do the Americans side with Awadh? Because Bharat is the home to demons and abominations. The wise and god-fearing people of Awadh have enacted their own versions of the Hamilton Acts, limiting the development of artificial intelligences to no more than level 2.0. The god-fearing people of America want nothing to do with anyone's silicon Antichrist. In Bharat, on the other hand, AIs of up to level 2.5 are legal and have been developed. This gives Bharat a powerful commercial edge, at the expense of offending the Americans.

Of course such dangerous devices must be licensed and carefully guarded. Ambitious businessmen and criminals, not to mention the AIs themselves, will always try to evade the laws. That is where Mr. Nandha comes in. He is a Krishna Cop, a hunter and killer of escaped or unlicensed AIs. It is his job to protect Bharat from demons, but he might just as well be trying to dam the Ganges all by himself. Indeed, some people think that he is foolish to try.

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*"There are undoubtedly Generation Three aeais out there that are every bit as alive and aware and filled with sense of self as I am. But they aren't going to reduce us all to slavery or pethood or just nuke us because they perceive we're in competition with them for the same ecological niche; that's Hamilton's thinking, and it's not thinking at all."*

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That was Professor Thomas Lull, one of the world's foremost experts in artificial life. Lull has chosen to withdraw from the world, sickened by the way his work is defined by politics rather than by science. He has fled to India, not, as has been the case with many of his colleagues, to work in the pirate Sundabarbans on illegal

software, but simply to enjoy a slower pace of life, take a few recreational drugs, and enjoy a party or two. It is at one such party that he meets Aj, a young girl in search of her parents. A girl who claims to be able to talk to the gods.

Talking to the gods is perhaps not the most useful skill in modern day India. Someone is always likely to ask which gods? If the potential water war with Awadh were not bad enough, Sajida Rana and her government have to cope with the Hindu fundamentalist party of N.K. Jivanjee. Compromise and nepotism have left Sajida with a weak cabinet. The only mind on which she can rely is that of her private secretary, Shaheen Badoor Khan. But Khan, of course, is a Muslim, exactly the sort of person at whom Jivanjee would like to aim his bloodthirsty street mobs. It is not an easy job, ruling Bharat.

Meanwhile, far out in space, NASA has discovered something very strange indeed. To astronomers it is known simply as Darnley 285, a large asteroid whose path might one day take it dangerously close to Earth. Except that it doesn't. Almost as if trying to attract attention to itself, Darnley 285 gently corrects its course each orbit so as not to put it on a collision path. Naturally NASA sends a team to investigate. What they find there terrifies them far more than simple orbital anomalies. It causes them to go to Lisa Durnau, Lull's foremost pupil, for help. And it causes them to hire computing resources that are illegal back home and unavailable anywhere except Bharat.

Is that everything? Far from it. Ian McDonald's new novel, *River of Gods*, is as stuffed full of sights and sounds and emotions and ideas as India itself. Have I mentioned the Bharati power company that is experimenting with zero point field



theory as a means of providing limitless free power from parallel universes? Have I mentioned the cricket match against England? Have I mentioned the nutes, people who have taken advantage of modern surgical techniques to make themselves over into creatures of pleasure entirely without gender? Have I mentioned *Town and Country*, the hugely popular soap opera with AI actors? Have I mentioned how genetics is coming to the aid of the caste system?

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*"Most days I can see the Indian Brown Cloud, I see the water level go down, I see skeletons on the beach, but they don't frighten me. It is those dreadful children, those Brahmins, they call them. Whoever gave them that name knew a thing or two. I tell you what it is scares Nanak about them. It's not that they live twice as long, half as fast as we do, or that they are children with the rights and tastes of adults. What frightens me is that we have reached a stage where wealth can change human evolution. You could inherit lakhs of money, send your children to American schools - like those inbred half-mad maharajas - but you couldn't buy IQ, or talents or good looks even. Anything you could do was cosmetic. But with those Brahmins, you can buy a new infrastructure."*

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Truly, there is so much in *River of Gods* that I could go on for pages talking about it. There is so much that McDonald needs ten viewpoint characters to tell the whole tale. Is it excessive? Possibly. Is it enthralling? Beyond doubt. If nothing else you will want to find out how McDonald manages to tie all of the disparate stands of the story together.

It is amusing too. McDonald plays games with names. The fact that some of the stupid American politicians are named

after British SF authors will raise a smile. The fact that some of the less pleasant Indian characters are named after members of India's current cricket team will perhaps not go down well on the subcontinent but will cause hilarity in England, Australia and Pakistan.

There will, undoubtedly, be a lot of fine genre novels published in the UK in 2004. Big names like MacLeod, Miéville and Grimwood are all in the hunt for honors. But in *River of Gods* Ian McDonald has produced a novel of impressive scope that is going to get noticed and may well get onto award shortlists. Don't miss this one, you won't see anything else like it this year. Besides, it has trains.

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*Downtown Mumbai is the world's largest single building; malls and housing projects and office and leisure units fused together into a many-armed, many-headed demon. Nestled at the heart of it is Chattrapati Shivaji Terminus, a bezoar of Victorian excess and arrogance, now completely domed over with shopping precincts and business units, like a toad entombed in a nodule of limestone. There is never a moment when Chattrapati Shivaji Terminus is still or silent. She is a city within a city. Certain castes boast they are unique to it; families claim to have raised generations among the platforms and tracks and red brick piers who have never seen daylight. Five hundred million feet pass over the Raj marble each year, tended by citiesful of porters, vendors, shysters, insurance sellers and janampatri readers.*

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Sometimes I wonder why we bother writing fantasy at all when we can just have India.

*River of Gods* - Ian McDonald - Simon & Schuster - publisher's proof

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## A Community of Minds

In my probably none-too-humble opinion, if a novel was going to beat *Maul* to the Tiptree Award this year then it was going to have to be pretty damn spectacular. The eventual winner was *Set This House in Order*, by Matt Ruff. And I'm pleased to say that my none-too-humble opinion was dead right.

If it had not been the Tiptree winner I would probably be reviewing *Set This House in Order* in the mainstream novel section of *Emerald City*. The book has no ray guns, no aliens and no spaceships. If it is about science at all then it is about psychotherapy. But what it is really about is Multiple Personality Disorder.

I'm no great expert on mental disorders, and I would not care to essay an explanation of how MPD is different from schizophrenia, for example. However, from the description that Ruff gives in the novel MPD involves the sufferer having several distinct personalities, or "souls" as Ruff terms them, each of which vies for control of the body. These souls can seem to be very different people. Indeed, the main reason why *Set This House in Order* is a Tiptree winner is that the souls do not even have to be of the same gender. From what I have read on the Web this is commonplace. The fact that the MPD sufferers sometimes think that they are persons of the opposite gender of that of their bodies may have some bearing on transsexualism. Or not as the case may be. Who knows, human brains can be utterly mysterious.

As with so much in mental illness, there is some dispute as to whether MPD is real, or whether the patients are somehow

"faking" being different people. And as is only too inevitable with fringe disorders of this sort, the condition has attracted a bunch of crackpot cures. Ruff, although a West Coast resident himself, has little time for them.

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*There was Dr. Minor, who believed that most MPD cases were the result, not of ordinary child abuse, but of ritual abuse perpetrated by a nationwide conspiracy of Satanic cults. There was Dr. Bruno, who was into past life regression. There was Dr. Whitney, who as a sideline to his regular practice ran a support group for people who had been sexually assaulted by extraterrestrials. And then there was Dr. Leopold, who recommended litigation as an adjunct to therapy. "Sue your parents," he advised my father during their first session. "You'll never reclaim your sense of self until you strike back at the bastards who did this to you."*

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Ruff accepts that genuine MPD is the result of child abuse, although only of the most extreme kind. However, he is interested only in two possible types of cure. The standard treatment is called "re-integration", in which patients are encouraged to merge their divergent personalities into a single person. But Ruff's hero, Andy Gage, has opted for an alternative treatment in which he accepts that the various people in his head are all individuals in their own right, and comes to an arrangement between them regarding control of the body. Indeed, Gage's position (or rather that of his therapist, Dr. Grey) is that he is not "ill" and that he can conduct a perfectly normal life despite being several people at once.

