

EMERALD CITY #110

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Introduction

Well, here we are again. Producing those two huge issues around Worldcon didn't exhaust me completely. My apologies to those of you reading this at World Fantasy Con for the fact that this isn't a 50+ page monster. But then you didn't want to read stuff about fandom, did you?

What the assembled editors and publishers at WFC will notice is that this issue has an above average number of typos. What can I say? Anne is busy doing something much more important, namely helping proof the souvenir book for Fiddler's Green, so Kevin and I are left to our rather less sharp-eyed selves.

And what is Fiddler's Green, I hear you ask? Why, it is the very wonderful Sandman convention happening in Minneapolis in November. More details here:

<http://www.fiddlersgreencon.org/index.htm>. There are still memberships available, and all proceeds go to the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund. Wish I could afford to go.

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Swiss Watching

I suspect that prior to last month almost no one in West Coast fandom had heard of Swissnex. I certainly hadn't. And that is not entirely surprising. To start with the organization is quite new – it only started in 2003. In addition its primary purpose is commercial. It exists to put inventors and entrepreneurs in Western North America in touch with their counterparts in Switzerland. It is headquartered in San Francisco so as to be close to Silicon Valley. So just what is this organization doing running a symposium on science fiction?

The simple answer is that Swissnex exists to encourage the fertilization of ideas, and that can happen as much through fiction as through, say, scientific conferences. The more subtle answer is that there are only two science fiction museums in the world: one in Seattle, and therefore in Swissnex's territory, and the other in Yverdon-les-Bains, Switzerland.

Maison d'Ailleurs (<http://www.ailleurs.ch/>) was founded by a Frenchman, Pierre Versin, in 1976. It has a collection of over 40,000 books and magazines in 40 languages. With any luck you'll get to see some of that collection at the Glasgow Worldcon next year. Its current Director, Patrick Gyger, was on hand to help run the symposium. Greg Bear and Leslie Howle represented the newer museum from Seattle (<http://www.sciencefictionexperience.com/>).

Day 1: Automata

The first evening's entertainment focused on automata. Things got off to a slightly slow start due to the need for the two museums to introduce themselves, but this was soon followed by Dave Grossman, a Stanford Professor, who presented a slide show about the history of animated machines from ancient Egypt onwards. Grossman was very amusing, but I think he had far too much material for the time allocated and consequently everything was a bit rushed and disjointed.

The star of the show, however, was François Junod (http://www.miralab.unige.ch/subpages/automates/temps_moderne/junod_uk.htm), a Swiss gentleman who is trying to revive the lost art of automaton making. When I say "automata", you may think of the sort of thing you see in exhibits at theme parks, but most of these are very simple, and cheat. If you see a theme park automaton playing a piano, it will simply be moving its arm up and down while a hidden sound system provides the tune. Nor am I thinking of things like those famous Swiss music boxes, which are to the real thing as a limerick is to an epic poem. Back in the 18th Century people built automata that would write letters or play the piano for real – all carefully programmed with cams and levers and not a computer in sight (no, not even a Daniel Waterhouse Logic Mill). Junod is trying to learn how they did this, and to do it himself. And he is doing remarkably well.

The difficulty with Junod's work is that it can take him and his team of expert craftsmen a year or more to make just one automaton. They are superbly impressive: we saw film of one, "The Draughtsman",

that drew pictures with a real ink pen, and whose eyes moved to follow what it was drawing. But once complete they go to the homes of the private collectors who paid to have them made (much as they would have done in the 18th Century).

Junod notes that most of his customers are Japanese, and was astounded to discover from them that in Japan there is an ancient tradition of making automata from wood. That's something I'd like to hear more about at the 2007 Worldcon. Having primarily Japanese customers also encourages him to do everything using traditional methods. His clients would not countenance his using a CAD program to design the cams – they are all drawn on a large scale and then rendered down to patterns for machining using a pantograph.

We did get to see one Junod creation close up. It was a small model of a magician who does tricks moving songbirds between large cones that he raises and lowers. The magic itself is, of course, a cheat, but the automaton is the real thing. The covers were taken off so we could see it working. Junod says that his current ambition is to create an automaton that can juggle. That, I think, would be seriously impressive.

Day 2: Robots

The second evening moved us forward into the world of actual robots – the sort of thing that we make today with the advantage of electronics and software.

The American guest speaker was Dr. Dave Korsmeyer, who works in IT at NASA's Ames laboratory in Mountain View. He and his team were responsible for much of the software on Spirit and Opportunity,

the two Mars Exploration Rovers (MERs). It was great to hear someone from NASA who sounded like he still believed in the mission and wanted to get things done, but it was clear from what Korsmeyer had to say that the vast cost of NASA missions results in an atmosphere of fear and risk-avoidance. The standing NASA joke about the MERs is that they can do in a day what a trained geologist can do in 45 seconds. This is because everything that they do has to be planned in minute detail by the folks back at base. As robots go, Spirit and Opportunity have very little autonomy.

Much more hope was provided by Dr. Dario Floreano from Lausanne University who is an expert (one of the world's leading experts judging by the number of Berkeley students who came to listen to him) in evolutionary robotics. The essence of Floreano's work is that instead of trying to program a robot to do what he wants, he creates a variety of different algorithms, allows them to "breed", and lets natural selection show him what works and what does not. He started off with simple things like getting the software to "drive" a virtual road on the basis of visual input. Now he is close to finishing work on a small robot aircraft that can fly around indoors.

Much of Floreano's work involves studying the neurology of animals. His aircraft, for example, operates in pretty much the same way as a fly or bee does. Floreano says his ambition is to create a new species, but he admits there is a long way to go. His robot aircraft can fly like an insect, but it can't detect food like a fly, let alone make honey. Nevertheless, his work is attracting interest. Michael Crichton based much of the science in *Prey* on a paper by Floreano.

The evening was rounded off by Rudy Rucker who has been spending much of the last year teaching the programming of computer games at San Jose State University. His interest is primarily in how to make non-player characters in computer games seem more "real" in their behavior. But being a science fiction writer he could not resist speculating. The trouble with robots, he pointed out, is that, despite their obvious advantages in number crunching, computers can't actually process as quickly as human brains. Our problem is that we are doing a lot more than them, and we can't load and run specialist programs. But of course computers are getting faster all the time. How long will it be before the "fast folk" really are as fast as us? Rucker has done some calculations using Moore's Law, and he says the answer is about 45 years.

Day 3: Cyborgs

And so to Friday and a series of talks on human augmentation. One of the guest speakers was Greg Benford, which means I finally got to ask him about Stephen Hawking's about-face on the subject of black holes. Benford says he understands what Hawking is trying to say, but that he is reserving his judgment until he has seen the math, which Hawking has yet to publish. Everything rests on a technique that Hawking claims to have developed to avoid singularities in the equations. If he has done it, it will be very clever, but the astrophysics community wants to see the proof before accepting the argument.

The evening was opened by the Swiss Consul General, M. Roland Quillet. Why the top brass? Because the main speaker was Claude Nicollier, Switzerland's only astronaut. Nicollier has been on four

Shuttle missions, clocking over 1000 hours in space. His most famous mission was the trip to upgrade the mirrors on the Hubble Space Telescope. His talk was about the use of robotic arms, on both the Shuttle and the International Space Station, as a means of allowing astronauts to do work in space. I was interested in his comment that much of the work on Hubble was quite fiddly, necessitating the astronauts getting out into space and doing things by hand. I asked him about the planned rescue mission in which a Canadian robotic arm is to be sent up on its own to make more repairs to Hubble. Nicollier, who clearly loves the telescope dearly, said he very much hoped that it would work, but that he suspected that the best the robot could do would be to prepare Hubble for safe "de-orbiting" so that it could be retired in peace. Depressing.

Greg Benford followed up with a talk about augmentation for us back on Earth. He looked at things like the CharmIT wearable computer (<http://www.pcstats.com/articleview.cfm?articleID=1061>) and opined that augmentation would only be acceptable if it were relatively invisible. I respectfully disagreed, arguing that once we get to the point of rapid uptake augmentation will become fashionable and people will want to look augmented. We shall see.

David Brin started off well, being the only English-speaking participant to attempt to say something in French. (He lived in Paris for a couple of years, which helped a lot, though he still speaks French with an English-speaker's accent.) Brin then went on to be his usual shy, retiring and uncontroversial self, which resulted in a very lively session. He wasn't really talking about augmentation per se, but rather about whether we want to go forward with science or not. Whether, in

fact, there will be a new System of the World in which humans and machines co-exist in collaborative harmony, or if instead we will choose to ban technology and return to an age of superstition and repression in which there really was a Golden Age we can look back on. Brin doesn't believe in doing things by halves.

Finally there was a very lively panel discussion involving all three of the Killer B's. It is clear that they work very well together, and can be hugely entertaining, but I would not want to be on panel with them watching the show.

Day 4: Mars

The final event was on Saturday afternoon. Dr. Richard Kornfeld, a Swiss engineer from JPL, presented some fabulous pictures taken by Spirit and Opportunity. You can see most of them for yourselves [here: http://marsrovers.jpl.nasa.gov/home/index.html](http://marsrovers.jpl.nasa.gov/home/index.html). It was interesting to be able to see the track of the capsules as they landed on Mars and bounced across the surface on those huge air bags leaving big dents in the surface. I shudder to think what happened to poor little Beagle if, as is suspected, its air bags did not work.