The house of the book's title, then, is an imaginary house inside Andy Gage's head

where all of his various personalities live. Andy himself runs the body most of the time, but takes advice from his “father” Aaron, who claims to be the original personality. Some of the inhabitants of the house, such as the child-like Jake or the artistic Aunt Sam, need only occasional peeps at reality to be kept happy. Others, such as the marital arts expert, Seferis, only take control in emergencies. But there is also Gideon, a selfish and greedy personality who wants to destroy the other souls and have the body all to himself. Aaron has exiled him to the misty island of “Coventry” in the middle of the lake near the house, but Gideon constantly plots escape.

Thanks to therapy from Dr. Grey, Andy has become very good at marshalling his various selves and is able to hold down a decent job. All goes well until his well-meaning but impractical boss, Julie, decides to hire another MPD sufferer in the hope that Andy can have a friend and maybe help the new girl, Penny, control her souls the way he can. In trying to assist Penny, Andy opens up a minefield of repressed memories in his own mind that he can only sort out by investigating the truth of his background. As I noted earlier, MPD sufferers only get that way through the most horrific child abuse. Consequently the novel is not easy reading.

Oh, but it is good, very good. As I said earlier, I don’t know a lot about mental disorders. I have no idea whether Ruff’s portrayal of MPD is accurate or not, or whether Dr. Grey’s revolutionary therapy is a good approach to take. What I do know is that Matt Ruff has created a fascinating and compelling novel. Why it hasn’t won any mainstream awards is a mystery to me.

*Set This House in Order* – Matt Ruff – Perennial  
- softcover

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## Rebuilding the Past

The latest novel by Anne Harris, *Inventing Memory*, is a meditation on the role of myth and religion in society. It takes place partly in modern day America and partly in the city of Erech in ancient Sumerian, during the reign of King Gilgamesh. The lead characters are Wendy Chrenko, an expert in Sumerian religion, and Shula, a slave girl who rises to become a priestess of Inanna.

We here at the First Church of Ishtar, Newly Revived, express our delight that Harris has chosen to highlight The Goddess and her stories in this way, even if she has chosen to use the old Sumerian name for the Queen of Heaven. We are particularly pleased at how many of the ancient tales have been used in the book. We do note that there are certain theological inexactitudes in Harris’s treatment that, in less enlightened times, would probably have resulted in her being convicted of heresy and sentenced to be torn apart by The Goddess’s pet lions, every day from now until eternity. But one of the advantages of being the Pope of your own church is that you can show magnanimity where necessary. Besides, Harris is a really nice person and I’d hate to have to order her sacrificed in such a potentially messy fashion. And, what is more, by the time we get to the end of the book, she says all of the right things.

But we have to start at the beginning, and that means the Garden of Eden. As with much of Genesis, this story has parallels in Sumerian myth, and wasn’t always as we

know it. In particular there is the mysterious figure of Lilith, Adam's supposed first wife. A garden with a tree, guarded by a dragon or snake, and inhabited by Lilith, appear in a Gilgamesh story. The meaning of that tale is not entirely clear, but I guess Lilith and the snake could have been up to all sorts of tricks.

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*And from these, in the fullness of time, came people. A new kind of creature that could write laws of its own. And the first law that people wrote was, "Death exists."*

*"True enough," said the snake, and Lili agreed, but before they knew it people were writing all kinds of other laws. Some of them were pretty good, like "Hanging out and talking is fun," but others, like "Sex is evil" didn't make any sense at all.*

*"Wait a minute," said Lili. "That wasn't what I meant."*

*"Well it's too late now," said the snake. "They'll just have to work it out for themselves."*

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Harris' heroine, Wendy Chrenko, is a devotee of what I tend to call "fluffy bunny feminism." This is the idea that if women were in charge of the world all would be sweetness and light and there would be no nastiness, ever again. It is generally accompanied by a belief that in the dim and distant past there was a time when a matriarchal fluffy bunny society existed, The Goddess was worshipped, and all was right with the world. This Eden-like paradise was destroyed by the invention of patriarchy, and we have gone downhill ever since. You can see the attraction of the Eden and Lilith myths to people who believe this sort of thing.

Shula, on the other hand, lives in the reality of ancient Sumeria. Although Inanna is worshiped fervently (indeed she is the patron Goddess of Erech), there is already a King (Gilgamesh) and Inanna's position in the divine hierarchy is by no means pre-eminent. Wendy and her feminist pagan friends have this daft idea that they can somehow search even further back and discover the fluffy bunny garden, thereby putting the world to rights. In the process of trying to do so, they learn some very different lessons, including that even fluffy bunnies have teeth and are liable to bite.

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*Shula tipped her head back to peer at Belili. "Will you be my guardian?" she asked.*

*"Yes, certainly, if you will remember that you were not always a slave."*

*"But how can I? My life before I came to Erech is a murky pond, and I have no net or line to draw up what might be in there."*

*"If you cannot remember, invent. Make up your own story."*

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There are, I think, a few flaws in *Inventing Memory*. Some of the characterization is a little stereotyped, although I guess some of that can be forgiven because Harris is talking about myths so she wants stereotypes in the story. On the other hand her portrayal of the unpleasantness of school life is particularly good so I'm not going to complain much.

More importantly, she gets the philosophy right. There never was a fluffy bunny garden, nor can we create one. On the other hand, myths are simply ways in which we try to help order our lives. As Joseph Campbell explained, we can create new ones. And the myths of the past

contain many useful elements. Patriarchal religion is neither inevitable nor healthy, and we need to get rid of it. Taking the better ideas from times when goddesses were worshipped is a good start. Anne Harris's book is, in its own way, a neo-pagan manifesto, and as such I highly recommend it.

(By the way, for information on how to become a Pope, search the Web for entries on Discordianism.)

*Inventing Memory* - Anne Harris - Tor - hardcover

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## City of the Sands

If you are going to set a fantasy novel in the Middle East there are a few sites that you simply have to use. One is the awesome crusader castle, the Krak des Chevaliers. The other is the desert city of Petra. Chaz Brenchley is smart; he has used both of them.

Part four of the *Outremer* series (or the second half of part two if you have the UK version) is set in the Sharai city of Rhabat, which just happens to be carved out of pink rocks in a vast canyon. The Sharai did not build the city, of course. They are desert people; they don't build anything. But that makes the city all the more magical. Of course in most fantasy books the mysterious canyon city with its wondrous architecture and advanced technology would have been built by elves or dwarves. But because we know that it is just a version of Petra and that Arab tribesmen are going to find Roman-period cities awesome it is all somehow more believable.

Where Brenchley deviates from the historical Petra is that he sites the city directly on the Dead Sea (or Dead Waters as he calls it). There are reasons for this, including an explanation as to why an ancient civilization would have built a city on such an inhospitable stretch of water. If you have read part three (*A Dark Way to Glory*) and remember seeing an army of Ifrit disappear into the Dead Waters you may also have something of an inkling as to what is to come.

The book is called *Feast of the King's Shadow* and indeed we do finally get to meet Julianne's scheming father. The whole point of going to Rhabat (excepting that Julianne and Elisande were ordered there by the djinn) was for the Sharai leaders, the Surayonese and the Shadow to get together so as to head off the impending war. We have been led to expect a book full of diplomacy. Brenchley, however, is adept at not delivering what is expected. Instead what we get is a whole lot of character development, in particular the setting up of various love triangles with which the author can torture his characters.