Next up was Kim Stanley Robinson, who gave an excellent survey of the history of Martian SF (well, SF about Mars) and then got onto the topic of Martians and ecology. I must say here that Robinson reads his own work better than most writers I have encountered. He's well worth going to listen to if you happen to see a reading advertised. I was less happy to have to go through the same silly arguments about the need to protect the Martian ecology from pollution from Earth (something that even Robinson

sounded unconvinced by as he put the case). As local writer Gerald Nordley pointed out, we have already sent a bunch of spacecraft to Mars, none of which were sterilized. In addition there are plenty of theories about how organic material from Earth could have got into space (most spectacularly from the Chicxulub impact). Certainly Martian rocks have found their way to Earth, and some have even looked suspiciously like they contained signs of biological activity. Given the far greater abundance of life on Earth, it seems very likely that Mars has already been "polluted" in this way.

It fell to Terry Bisson to wrap up the event, talking mainly about the human need to find life elsewhere in the universe. And then we were done.

Summary

It proved to be a pretty exhausting four days for Kevin and I, given that it takes around 2 hours to get into San Francisco from where we live, and from Kevin's office. Consequently we were getting home at gone midnight, and the alarm was on for 6:00 am so that Kevin could get into work early and therefore leave early to get to the events on time. We spent much of Sunday asleep.

But we did have an excellent time. There were some really fascinating talks, and a lot of good questions from the audience. The Swissnex folks proved superb hosts, providing free food and drinks on the weekday evenings and snacks on Saturday. I for one am very glad that I went.

What I don't understand is why so few local fans turned up. I mentioned the event in my blog. It was also mentioned

on the BASFA mailing list and at the meeting on the Monday beforehand. There was free food, free beer, and a collection of the West Coast's best SF writers. And the number of fans who turned up could be counted on the fingers of one hand. Sad.

There are photos:
<http://www.emcit.com/photos.shtml>.

Dreamer of Worlds

Chuang-Tzu once dreamed he was a butterfly. When he awoke, he no longer knew if he was a butterfly dreaming he was a man, or a man who had dreamed he was a butterfly.

The new novel from Jon Courtenay Grimwood, *Stamping Butterflies*, moves away from the alternate future setting of Al Iskandria and settles, at least in part, in more-or-less contemporary Marrakech. Only in part, however: other sections are set in the same city, back in the 1970's, where some of the characters begin to get to know each other. Yet other sections are set in the far future, in the reign of the 53rd Chuang Tzu Emperor. *Stamping Butterflies* is a novel that spans vast gulfs of both space and time with a tiny pair of wings.

Tris looked at the drugged tourist.

"God," said the Doc, "do I need to do everything?" Tipping the creature off the mixing desk, Doc Joyce patted the slab, dislodged a spider which had been busy behind the patient's ear. "Up you go."

On the floor the spider scuttled away to stand a few paces from the body. After a second or two, during which its metal legs quivered and reformed in restless twists of black smoke, the

spider sidled up to the tourist's skull and went back to work.

Ah, isn't science fiction wonderful. Just try writing that in a mainstream novel and see what people make of it.

But all of this is a long way from Marrakech. It is a long way from Jake Razor, spoiled rich kid turned punk rocker turned drug addict. It is a long way from Marzaq al-Turq, a kid from the Marrakech slums with a passion for finding things out. And it is a long way from Prisoner Zero, arrested for the attempted assassination of the US President and awaiting execution. All of these things, as the sage Chuang Tzu might tell you, are linked. At a quantum level, although the original Chuang Tzu would not have used such words, they are all part of the fabric of the universe.

"So you see, what you and I think of as physical laws our friend considers the cosmological equivalent of local weather conditions."

For the Emperor it is all a question of the nature of reality. Supposedly, outside of his palace, are the 2023 worlds of his empire, worlds that make up the shattered eggshell matrix of a part-built Dyson sphere. According to the Library, the continued gravitational balance of the 2023 worlds is dependent on the continued well-being of the Emperor. But the Library often lies. The Emperor isn't even certain whether the servitors that attend him are real people or humanoid puppets that do the Library's bidding. Nor is he convinced that he is descended from the navigator of the *SZ Loyal Prince*, a star ship from a far-away place called Earth.

For President Gene Newman it is simply a matter of who and why. No one seems to know who Prisoner Zero is, or where he came from. As he won't speak, no one knows why he shot at the President either (although the Pentagon has managed to fabricate an entire conspiracy theory based around an imaginary Muslim extremist cell). Despite calling in one of the world's best psychologists, the President is no nearer solving the mystery, and a great deal nearer falling into a much bigger and more dangerous puzzle.

Of course, Professor Mayer knew it didn't really keep the equations out of the hands of dangerous lunatics at all. It merely put them into the hands of our dangerous lunatics as opposed to their dangerous lunatics.

As you may have noticed by now, there isn't a lot I can say about this book, or how it hangs together, or what it has to do with an ancient Taoist philosopher. You need to unfold the petals of the story for yourself, unleash its heady perfume of mystery, and wait for a butterfly to land upon it and bring enlightenment.

Then again, wisdom is not always very much use when dealing with those obstreperous Westerners.

There was a certain strength and logic to Hammou's plan, but a weakness also and it was the weakness that had always undercut his family's ideas where Jake Razor, Malika and Moz al-Turq were concerned. Caid Hammou and his nephew consistently ignored the obvious, which was that some people had real trouble doing what they were told.

Thankfully, unlike Caid Hammou, I don't have a complicated plan to execute. All I want to tell you to do is to go out and buy this book. OK?

Stamping Butterflies - Jon Courtenay Grimwood - Gollancz - publisher's proof

War of the Systems

And now the end is near. Some 1800 pages done, only another 900 to read. Gird your loins, fellow travelers, for we are about to embark upon the final rotation of Neal Stephenson's *Baroque Cycle*, a volume which, in common with the third part of Newton's *Principia Mathematica*, is known as *The System of the World*.

Now most places did not have newspapers, and so, if Mrs. Arlanc had not brought him any, he would never have known that they were wanting. But London had eighteen of them. 'Twas as if the combination in one city of too many printing presses; a bloody and perpetual atmosphere of Party Malice; and an infinite supply of coffee; had combined, in some alchemical sense, to engender a monstrous prodigy, an unstaunchable wound that bled Ink and would never heal.

When we last left them, Eliza was fabulously wealthy thanks to marrying into the Duchy of Arcachon but is therefore, somewhat inconveniently, a member of the French nobility and thus subject to the whims of that most illustrious of monarchs, Louis XIV. Jack has been fabulously wealthy and dirt poor by turns more frequent than the turns of the wheels of those new-fangled "Phaethon" carriages in which young

blades career through the streets of London on their way from coffee house to club. He is currently in possession of vast quantities of Solomonic Gold, but is bound to the service of the villainous Jesuit, Edouard de Gex, on pain of Awful Consequences for poor Eliza.

Jack's cunning, and the gold, are therefore to be put to work in the service of Leroy (the aforementioned King of France) by means of causing the downfall of England. The precise method that Jack is to employ is to effect a collapse in confidence in the English Currency, and thereby precipitate further collapse in that system of Trade whereby England is coming to dominate the world. This will inevitably bring Jack into conflict with the cleverest and most ruthlessly competitive man in the entire known universe: Sir Isaac Newton, Master of the Mint. As our story begins, Queen Anne is near to death and, she being without immediate issue, the English parliament is torn between two factions.

The Whigs wish to invite one George von Hanover, Elector of that small German principality, and most importantly a gentleman of the Protestant persuasion, to be their next King. The Tories, on the other hand, still cling to the hope that James Edward Stewart, son of the deposed King James II and currently in exile in France, can ascend to the throne and restore England to the bosom of the Catholic Church. Leroy, being a good Catholic himself and doubtless wishing to rid himself of an embarrassing royal pretender, naturally hopes for the latter. Newton too is leaning towards support of the Tories, if only because the House of Hanover is the current patron of his mortal enemy, Baron Godfried von Leibniz. Caught in the middle of all this is the man who is friend to both savants and whom we last (in a chronological sense)

saw being chased around the coast of New England by a pirate fleet commanded by the villainous Captain Edward Teach as he (Daniel Waterhouse, of course) seeks to return to England at the behest of Princess Caroline of Hanover.

Hooke, twisted and bent as he was, had been in the habit of going everywhere on his own two feet, even though his work as city surveyor, and as a sort of partner to Wren, had made him rich enough to afford a coach and four. Daniel had not understood it fully until today. For a man who wanted to get things done in London, there simply was not time to go in a vehicle.

That, then, is the plot. Somehow the house of Hanover must triumph over the House of Stewart (because we know it does). Somehow our heroes must have a part in this triumph. Somehow, because writers of alternate histories can never resist embroiling their characters in every single major event of the times, we must also see the unfolding of the South Sea Bubble, the Longitude Prize, the Abolition of Slavery, the invention of the Steam Engine and various other examples of Economic and Technological Wonders. And somehow Jack and Eliza must come to live Happily Ever After, which after nigh on 3,000 pages of unrequited love they surely deserve.

Back when we began this epic journey of Stephenson's I commented, in my review of *Quicksilver*, how one of the major theological differences between Catholics and Protestants occurs when one asks whether human beings have free will (and can therefore repent their sins) or whether the whole of human existence is like unto a giant piece of horological apparatus along similar lines to Sir Isaac's

description of the orbits of the planets. In that book Dr. Waterhouse and Dr. Leibniz have discourse on this very subject, but rather than referring to human beings the topic is that of computing machines, or Logic Mills as they have chosen to name them.

"I did not know you ran a theatre in Boston."