The other thing that happens in this book is that the magical stakes are raised significantly. Marron, of course, has been massively powerful ever since he became a host for the Daughter. But that power is mitigated by its uncontrollability and Marron's oath to never again deliberately use it to take life (even Ifrit life). However, in *Feast of the King's Shadow* our heroes (and the entire Sharai army) are beset by an unstoppable, and largely unkillable, army of Ifrit. With Marron unwilling to kill, the only way that Brenchley can save his heroes is to give one of them significant magical power as well. This may unbalance the remaining books of the series.

Then again, there is a lot left to be done. War still appears inevitable. Even if Hasan can be talked round, you can bet that Marshall Fulke and his fanatical holy order will stick to their plans. And talking of fanatics, we can't forget about the Sand Dancers. In the meantime, Julianne gets married (again) and is just about to finally lose her virginity when... Well, that would be telling. Suffice it to say that Brenchley ends on a humdinger of a cliffhanger that makes you want to rush straight out and buy the next book. Which is just how it should be.

*Feast of the King's Shadow* - Chaz Brenchley - Ace - softcover

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## Sex Magic Science

There are many reasons for setting up a small press publishing company, and hopefully at some point I will get to talk to Storm Constantine about hers. But one of the obvious reasons for doing so is to bring good books back into publication. Constantine is doing this with books like Ian Watson's BSFA Award winning novel, *Whores of Babylon* (which I hope to get round to reviewing soon). But she is also able to do it with her own books, and that means that *Hermetech* is once again in print.

All things considered, *Hermetech* is still my favorite Storm Constantine book. Granted Constantine has matured as a writer in the last 13 or so years. There are slabs on infodump in there that I am sure she'd be more careful with these days. But its essential tightness of plot (yes, it is a stand-alone novel) remains, and idea-wise the rest of the world has in some ways caught up with it. Most importantly,

perhaps, I think that Constantine's themes of gender and magic actually work better as SF than as fantasy. Let me talk about the book, and hopefully it will become clear.

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*A ground mist, morning white, hid all but a suggestion of landscape. A dreamer could imagine green fields might lie there, trees with leaves, even animals moving slowly over the grass. Concentrate hard enough and the smell of living plants might be conjured up. A psychic could probably manage it; someone good with ghosts.*

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Theme one is a world ravaged by technology. When it was far too late, mankind turned back to Gaia, but their worship has little effect on the planet. Even the appliance of science to environmental ends seemed to have very little effect. The primary philosophy of the Tech-Green movement is for mankind to move into space and let the planet heal herself in her own time. The less wealthy, the Naturotech, travel the world in gypsy-like convoys, surviving by scavenging and re-cycling, and worshipping at artificial henges they have constructed. Much of this is rather reminiscent of the technogreens in Gwyneth Jones's *Bold As Love* series.

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*The angels of climate control have freshly misted the streets tonight. If Arcady has to have low-life areas (and what city doesn't?), the streets should always be damp at night. Clusters of translucent, ceramic globes hang along the warren of boulevards and alleys, like fizzing crystal balls, gossiping prophecies. Blue-white radiance that should be bright, but isn't, making the sidewalks gleam.*

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Theme two is city life under the domes. Those who cannot afford or do not wish to flee into space, and who don't fancy taking their chances outdoors, can huddle under the domes and rely on technology to pretend that all is as it once was. The economy hasn't failed, yet. And certain parts of the economy, you suspect, will never fail. The oldest professional will also be the last, and modern bioscience can do wondrously inventive things to the body.

Theme three is magic: sex magic to be precise. Ewan Famber, the golden boy of the Tech-Green movement, had this theory that the solution to mankind's problems was not in meddling with the environment, but in meddling with themselves. He believed that by tapping into the psychic energy produced by human orgasm you could, quite literally, change the world. All that was needed were a few subtle neurological and genetic modifications, and of course a few necessary blocks to prevent the little goddess coming into her powers before she has learned to control them.

We have characters now. Ewan Famber is long dead, killed in a freak accident in space. But his wife and daughter survive him, eking out a miserable existence on the company pension. Living too are his former assistant and mistress, Leila Saatchi, and his ex-boss, Quincx Roirbak. Leila has resigned from Tech-Green and now leads a Naturotech convoy called Star Eye. Quincx has just retired, and lives in luxury in Arcady where he carries on his scientific studies as a hobby. Both of them wait anxiously for the time when Famber's daughter, Ari, reaches puberty. They owe it to their old friend to see the girl through the process. Besides, their scientific curiosity has been pricked by the records that Famber left.

Theme four is just sex. On the streets of Arcady there walks a young man who is nothing but trouble. Zambia Crevecoeur has ambitions well above his abilities and considerable pride. Sadly, neither of these are enough to keep him out of the clutches of the successful club owner, Jahsaxa Penumbra. For Zambia is a very pretty boy, and Penumbra wants him in her stable of whores. Having reduced him to penury and desperation, Penumbra presents the offer that he can't refuse. There is a new surgical technique that allows for implanting additional sexual organs in the body, for creating a new kind of human that is neither male nor female and is able to please either, or both, or several.

To some extent *Hermetech* is just a classic Constantine novel of sexual confusion and jealousy, but there is rather less of that than in many of her books. Furthermore, Crevecoeur is not the subject of the novel, but rather a means by which Constantine can embroil her characters in unsavory goings on and danger. And unlike most SF authors who deal with such subjects, Constantine is also aware that changing gender is no trivial matter: she has Crevecoeur go through substantial counseling and neurological re-programming before he is able to come to terms with his new body.

But this, as I said, is a sideline. The main thrust of the novel involves Ari and her journey from isolated country girl to the big city, and from frightened teenager to confident woman. *Hermetech* is a coming of age novel, but it is one that suggests that the coming of age process is not just something that individual humans have to do, but something that is a necessity for the entire race.

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*“Order froze the world, Ari, and those who set themselves up as leaders of society used everything they could to control people around them. Humanity’s excursions into its own future became entirely cerebral. Science developed. The province of the mind. People strove to be free of Nature, seeing it as something outside of themselves. Its innate chaos repelled them. Soma, or body, and bodily functions, were regarded as unclean or shameful. Their gods became sexless, spirit without flesh, without fleshly drives, pure thought. And people strove to emulate their creation, while telling themselves they were striving for purity as possessed by the entity or entities that had created them.”*

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So there is a little preaching along the way, but it is preaching that we would do well to listen to. Even if we don’t subscribe to Constantine’s theories about the magical powers of sex, we can all recognize how much we have become detached from our physical reality, and from the planet that gave us birth. And besides, along the way Constantine gives us some great science-fictional imagery.

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*The jellycrusts, scorning the protection of traveling within armoured trucks, walked the dry lands in ragged groups, pushing or dragging their belongings in carts and sledges. Their skins were concealed by a thick, insulating gel once manufactured for military use. Since then, the jellycrusts had bought up all remaining stocks of the stuff, slapping it onto their integument, where it accumulated the dust and debris of the desert lands; hence their nickname. It reminded Leila of certain larval creatures who once lived in freshwater streams, and which perhaps still did somewhere, who attached stones and water rubbish to their skins, making a shell to live in.*

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So there we have it, a stand-alone science fiction novel that encapsulates most of what is essential about a Storm Constantine book and does so effectively and elegantly. These days, of course, SF publishing tends to be rather too prudish to cope with the likes of Zambia Crevecoeur, let alone sex magic, so it is left to small presses to provide an outlet. It is good that they do.

*Hermetech* - Storm Constantine - Immanion Press - softcover

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## Interview - Andrew Hook of Elastic Press

Elastic Press is a UK-based operation that puts itself firmly out on the edge in a number of different ways. I spoke to the man behind the company, Andrew Hook, to find out how this adventurous business was doing.