"You jest, sir, the Bostonians would never have allowed it – they'd have sent me packing to Providence."

"Then how comes it you have machinery in Boston?"

"I used the term ironically. I built a machine there – across the river actually, in a shack about halfway 'tween Charleston and Harvard."

It has taken a while for Stephenson to get back to this debate, but around page 680 of *The System of the World* Princess Caroline finally manages to bring Newton and Leibniz together to debate the role of God in the universe. Newton, for all his brilliance at physics, is still an alchemist at heart and believes in a distinct and separate God who interferes quite regularly in the behavior of his clockwork universe (indeed, he does so in every instance that Newton's perfect equations do not fully predict the paths of the heavenly spheres). Leibniz espouses a form of scientific pantheism that might well have been recognized by the sage Chaung Tzu: God is present in everything but acts not at all. Waterhouse, being a professional skeptic, has given up belief in God altogether.

Unsurprisingly, the great sages fail utterly to come to any conclusion in their dispute, save to agree that in future times men of

science will perform experiments that will prove one or the other of them correct. And this, perhaps, is the end of the book (save for another 200 pages or so of epilogue in which the aforementioned Happy Ending is secured). But Stephenson – unbeknownst, I suspect, to many of his readers – has in fact been carrying on the debate throughout the book, subtly disguising it as a matter of politics and economics. One of the key passages of *The System of the World* occurs where Edouard de Gex finally has Eliza at his mercy and is fantasizing about having her burned at the stake. Naturally, being a traditionalist villain, he insists on explaining her witchery to her at great length. It is all, it seems, a matter of money.

De Gex is a firm believer in a long-lost Golden Age in which kings were kings, nobles were nobles, and peasants were peasants. Everyone knew their place. Nobody needed money, because wealth was expressed in terms of assets: land, property and vassals. And without money, no upstart genius with a head for figures and an instinct for markets could upset the natural order of society. It goes without saying that de Gex's fantasy world is just that: money was of great importance to mediaeval kings, they just didn't know how to use it very well. But the idea of a world without money, where everyone knows their place and no one has to worry where their next meal is coming from, still holds many attractions. Ironically these days it is more often the Socialists who talk wistfully about how we will have prosperity for all and jobs for life if only we get rid of money and put all management of society in the hands of The Party or The Government.

How would the ceremony, the pageantry of the Queen's visit to Parliament look, to one who could see them thus? Colorful, magnificent, mesmerizing, Daniel supposed. He'd never know. Daniel could only see this as a sick old lady paying a call on a room full of anxious blokes who hadn't bathed in a while.

Stephenson's book, however, talks about the creation of a very different System of the World. Not a society of class and obligation, but one of contracts and remuneration, a society in which persons are not part of some pre-determined clockwork system but are instead granted free will to pick and chose with whom they should have commercial relations. A system, in fact, that would be very familiar to Jonathan Wilde and Dave Reid (though they would of course argue endlessly about how it should be implemented).

Now this is a very fine thing so say, and I am glad that Stephenson said it. But the question that we must return to is whether it was necessary to say it in almost 3,000 pages. Could it not perhaps have been done a little more concisely? I agree with some of the sentiments expressed by John Clute, in his review in *SF Weekly*. Sentence for sentence, paragraph for paragraph, the whole of *The Baroque Cycle* is exquisitely crafted. Stephenson is a fabulous writer and, as I hope the various quotes scattered about this review will show, a master of the humorous turn of phrase. But it is possible to have a surfeit of anything, even chocolate.

The place had not been fixed up in more than a hundred years, and was irredeemably Tudor: one could easily imagine Gloriana calling Sir Walter Raleigh on the carpet there. No books by living authors were in evidence. The

coastlines on the globe were hopelessly out of fashion.

Stephenson does, at times, go on endlessly. There are vast swathes of exposition, endless diversions to allow the author to show off the depth of his research, and innumerable charming vignettes that, whilst delightful in themselves, could possibly have been sacrificed to preserve the lives of the odd Amazon rainforest or two. *The System of the World* even has a small group of characters whose only purpose in the book seems to be to ultimately allow Stephenson to have one of them say, "I didn't expect the Spanish Inquisition." Cute, yes; necessary, no.

Of course in making such a complaint I am leaving myself open to charges of being alike to the Emperor of Austria whom, in *Amadeus*, crushes the young Mozart by telling him that the piece he has just had premiered contained "too many notes." On the other hand, I suspect that the attention span of the modern reader is even shorter than that of Austrian emperors, and the attention span of the hard-pressed book reviewer with a large pile of novels to get through is significantly shorter than that of the average reader. I would therefore respectfully ask Mr. Stephenson and his publishers that if they do wish to produce further 2,700 page novels then they might consider issuing them in nine 300-page chunks so as to make them more digestible.