**CM:** Where did the name, Elastic Press, come from? You don’t do books about lingerie, do you?

**AH:** Well, I wouldn’t rule out books about lingerie - or perhaps a lingerie-themed anthology - but essentially the word Elastic refers to the flexibility of what we do here in that we’re not genre restrictive.

**CM:** So how long has Elastic Press been going, and how are things so far? Can you give up the day job yet?

**AH:** Our first anthology was published in November 2002, and - to test the water - it was a collection of my own previously published stories entitled *The Virtual Menagerie*. Considering it was short-listed for the British Fantasy Society Award for best collection in 2003 it was a good



flagship for Elastic to run with. Since then, we've continued to publish new single-author collections quarterly without fail, and the reviews have almost unanimously been favorable. As for giving up the day job, that won't happen without a major distribution deal and here in the UK that's quite difficult, but I'm in no rush and at the moment I'm content to build on what we've achieved to date and then take it from there.

**CM:** Your policy is only to publish anthologies and collections. That's a pretty specialist market niche, why did you go for it?

**AH:** I'm a great lover of short fiction and there are very few publishers specializing in short stories. Plus, I wanted to consolidate the reputations of those authors in the independent press who had many stories published but ultimately little to show for it. Magazines come and go, but anthologies and collections tend to stand the test of time. As a promoter of short fiction and an enthusiast for the independent press, my desire was to forge ahead in this particular market, and make Elastic stand out from those publishers who have more diverse catalogues.

**CM:** You are also specializing in lesser-known writers. That's a great thing for a small press to be doing, but is there a market?

**AH:** In the UK at the moment mainstream publishers will tell you that there is no market for short stories, that there is no market for unknown writers, and that there is no market for mixed genre publications. My answer is that if you create the market then there is a market, and by having to create that market hopefully that makes us memorable. The great thing about Elastic Press is that many people have been with us from the

start and regularly pre-order from one book to the next – regardless of the name of the writer. And because our titles are so reasonably priced people have the freedom to experiment with some of the lesser-known writers, which benefits both the writer and the reader. Most of our writers have, however, been previously published in several magazines, and so the names should be familiar to the independent press scene in the UK if not elsewhere.

**CM:** And if all that wasn't enough you are positioning yourself firmly in the slipstream. Your web site talks about being on the edges of fantasy and reality rather than being firmly genre or non-genre. Another brave move?

**AH:** It simply reflects my own personal preferences in literature. Life itself is a mixture of SF-Fantasy-Horror-Crime-Surrealism-Romance-Downright Weird, so why be genre-restrictive with fiction? I've always preferred stories which cross those boundaries, and such fiction can often be more interesting without the usual tropes coming into play. I want to appeal to those readers who want an eclectic read, who regard all writing as "literature" and who are prepared to be open-minded in their reading.

**CM:** How do you go about choosing a collection to publish? Is it a question of monitoring magazines looking for people with good stuff, or do you wait for them to come to you?

**AH:** In terms of the single-author collections most of the authors have approached me. My policy is to always request two stories in the first instance to gauge an opinion of their work, and then to read the remainder of their proposed collection if I like what I've been sent. Usually, if I've requested the collection in

its entirety then I'm likely to publish it. There's an intuitive feeling to be had when reading the initial query that generally holds true when reading the collection.

**CM:** How exactly did you end up publishing Brian Howell, an author who lives in Tokyo?

**AH:** Whilst Brian currently lives in Tokyo he was born in the UK and has had stories published in *The Third Alternative* and other magazines and anthologies, so he was known to me as a writer before he approached me. What is interesting about his collection, *The Sound of White Ants*, is that all the stories are either set in modern Japan or feature Japanese characters, and whilst they are mainly literary, there are threads of slipstream running through them which unnervingly knock the reader askew. To quote someone on our discussion boards: "Uncomfortable, disturbing, on the very knife-edge of bad-taste, wallowing in death and sexual obsession." Not a bad combination, really...

**CM:** Your anthologies are strongly if somewhat strangely themed. Can you explain the story behind *Alsiso*?

**AH:** *The Alsiso Project* is an anthology in which all twenty-three stories are entitled "Alsiso", and contains such writers as K.J. Bishop (who also did the cover design), Justina Robson, John Grant, and Nicholas Royle, amongst others. The word "Alsiso" is a nonsense word, it can mean anything and nothing, and came about as the result of a typo on our discussion boards, yet although each of the authors tackled it in a different way there is an overall gestalt that gives the book a unique identity. All of the reviews so far have been complimentary, and because of its quirky premise and multi-genre content, it's an excellent place to start for those readers

wanting to familiarize themselves with the books that we're publishing.

**CM:** And the next project is an anthology of stories about numbers. How is that shaping up?

**AH:** We've accepted around half a dozen pieces so far, and unlike *Alsiso* this is an anthology which is open to submissions rather than by invitation, so anyone interested in contributing should seek out the guidelines on our website (<http://www.elasticpress.com/>). The brief premise is that each story must contain a number in the title which must also be integral to the plot. Some of the submissions we've received don't quite hit the mark, either with originality or by not keeping the number element central. Those stories we have accepted, however, indicate that this will be a very strong anthology, and I hope it will continue to raise awareness of Elastic Press as a publisher of innovative and original fiction. As Christopher Fowler says in his introduction to *The Alsiso Project*, "I've always wondered why more anthologies aren't intelligently or capriciously themed." In fact, intelligent and capricious fit well in the Elastic Press ethos.

**CM:** You had one of your own stories in *Alsiso*. Is there any sort of conflict with editing and publishing your own work alongside other people's?

**AH:** I included one of my own stories in *Alsiso* because the idea was to produce an anthology which would be a retrospective for those writers Elastic had previously published, together with a taster for those writers lined up for the future - as well as some additional names. The reviews so far suggest that decision was justifiable. When I published my own collection to launch Elastic that was done specifically to see whether I had the wherewithal to do

so - I didn't want to experiment with someone else's book given the responsibility which that contains! In addition, in my collection, seventeen out of the nineteen stories had been previously published and had proven their worth with magazine editors elsewhere. This isn't something I would continue with however, and I don't anticipate publishing myself again.

**CM:** For the *Book of Numbers* you are working with Allen Ashley. What is the arrangement there?

**AH:** Allen is the sole editor of the *Book of Numbers*. He came to me after being involved in *The Alsico Project* with the suggestion of editing a similarly strange anthology. I liked his idea and felt confident in leaving the details in his hands.

**CM:** What printing technology do you use: PoD or conventional?

**AH:** We use digital printing with Blitzprint (<http://www.blitzprint.com>), and whilst they have PoD facilities available, I treat them in the same way as I would a traditional printer and print a fixed amount of books in the first instance. Unlike some PoD companies we're totally in charge of all stages of production/marketing, and this arrangement gives us the flexibility that we need in order to run the business effectively.

**CM:** The traditional distribution question: how is it going? I see you have a very small list of stores that carry your books, but quite a few online venues as well.

**AH:** Distribution to major bookstores is next to impossible in the UK for an independent press other than targeting those stores local to the author. A major distribution deal would mean switching to

conventional printing rather than digitally printing as the increased print runs would be more cost-effective per unit. There is a possible distribution deal in the pipeline which could affect this, although the risk of returns on a sale or return basis could prove difficult. However, there are a number of independent chains in the UK who regularly stock our products, so we do have a definite bookshop presence.

**CM:** Any luck with cracking the American market?

**AH:** Our major American outlet is through the online stores at Shocklines (<http://store.yahoo.com/shocklines/>) and Clarkesworld Books (<http://www.clarkesworldbooks.com/>), and we also get several overseas orders through the BFS online store (<http://www.britishfantasysociety.org.uk/shop/info.htm>) in the UK. I'd like to increase our presence in the American market, and I think this is something that will come with time as our catalogue increases and more people become aware of us.

**CM:** I see that you have started distributing books by the US small press, Emperor's New Clothes (<http://www.enpress.com/>). Will that be a reciprocal arrangement giving you a US outlet?

**AH:** What we're doing is stocking those ENC books which are written by UK authors because ENC otherwise have no outlets in the UK and the postage costs from the States for UK buyers could be considered prohibitive. This arrangement has arisen due to commonsense, especially since ENC published my own novel, *Moon Beaver*, earlier this month and obviously I'm interested in promoting it here in the UK as much as I am able. I'm also interested in ENC as their catalogue

contains some especially inventive fiction, and this one-off arrangement might be expanded in the future on a reciprocal basis, but I'm unable to speculate at the moment as to how that might develop.

**CM:** Aside from the *Book of Numbers*, what other exciting new projects do you have on the way?

**AH:** The single-author collections this year will continue with Allen Ashley and Steve Savile. Allen is a prolific writer with a proven track record in the independent press both with his short stories and his regular Dodo column in *The Third Alternative*. Steve Savile's collection will be loosely themed around angels and will feature some beautiful artwork by Robert Sammelin. In mentioning artwork I'm also pleased to be able to use a cover design by Mark Mothersbaugh - previously the lead singer in DEVO - for our February 2005 collection, *Visits to the Flea Circus*, by *Aliso* contributor Nick Jackson. It's a striking image which fits perfectly with the thematic threads in the book. There are also other writers lined up for the future, although I'll keep those under wraps for the moment, save to say that I'm very excited about the way in which Elastic Press is developing.

**CM:** I have noticed a preponderance of sheep imagery on your web site. Any comment?

**AH:** This is where we came in...the lingerie question, right? Oops! Wrong interview...

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## Found in Translation

Most if not all of you will be familiar with the work of Jules Verne and H.G. Wells. In

between the eras of these greater writers, however, France produced another science fiction writer of note. His name was Albert Robida, and Wesleyan University Press has just produced a fine new edition of his most famous work, *The Twentieth Century*.

It is perhaps inevitable that a re-issue of a venerable work of SF will cause people to focus on the predictive power of the book. Both Verne and Wells have solid reputations as foreseers of the future. Robida too manages some impressive prescience. His book, published in 1882, contains references to women's liberation, commuting to work by train, television, home shopping and videophones. In his introduction the translator, Philippe Willems makes much of Robida's predictive powers. But the more I read of the book the more I came to the conclusion that Willems had mis-understood it completely. Phil Dick managed to successfully predict the future by giving free rein to his most paranoid imaginings. Robida, in contrast, produced what he probably thought was an absurdist satire on how the future might be if all of the daftest modern ideas of his time came to fruition. Of course he, like Dick, was proved absolutely right.

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*"Yes," the journalist confirmed. "This is an ad-novel. Surely you understand that telephonic journals cannot carry the same type of advertisements as typographic newspapers do. Subscribers wouldn't listen to them. Another way of placing advertising had to be found, and this was born the ad-novel. Listen..."*

*"Stretching back in her recliner (from The Furniture Bazaar, Boulevard du Châtillon), the unfortunate Valentine, wearing an exquisitely cut chiffon dressing gown fashioned by the great designer Philibert, was*

*cruelly suffering from acute rheumatism. Doctor Baldy, the renowned physician favored by all women of taste (945 Rue Atala), had prescribed the excellent Godot mustard plaster as well as an assortment of the best medicines: Flageois tablets, which protect against..."*

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The clues are not hard to spot. Robida's main source of income was as the editor of the weekly satirical magazine, *La Caricature*, which sounds like a French version of *Punch*. He is a brilliant cartoonist and the book is peppered with many amusing illustrations of the daft situations his characters find themselves in. There is even a back cover blurb from Brian Aldiss that compliments the book on reaching "heights of glorious absurdity." But somehow Willems (and at least one review I have seen) insist on treating it as serious, predictive SF (if lacking the scientific rigor of Verne). Predictive it may be, but serious it most certainly is not.

Which is not to say that Robida doesn't have his pulse on the finger of society. As a magazine editor he is well aware of the shortening attention span of the general public. In the book he explains how classic plays have had to be adapted for the modern audience by adding "highlights", short skits involving dancers and circus performers. He even proposes something called "Condensed Literature" in which classic novels are reduced to a few pages to make them easier to read. Some clever person got *The Iliad* down to only four lines. We'd laugh, if we weren't familiar with Disney and Hollywood.

The heroine of the book is H el ene Colobry, an orphan who has been raised by the rich banker, M. Ponto. Unlike Ponto's daughters, who take to the banking business like fish to water, H el ene has difficulty settling on a career. She is, after

all, a blonde, and possessed of all of the traditional characteristics of that species: very pretty, completely impractical, and largely devoid of brains. Poor M. Ponto tries everything, thereby giving Robida the chance to satirize a number of different professions.

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*The great triumph of modern ideas triggered a whole series of reforms and improvements in prison administration. The penal system had to reflect the new social mores, philanthropists and thinkers all agreed on that. First of all, the words "incarceration" and "prison" were no longer used, as they had become prejudicial to human dignity. They were replaced with the more euphemistic terms "retirement" and "retirement home."*

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H el ene should have made a good lawyer. Pretty women who could cry convincingly in court were in great demand as defense lawyers. But having successfully defended a vicious murderer who killed his aged aunt in cold blood H el ene sickens of the profession and moves on.

She might also have made a good gossip columnist, being sufficiently vacuous for that sort of work. Unfortunately the requirement for journalists to fight duels with anyone whom they have offended in their articles soon put paid to that career. Banking is, of course, a complete disaster, because H el ene can't manage simple arithmetic. Perhaps there is nothing for it but politics.

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*"This was one of the most important victories of 1789, my child. Before the Great Revolution, this opportunity did not exist. People lacking talent for any art, science, or occupation would be left to their own devices. Nowadays, however, good ol' politics is here, stretching*

*out her arms to those unable to succeed at anything else!"*

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Hélène, of course, is hopeless. She can never remember which side she is supposed to be arguing for. But introducing politics does allow Robida to take a few pot shots at his country's traditions. In his vision of 20<sup>th</sup> Century France there is a 3-month public holiday held once a decade. The purpose of this is to hold a revolution. A carefully stage-managed revolution that will replace the tired, old government with an enthusiastic new one. A replica Bastille is built so that it can be stormed. A great exposition is held to show off the best examples of the barricade building industry (a field in which France leads the world). And of course everyone gets to march through the streets bearing large banners.

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The French Republic  
CHALLIOT Department Store,  
the biggest shopping center in the  
WORLD  
DOWN WITH THE GOVERNMENT!  
UP WITH OUR MERCHANDISE!  
Open during the Revolution

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In the end there is nothing for it but to marry Hélène off. So much for women's emancipation. But her world tour honeymoon allows Robida to aim his sights further afield. Italy, for example, has been an economic basket case for decades. The Italians just can't seem to manage anything. Thankfully the country has now been purchased by a consortium of French businessmen, headed by M. Ponto. Three quarters of the Italian population has been shipped off to Uruguay, and the remainder is employed

in the world's largest theme park. Every attraction is on offer: fabulous mountain scenery in the north, unparalleled history and culture in the middle, and adventure holidays beset by bandits in Sicily. And, most importantly from a French point of view, the Italians are finally being taught to cook properly. Oh dear...

Even Robida, however, does not have the courage to let fly at the Germans. He simply contains their expansionist desires by having them emigrate en masse to North America where they take over much of the continent, stopping only at the Rockies where they encounter the Chinese coming in the opposite direction. Russia, sadly, is no more. It was completely destroyed by enormous bombs planted by the Nihilist Party, which wiped out all of the major cities. This, however, is mild compared to the fate that Robida reserves for the British. With the government having all decamped to India where the weather is better, the poor British were not well enough organized to resist invasion, and consequently fell victim to the blandishments of Mormon missionaries. Britain is now a fundamentalist Mormon republic in which being a bachelor is illegal and voting rights are dependent on how many wives you have.