It remains now only for us to address that well-worn question of, "it is science fiction?" There more I have read of *The Baroque Cycle*, the more I have come to the conclusion that Stephenson is playing with his audience. I could not find,

anywhere in the book, an explanation for the properties of Solomonic Gold (though I confess that I may have missed a vital clue whilst skipping through a particularly lengthy piece of exposition). As I have said before, there are no additional stable isotopes of gold, so the obvious chemical explanation is excluded. Hopefully someone else has had more patience than me and has trawled the books for possible theories.

There is no longer any doubt that Enoch Root has lived a very long time. *The System of the World* makes this very clear, and even suggests that he may be that very same Enoch who walked with God and was translated bodily to heaven (although of course this would be entirely at odds with the general message of the books so I doubt that Stephenson wants us to take it seriously). Other characters in the book appear to benefit from resurrection: all of them quite notable, and one very spectacularly. But I caution the reader that for much of the timeline Edouard De Gex believes himself to have been raised from the dead by Satanic Rites, and Stephenson playfully arranges for him to meet his end in such a way that this hypothesis is not disproved. Yet in restoring him to "life", de Gex's sister makes it plain to him that she believes any advanced form of herbalism to be indistinguishable from magic and therefore useful for gulling the ignorant and superstitious. Stephenson may well think himself to be doing the same.

There is a word for what Stephenson is doing here. It is "weirding", that being the process of confusing the reader by mixing ideas from different genres and refusing to say which are to be taken seriously. Whether it is New Weirding, Old Weirding, Adolescent Weirding or any other species of the methodology I care

not. Suffice it to say that it is a very useful technique whereby readers may be alternately confused and delighted, and otherwise given to enjoy the novels so treated.

Buried deep within the body of text that forms *The Baroque Cycle* are innumerable gems of literature which, once discovered, are a joy to the reader's heart. Each one of them sparkles with wit and genius. One can gaze upon them with admiration, or patiently chisel into the text in search of others just as fine. But one cannot help wondering how magnificent it would be if some Alchemist of English could come along and place the whole vast edifice in a crucible, there to render it down such that base materials and noble ones be separated, and those noble parts be gazed upon, naked, in their entirety. I believe that there is a word for this sort of Alchemist. What we are looking for here is, I think, an Editor.

The System of the World - Neal Stephenson - Heineman - publisher's proof

Ethical Cleansing

Doing the Best of 2004 panel at Noreascon 4 was interesting because it got me a sneak peek at the working copy of the list Charles Brown is maintaining in readiness for the January *Locus*. Most of the novels I had, of course, heard of and read. But new writers are much harder to keep up with and Charles had listed several books I was not familiar with. The one that caught my eye, because it got mentioned by the panel alongside the Susanna Clarke and Steph Swainston novels, is *City of Pearl* by Karen Traviss.

Traviss is a British writer, living not far from me in Wiltshire, and I've seen her around at a few cons in the US. Somewhat to my surprise, she doesn't have a publishing contract in the UK, but Eos in the US likes her and her debut novel has been getting a lot of critical acclaim. In some ways this is unsurprising because *City of Pearl* is a classic, solid piece of alien-encounter SF. I don't think it is an accident that Eos chose Jack McDevitt to provide the front cover blurb. But in other ways it is exceptional because the book has a very European theme to it. In Traviss's future world the US doesn't seem to exist, though the EU has become very US-like. And the book is shot through with environmental messages of a type liable to give your average Republican Party voter a seizure. It is, in short, full of the sort of stuff that US editors have been claiming makes British writers unsaleable in the US.

Besides, when was the last time you read an American SF book (Kim Stanley Robinson aside) in which the scientists are the bad guys?

But let's start at the beginning: Earth, 2299. Decades ago a small group of Christian fundamentalists left Earth in search of a new home where they could practice a simple life. As far as most people are concerned, the crazy would-be colonists are lost somewhere in the vastness of space. But the EU knows different, and Superintendent Shan Frankland suddenly finds herself in charge of a combined mission of soldiers and scientists sent off in search of Constantine Colony.

On the world known as Cavanagh's Star II there are three intelligent races in residence and one that is no longer so. The bezeri are native to the planet but are aquatic and are still working on getting out of the water. The wess'har come from

a nearby planet and are air breathing, space traveling and technologically well in advance of humanity. The isenj are also space faring, and breed so rapidly that they need to colonize new worlds on a regular basis. The wess'har have been waging a bloody war against the isenj to protect the bezeri, who are unable to protect themselves. None of this was known to the little Christian colony when they arrived in Cavanagh's Star space. And none of it was known to Shan Frankland and her mission when they set off from Earth decades later.

"I can understand they're hacked off at not being allowed to run loose and take what they like. But the situation's different now. We're in a potential war zone, and two of the hostiles have space travel and probably know where earth is. I don't have to draw you a picture and color it in, do I?"