I think you have got the idea by now. *The Twentieth Century* is a marvelous piece of satire and perhaps even more amusing now than when it was written because so many of the awful things that Robida wrote about have come true. I suspect that the poor man would have been quite appalled to discover just how prescient he had been. But we can enjoy his foresight (and his fine cartoons) all the same.

*The Twentieth Century* - Albert Robida - Wesleyan University Press - softcover

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## Boys and Girls go out to Space

Probably the most important thing to say about Brian Attebery's book, *Decoding Gender in Science Fiction*, is that you don't have to worry about it being written by an academic. Attebery's style is light, eminently readable, and often humorous. There are times when he falls into the traditional academic pattern of belaboring the point, but it is important for an academic to prove that he (in this case) is making a valid, general point and not arguing from an isolated instance. Other than that, this is a book that you can sit down and read from cover to cover without having to try to puzzle out what the author means. For an academic book, this is a very good start indeed.

Attebery also starts interestingly in that he compares science fiction and gender as both things that deal with signs and re-interpretation. Much of what passes for gender (as opposed to chromosomal sex) in human society is culturally determined and can change with different viewpoints. Much of science fiction is precisely about looking for different viewpoints. This makes SF an ideal vehicle for analyzing gender issues.

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*I like to think in terms of signs because decades of reading SF have given me the habit of looking at my fellow humans as interestingly weird creatures, alien beings. The first thing to do when confronting a dangerous alien is to figure out what it means by beeping or wagging its antennae.*

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Of course this is not a book for those people who believe in that mythical chimaera, Author Intent. If you are one of those people who believes that a book can be read in one way, and one way only, then you should not go anywhere near Attebery's book because it will likely give you heart failure.

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*Having now summarized the same story four times, with four radically different results, I can only conclude that there is no such thing as a simple plot summary. The very thing literature teachers tell students to avoid, as distracting from real critical work and a waste of the reader's time, may actually be the heart of critical interpretation. Every act of retelling is also an act of translation that reveals which codes the story invites or allows us to apply in order to generate meanings.*

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This might seem unnecessarily flexible, but it is absolutely essential in trying to understand how works written by one species of animal (white human males) can be understood in a completely different way by a species utterly alien to the writers (white human females).

Most of the book is essentially a history of SF seen through the filtering glasses of gender-based interpretation. Attebery starts back with the Gothic novel and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and moves slowly but surely up through the pulps to the origins of feminist SF and beyond. Some of it will be familiar to students of the genre (yes, there is yet more discussion of the influence that John W. Campbell had on the works of the writers he published), but plenty of it is fresh and interesting.

For example, early on Attebery makes the interesting observation that the primary

sexual organ in pulp SF is the eye. Male characters are always described in terms of their overpowering, penetrating gaze; female characters bat their eyelashes and demurely look away. The innate assumptions of the writers are all there, if only you have eyes to see.

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*What is a woman; what is true womanhood; what do women want? Until quite recently, men would not have thought of asking women to answer these questions any more than one would have asked a cat to define cathood.*

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One of the more interesting chapters, as far as I was concerned, was the one on supermen and the slant myth (i.e. the idea that overweight, underwashed, style-challenged and socially-inept single males are in fact superhuman, the next evolutionary step for mankind, because they happen to know a lot about science). This relates back to the posts I've put in my blog about Joan Roughgarden's book, *Evolution's Rainbow: Diversity, Gender, and Sexuality in Nature and People*. Attebery has this to say about Darwin.

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*In The Descent of Man, Darwin emphasized sexual selection as a primary form of evolutionary pressure. He observed that while some characteristics seemed to be passed on equally to all offspring, others only show up in one sex or the other. In his account of sexual difference, though, the characteristics that count the most are those associated with maleness, for he saw sexual selection as operating primarily to distinguish among male candidates for reproduction.*

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Sadly whether Darwin actually meant this is now largely irrelevant. As Attebery

notes, the goal-directed explanation of evolution popularized by Herbert Spencer has largely replaced Darwin's essentially random process in the popular imagination, and very specifically in science fiction. There has been no end of SF stories published that talk about the progress of evolution, and vast numbers of them have assumed that the white male geek is the forerunner of homo superior. SF as wish fulfillment. Who needs Charles Atlas when you have a C compiler? Oh dear.

In any work like this there is inevitably a question of scope. There is far more to talk about than would reasonably fit into a readable book. One might be left wondering, for example, why a book such as Sheri Tepper's *The Gate to Women's Country* merited only one sentence of coverage. David Brin will want to know why his *Glory Season* wasn't mentioned at all. Or indeed why the whole scientific basis of women-only societies (i.e. how do you get kids with no men) is not discussed. Other readers will wonder why Attebery spends a whole chapter talking about androgeny but barely mentions works that deal with the idea of characters who change gender. The author cannot win here. In writing a book like this you can only please all of the people some of the time.

But the things that will probably strike you most on getting to the end of this wide-ranging and well-informed study of gender in SF are that it hasn't actually said anything about what gender is or come to any conclusions other than that SF is a convenient tool for examining the alien. I have been scratching my head to try to work out why this is so.

There is a movement in American gender politics that holds that gender is nothing



but signs, that it is something that you can take on and off with your clothes. This is very useful for freaking out conservatives, but doesn't bear much relation to reality. I don't think that Attebery subscribes to this theory. In his discussion of androgeny he points out that most writers who try to create androgynous characters fail. Because of the way gender is perceived, they either end up with male androgynes (generally presented as men with something taken away) or female androgynes (women with something added). Gender blending isn't easy.

Another possible reason is that Attebery simply doesn't want to stick his neck out too far. He says right at the beginning that, "SF is not usually very successful when it tries to predict solutions to particular problems, but it is very good at playing insightfully with social issues." Given that he knows his work is likely to be critiqued by academics of every stripe from religious fundamentalist conservatives to radical separatist feminists, Attebery may well have felt it safer just to watch SF at play than to suggest that it has actually created or discovered anything. If the result is a book that faithfully describes the tail, skin, ears, tusks and trunk of an elephant without giving you any idea of what an elephant actually is, well so be it.

But I don't want to be too harsh. It is very brave for a male academic to even consider writing such a book, let alone making it controversial. And not that it won't be anyway. The weakest part of the book is the section at the end where Attebery takes issues with some of the criticism leveled at *The Norton Book of Science Fiction*, a work that he co-edited with Ursula Le Guin and Karen Joy Fowler. Really, one should not bother to read the nonsense written in Amazon reviews, let alone take it to heart. But it

does go to prove the point that in the ongoing war of ideas that is contemporary America even the most bland and reasonable argument is likely to come under vicious attack from fundamentalists of one stripe or another. There is no middle ground any more.

One of the other things that stands out about the book is its lack of outrage. When Attebery comes across yet another example of gross male chauvinism in action he is much more likely to express gentle ridicule, and point mocking fingers at the homosexual undertones in the text. Women writers are much more likely to react with anger. Whatever the book's faults, and bearing in mind that it is going to be viciously attacked by partisans of all sides anyway, it is rather refreshing to have such a mild-mannered and laid back survey of the field.

And now I would like to leave the final word to Gwyneth Jones (as quoted by Attebery).

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*I often awarded my Aleutians quirks of taste and opinion belonging to one uniquely different middle-aged, middle-class, leftish Englishwoman. And I was entertained to find them hailed by US critics as 'the most convincingly alien beings to grace science fiction in years.'*

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Oh, Gwyneth, I do surely know what you mean.

*Decoding Gender in Science Fiction* - Brian Attebery - Routledge - softcover

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## One of Us

David Mitchell is one of the young lions of the British literary scene. It is official. *Granta* says so. His first novel, *Ghostwritten*, which I reviewed in issue #95, was all about the unreality of fiction. The second, *number9dream*, which I have shamefully missed out on, was short-listed for the Booker Prize. His latest novel, *Cloud Atlas*, is hotly tipped to better its predecessor and carry off a trophy. About all that is likely to stand in its way is that it is a science fiction novel.

As with *Ghostwritten* (and doubtless *number9dream* as well) *Cloud Atlas* sees Mitchell obsessed with structure. The novel is a collection of Russian dolls, one story inside the other, vaguely linked by a theme of a comet-shaped birthmark and a collection of artistic works of varying quality. The significance of this is not obvious for some time, but it does work and eventually Mitchell rubs our noses in it just to make sure that no one missed the message. Thankfully this doesn't spoil the book.

The outermost doll is the Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing, a San Francisco lawyer who has had to journey to Australia to sort some complex inheritance. It is a 19<sup>th</sup> Century tale, full of roguish seamen, pompous missionaries, and maltreated natives. It owes much to the work of Herman Melville. Ewing, it seems, is one of the few moral, upstanding and god-fearing men in the whole of the Pacific. The antics of his fellow "civilized" humans give him cause for concern as to the future of his race.

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*"The merciful ploughman shoots a trusty horse grown too old for service. As philanthropists, might it not be our duty to likewise ameliorate*

*the savages' sufferings by hastening their extinction? Think on your Red Indians, Adam, think on the treaties you abrogate & renege on, time & time & time again. More human, surely, & more honest, just to knock the savages on the head & get it over with."*

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Ewing's journal was eventually published by his son, Jackson, and a copy of it found its way into the library of Vyvyan Ayrs, a British composer living in Belgium just after the First World War. Ayrs is dying slowly of syphilis, and can no longer compose, until he is visited by one Robert Frobisher, a venal and selfish young rake with a talent for music who hopes to pay off his substantial debts and redeem his reputation by helping the old man make music once again. Naturally Frobisher soon takes to sleeping with Ayrs' wife and stealing rare books from his library for sale. But he also finds his own muse and composes his one work of genius, the *Cloud Atlas Sextet*.

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*Several dead bottles of Trappist beer later, I asked Elgar about the Pomp & Circumstance Marches. 'Oh, I needed the money, dear boy. But don't tell anyone. The King might want my baronetcy back'.*

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Frobisher's masterpiece was perhaps a favorite of the crime writer, Hilary V. Hush, for reference is made to it in the novel, *Half Lives: The First Luisa Rey Mystery*. Hush also uses the character of Rufus Sixsmith, the talented physicist and forger whom Frobisher relies upon to fence the stolen books. Sixsmith and Frobisher were lovers at Cambridge, but in Hush's novel Frobisher is now a world-renowned expert on atomic power stations. It is 1975, and Seaboard Power is

about to build a new type of reactor near the city of Buenas Yerba, a California location supposedly half way between Los Angeles and San Francisco. Sixsmith knows that the reactor design is dangerously flawed. He also suspects that Seaboard's management will do anything to stop the truth getting out. His only hope is a young investigative journalist by the name of Luisa Rey.

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*The Ghost of Sir Felix Finch whines, 'But it's been done a hundred times before!' – as if there could be anything not done a hundred thousand times between Aristophanes and Andrew Void-Webber! As if Art is the What, not the How!*

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Presumably unable to sell a somewhat hackneyed and blood-spattered thriller set in 1970s California in any other way, Hush sent it to the legendary British vanity publisher, Timothy Cavendish. (Yes, him – those of you who read *Ghostwritten* can surely not have forgotten him.) Cavendish is a fatuous oaf of monumental proportions (though by no means short of the odd deeply penetrating comment or two, as the above quote shows). By some miracle his publishing business has fallen on good times, but only as a result of becoming involved with some rather unpleasant Irish hoodlums. Our Tim is in big trouble, and as brother Denholme was ruined by the events of *Ghostwritten* there seems little he can do to save his neck. Of course miracles may happen, but before they do Timbo must reach into the depths of his soul to survive a terrifying incarceration in that most hideous of hell-holes, a rest home for the elderly.

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*The library refused many requests, of course, but I succeeded with two Optimists translated from Late English, Orwell and Huxley.*

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By circumstances too absurd to happen to anyone other than Timothy Cavendish, the awful experiences of those days were made into a successful movie. Well, successful in that it survived the years and various cultural purges and thus a digital copy is still available to seditious revolutionaries in a future vision of Korea, now called Nea So Copros. This brave new world is the business world run riot. It is corporate feudalism, a Republican Party wet dream with one vast commercial monopoly representing each industry. Cars are now "fords", computers are "sonys", coffee is "starbuck", and for obvious legal reasons McDonald's is "Papa Song's".

Biddable low-level workers are hard to come by, so Papa Song's employs mainly "fabricants", clone-workers who are genetically engineered for pleasantness and servitude, and who will expire in 48 hours if not fed a regular diet of "Soap"\*, a formulation that also neatly erases their memories of the past day. Our heroic seditious revolutionaries, an organization known only as Union, plan to quite literally raise the consciousness of the working classes by unlocking the power of their human brains. Their test subject, Sonmi-451, proves voraciously intelligent, though for some reason she takes quite a shine to old Timbo. Doubtless the movie portrayed him in a rather flattering light. Sentenced to death for sedition, Sonmi records her memoirs for posterity.

\* Etymologists suspect that the term "Soap" is a contraction of a late 20<sup>th</sup> Century term used to describe a form of escapist entertainment.

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*Sonmi was a human like you'n me? I'd never  
thinked so nor'd Abbess ever speaked such  
loonsomeness, nay. Sonmi'd been birthed by a  
god o'Smart named Darwin, that's what we  
b'liefed.*

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By the time of the 6<sup>th</sup> doll, Korea and its corporate culture, which Sonmi-451's writings helped to destroy, are nothing but a memory. In Hawaii, one of the last outposts of human civilization, Sonmi is worshipped as a goddess by tribesmen whose claims to technological sophistication rest on knowledge of weaving and bee keeping. Yet even they are threatened by their neighbors, the warlike Kona. Only one part of the world still possesses what our narrator, Zachry, calls Old'un Smart. The mysterious isle of Prescience harbors a race of dark-skinned people with fantastic powers and a vast white ship that crosses the ocean without the aid of sails. When a Prescient woman called Meronym asks to live on Big Island with Zachry's tribe for a year to study them, only trouble can follow. Sonmi might guard the islanders, but her enemy, the evil spirit known only as Old Georgie (I wonder where Mitchell got that name from) is plotting their downfall.

You will notice that we have returned to the Pacific, and to primitive Polynesian islanders. And we have met a character whose name literally means a connection. This is no accident. *Cloud Atlas* is a book about the way that we shape the past through our histories, and the future through our actions.

Mitchell cleverly has Meronym refer to Buenas Yerba as one of the great cities from before the Fall. But is that because her story is a fiction, or because she has

read one of Hilary Hush's novels? The past is malleable.

All of the leading characters, even the odious Frobisher and the incompetent Cavendish, achieve something during our sojourn with them. And by achieving something they change the future, no matter in how small a manner. Frobisher's *Cloud Atlas Sextet* is a work for six intertwined solo instruments. Six individuals, going their own way, and combining to create something awesome and beautiful. Six raindrops, working together to form a puddle.