As it turns out, the little Christian colony is tolerated by the wess'har. Their devotion to St. Francis and vegan diet appeals to the strong environmentalist ethic of their alien neighbors. Shan Frankland's crew, on the other hand, is 50% trained killers and 50% a bunch of selfish and naïve scientists whose only thoughts are of the massive bonuses that can earn back home if they discover and patent useful new materials. Life has to serve the purposes of science, and if the life in question happens to be that of an alien child on the dissection table, well it wasn't human, was it? And if the aliens object, well let's see them try to mess with a species that has imposed its will on dangerous rivals such as, er, dolphins and gorillas.

Such was the exchange rate when you looked at those who were different to you. One alien was a miracle, two a novelty, a hundred an invasion, and if they thwarted humanity – they were the enemy.

Not that the wess'har can claim any moral superiority (although of course they do). They don't bluff, they don't negotiate, and they don't take prisoners. They just issue orders and, if they are not obeyed, kill everyone who gets in their way. Aras, the friendly wess'har who looks after Constantine Colony, is known to the isenj as the "Butcher of Mjat" and is guilty of war crimes on a scale unimaginable on Earth because there aren't that many Earthlings to kill.

The beauty of *City of Pearl* is that Traviss has set up a scenario in which there are no right answers. The isenj killed millions of bezeri by polluting the seas of their planet. The wess'har killed billions of isenj in revenge. And the humans would wipe out the whole lot of them if necessary to get hold of some of the advanced technology that the wess'har and isenj appear to have.

Justifications for genocide abound. The isenj claim that they need the space in which to live. The human scientists claim that science has to advance. And the wess'har claim that they are protecting the environment. Little of this stands up to scrutiny. Even the supposedly hard-line ethical wess'har are actually playing God, choosing where to intervene and doing so ruthlessly from the point of view of those they have decided against. It is a bit like humans deciding that all lions have to be exterminated as punishment for the crime of eating wildebeest.

There are probably interesting aspects to the wess'har philosophy to be resolved as

well. For instance, here is Aras living by the teachings of one of his favorite philosophers:

Everything he owned, or would ever own, was folded into the pack slung across his back, as Targassat had taught. If you couldn't carry it with you, you didn't need it. If it didn't perform several functions, then it was not worth carrying. And if it had no function – well, then it was an un-wess'har thing, a waste of resources and something to be avoided.

Those are the words of a culture that sees little or no value in books, could never contemplate the idea of art for art's sake, and would probably never have invented agriculture. And yet there is a wess'har city, and later in the book we are told that everyone who lives there has a library. I'm hoping that in a later book in the series we'll meet a warm and loveable isenj.

There are times when reading this book that I started to appreciate what Kim Stanley Robinson does. Every so often I find myself thinking that the characters had hardly touched the surface of an issue. Each side had stated their case and that was it. But of course Traviss was thoughtfully saving us from the twenty pages of involved debate that Robinson would have given us. Maybe there is a middle ground, but I'm sure it will be hard to produce.

I also think that *City of Pearl* would have been a better book if it hadn't been told mostly from Frankland's point of view. If Traviss had got inside the heads more of Aras, one of the colonists, one of the scientists, maybe even a bezeri or isenj, and allowed each one to make their own case as they saw it, then the readers would have been left much more to their own

devices in drawing conclusions. As it is, there is a little too much authorial voice for the book to work as well as it I would like.

Having said all of that, however, *City of Pearl* is a very good debut novel. It isn't top class literature, but it does what SF does very well indeed. Charles Brown clearly has it on his shortlist for Best First Novel, and I would not be at all surprised to see it on the Phil Dick Award shortlist as well. Why Traviss has been unable to sell this book in the UK is a mystery to me.

City of Pearl - Karen Traviss - Eos - mass market paperback

Fire and Water

Dreams-of-War was hunting the remnants of men across the slopes of the Martian Olympus when she came across the herd of ghosts.

For some time now Liz Williams has been producing some very solid science fiction novels and has been rewarded by a couple of nominations for the Philip K. Dick Award. Everyone praises her ideas and interesting plots, but it isn't often her imagery that takes center stage. All that is about to change. Her latest novel, *Banner of Souls*, is set in the far future of our solar system at a time in which biotech and nanotech have so changed our worlds that there are barely recognizable. From the very first sentence (quoted above), the book grips you in a fascination for its strangeness. It is a work that few will hesitate to describe as science fantasy.

There have been further reports. I have been keeping in touch with Memnos, but I would not have needed to. It is all in the news-views. Over the last months, since we first saw the gaezelles, the sightings of such ghosts have increased. Horned women striding the passageways and underways of Winterstrike. Flayed warriors in armor made of thorns, manifesting in tea houses in Caud. Women from the Epoch of Cold, whose flesh seems made of amber and ice.