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*I watched clouds awobbly from the floor o'that  
kayak. Souls cross ages like clouds cross skies,  
an' tho' a cloud's shape nor hue nor size don't  
stay the same it's still a cloud an' so is a soul.  
Who can say where the cloud's blowed from or  
who the soul'll be 'morrow.*

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There are things that I can point to in *Cloud Atlas* that might cause me to mark it down, were I a Booker Prize judge. To start with some of Mitchell's politics seems rather naïve and simplistic. He seems to think that Nea So Copros is the ultimate triumph of market economics, whereas in fact it is its absolute negation. Then there is his research. He's spot on to suspect that the inhabitants of Buenas Yerba would be fascinated by a Giants-Dodgers baseball game, but his vision of the American electricity system is rooted firmly in UK experience. Everything from the power station names to the use of the term "national grid" screams "wrong" to anyone who knows the business. He even uses the name of a British company for his bad guys (and in defense of my friends at Seaboard I'd like to note that they don't own any nukes and that one of their

directors is a leading light of Ofgem's campaign against fuel poverty). Then there's the train sequence: if Tim Cavendish really wanted to go from Kings Cross to Hull, surely he would have taken the main line up through Hertfordshire, not the rural line through Essex and Cambridgeshire.

Still, these are minor niggles. What is much more likely to cost Mitchell his Booker Prize is if any of the judges read *Emerald City*, because I am just about to blow his cover. You see, *Cloud Atlas* is not just a book about the future, it is not just a book containing themes such as clone slavery and the apocalyptic fall of civilization. It is a book written by a science fiction fan. OK, so maybe Mitchell can get away with having Tim Cavendish go around muttering "Soylent Green is people." He might have got that from the movie. But later in the book Mitchell comes back to Harry Harrison's themes with a vengeance. It is probably unlikely that Booker Prize judges will wonder whether it is an accident that Sonmi's clone number is 451. And they probably won't have a clue why Mitchell wrote this.

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*The immense lunar projector on far-off Fuji beamed AdV after AdV on to the moon's face; tomatoes big as babies; creamy cauliflower cubes; holeless lotus roots; speech bubbles ballooned from the Seed-Corp Logoman's juicy mouth.*

*Descending, the elderly taxi driver spoke of his boyhood in a distant conurb called Mumbai, now flooded, when the moon was always naked. Hae-Joo said an Advless moon would freak him out.*

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Oh, but we know. We know which piece of classic SF Mitchell has been reading.

And we know that means he is one of us. So go buy his book, OK? It is, after all, a wonderful piece of writing. And if he does get that Booker Prize nomination, we can all cheer him on.

*Cloud Atlas* - David Mitchell - Sceptre - hardcover

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## Short Stuff

### A Time of Elegance

It is, of course, impossible to read everything that is published in SF&F these days, but I do try to take account of what other people are saying is good, and if, last month, I had compiled a league table of writers I am unfamiliar with but who are getting rave reviews elsewhere then I have little doubt that the name at the top of the list would be Avram Davidson. So, spotting one of his collections going cheap at Eastercon, I decided to give him a try.

Davidson is primarily (I think possibly solely) a short fiction writer, which probably accounts for his high degree of critical acclaim and poor visibility otherwise. *The Other Nineteenth Century* is a collection of stories set in that particular era, or perhaps rather an imagined version thereof. There is a variety of tales here. Some are genuine alternate history pieces, such as the first tale, "O Brave Old World", which has the British monarchy moving to North America. Another story uses Sherlock Holmes as a character, while yet another is a rather clever Lovecraft pastiche that manages to include many of the traditional elements and atmosphere of a Lovecraft story whilst entirely avoiding his dreadful prose style.

The thing that struck me most on starting *The Other Nineteenth Century* was that here was a writer of immense talent. Davidson's prose is elegant and effortless. My next reaction was that he is clearly a man who enjoys clever tricks and minute observation. Some of the stories, for example, use historical characters but give them different names. It is part of Davidson's game with the reader to have them guess which famous people he is talking about by their behavior and relationships to each other.

In the end, however, my overall reaction was "why?" There was an incredible amount of skill deployed in writing the stories, but nothing that I could take away from them other than that cleverness.

*The Other Nineteenth Century* - Avram Davidson - Tor - hardcover

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### Postscripts Arrives

One of the things I was hoping to see at Eastercon was the promised new fiction magazine from PS Publishing, *Postscripts*. In the event it didn't make it out in time. The delay is primarily due to getting all of the contributing authors to sign the 150 hardcover edition copies. The last I heard from Peter Crowther was that he hopes everyone will have their copies by the end of May, which is not far off. In the meantime, however, he was kind enough to send me a PDF to peruse.

So what have we got? To start with the magazine is large. There are over 150 pages of it. Obviously that is offset by it being digest size, so it doesn't get as many words on a page as, say, *Interzone*, but it is still impressive. There are thirteen stories, including contributions from Gene Wolfe, Brian Aldiss and Ramsay Campbell. There is a poem by Ray Bradbury, and there are

three non-fiction pieces, including the introduction by Christopher Fowler which is essentially his Guest of Honor speech from last year's FantasyCon. I had really wanted that speech for *Emerald City* #100, because it fitted right in with the theme, but I guess I should be pleased that Fowler got paid for it.

I haven't managed to read all of the fiction yet, and I'm not sure that I will. One of the potential issues with *Postscripts* is that it covers four genres: SF, Fantasy, Horror and Crime. That's an interesting approach, but it will be interesting to see how it stacks up as a marketing plan against Andy Cox's stable of genre-specific magazines. There wasn't any stand-out material in the stories I read, but I want to make special mention of Jay Lake's story, "The Rose Egg". Lake has a wonderful imagination - I can't think of many people who are likely to produce a story that is about technological advances in graffiti production.

The non-fiction includes an excellent interview with Jim Blaylock by John Berlyne. Way too many interviews with SF authors ask dull and predictable questions. Berlyne obviously knows Blaylock's work well and was able to draw the author out. The other non-fiction piece is by Mike Ashley and is about SF&F magazines. I was mildly stunned to find that Ashley could count 110 different semi-prozines that have appeared in the field at one time or another. That rather gives the lie to the claim that *Locus* always wins the Hugo because it has no serious competition. I suspect that we are back with Lazy Voter Syndrome as an explanation again.

Anyway, copies should be hitting the newsstands and mailboxes in the UK pretty much the same time as you get this.

Mail order subscriptions to the US are \$50 for four issues, including postage. You can get more information here: <http://www.pspublishing.co.uk/postscripts.asp>.

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## Miscellany

### Hugo Short Fiction Online

The Noreascon 4 web site now has links to online version of all of the Hugo nominated short fiction pieces. You can find the full list here: <http://www.noreascon.org/hugos/nominations.html>.

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### Harry Potter Becomes Libertarian

Well, not quite, but a Potter novel is on the short list for this year's Prometheus Award. The full short list is: *Naked Empire*, by Terry Goodkind (Tor Books); *The Pixel Eye*, by Paul Levinson (Tor Books); *Spin State*, by Chris Moriarty (Bantam Books); *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, by J.K. Rowling (Scholastic Press); *Sims*, by F. Paul Wilson (Forge Books).

I've only read one of those, *Spin State*, but that book does contain some interesting speculation on AI rights. I guess it might be somewhat embarrassing to get an award for supposedly writing Libertarian fiction, but given that Ken MacLeod is a former Prometheus winner at least you'd be in very good company.

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### Clarke wins Heinlein Award

Sir Arthur C. Clarke has become this year's recipient of the Heinlein Society's Robert A. Heinlein Award, given for "outstanding published work in hard science fiction or technical writings inspiring the human exploration of space." The award ceremony will take place at the Society's annual dinner on the Friday night of Worldcon (immediately after the Retro Hugo ceremony). Sir Arthur is, as usual these days, unable to travel, but he has promised to try to get a live video link from Sri Lanka so that he can make an acceptance speech.

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## Footnote

Next issue I will have a review of China Miéville's new novel, *Iron Council*. I've been dipping into it off and on when I should have been reading books for this issue, and so far it looks very good indeed.

Also on the schedule are a Wiscon report, fiction from Charlie Stross, Sean Stewart, Lucius Shepard and John Crowley, and assuming we can find time to get together during Wiscon there will be an interview with Kelly Link and Gavin Grant of Small Beer Press.

Ciao,

Love 'n' hugs,

Cheryl