Earth is largely submerged. Those Northern continents not destroyed by fire and flood are over-run by the barbarian clans of the war-madams. Only Fragrant Harbor, a city of great antiquity on the edge of the world's greatest empire, still clings to civilization. Yet even there what passes for post-humanity is dependent on the amphibian kappa, a secretive race from the Fire Islands to the north, as servants and workers. Besides, Earth is ruled from Mars, which means from Memnos Tower.

The deserts of Mars are an unfriendly place these days, infested with many kinds of men-remnants such as hyenae, vulpen, awt and others of the Changed. The warriors of Memnos are bred to hunt them down and keep order. They in turn are ruled by the Matriarch and her fearsome cadre of Excissieres. In a world of made-humans, a great evolutionary advance, there is no purpose to men, and the sorry degenerate dregs of their kind must be hunted down and destroyed.

Technology, however, is not without its dangers. Much of the power of Memnos is dependent on haunt-tech, devices so strange that few post-humans come close to understanding it. Who, after all, would want to understand something that depends for its power on the Eldritch

Realm, on the power of spirits? It is a product of the alien Kami, a mysterious race whose first contact with our solar system was, quite naturally, with its farthest-most outpost.

Deep in the darkness of space, out far beyond Io and Europa, is the world of Nightshade, home to the Lab Clans. This is where the Kami and humanity first made contact. This is the source of all haunt-tech. It is where plots are hatched And very strange beings as well.

She rested bone-and-metal fingers on the railing of the ship and contemplated the churning sea. It was good to have a change of limbs once more. Her spare parts had finally been delivered, arriving via a scow the previous day.

Thus Yskaterina Iye, a product of Nightshade technology: an agent, an assassin, a pawn in a long-term game the prize of which will be mastery of the solar system. Her mission is simple, find a young girl and kill her.

Of course that may not be so easy. The girl in question, Lunae, has been granted a fearsome Martian warrior, Dreams-of-War, as her bodyguard. The kappa nurse should prove no obstacle, but one should never underestimate the opposition. For The Grandmothers too are of Nightshade, a rival clan that fled to Earth decades ago to put their plan into action. The Grandmothers are ruthless.

"Would you miss me if I died?"

"It is hard to say," the kappa mused. Lunae felt something cold and pulpy rise inside her throat; she stopped walking and stared at the kappa. "Do not think I do not love you," said

the kappa in sudden dismay. "I did not mean that. But your Grandmothers are compassionate, and will not let me fully feel. If anything were to befall you, they would extract my emotions, store them safely where I cannot find them. They are very kind.

Then again, perhaps Yskaterina should consider Lunae herself. She is the *hito-bashira*, the one-who-holds-back-the-flood. She is the end product of the Grandmothers' lengthy breeding program, not the helpless child that she seems. Indeed, she is possibly the only sane person to come out of Nightshade, the only one of that terrible sisterhood that is not so corrupted by her power that she cannot rest unless she controls everything.

There is much to admire in this book, not the least of which is the skillful blending of SF, fantasy and horror tropes. Liz would kill me if I used That Term to describe any of her work, but nevertheless *Banner of Souls* is something new; and it is very, very weird.

I was impressed also with the thought that has gone into the imagery. Earth is clearly a water world, characterized particularly by the amphibious kappa with their passive, accommodating ways. Mars is a martial world, full of angry warriors who yearn for the fires of war and have their emotions excised before they are born. Williams gets her alchemy right.

And if that isn't enough for you there is the running side-story about a world almost entirely without men, because they have outlived their usefulness. And of course because they were a menace.

"I am surprised," the kappa said with care, "that a meal was all they had in mind for you. I know the reputation of males."

The warrior snorted. "It would have been worse for them had they tried. I have internal modifications, like all members of the warrior clans."

I don't think this is quite the book that will set Liz Williams rocketing onto the award shortlists (though another Dick Award nomination is highly likely). The plot is ultimately fairly predictable, and I was rather disappointed that Williams saw the need for a chapter in which she Explains Everything. But it is certainly her best book yet, and it puts her alongside China Miéville and Jeff Vandermeer as someone whose imagination is so twisted that it would need the 10-or-so dimensions of String Theory to fully describe it. Highly recommended.

Banner of Souls - Liz Williams - Bantam - mass market paperback

Distilled Spirit of a Classic Fanzine

By John Hertz

Patricia & Richard Lupoff's *Xero* won the 1963 Hugo Award for Best Fanzine. Now Tachyon Publications of San Francisco has brought out *The Best of "Xero"*, in hard covers, illustrated, a labor of love. I ran the Fanzine Lounge at the 2004 Worldcon, and made sure to put a copy on display. It's a fine piece of work, which I commend to you.

In the SF community we've published amateur magazines, by and for each other, since before the first World Science Fiction Convention (1939). In the 1940's we adopted the late Russell Chauvenet's

word "fanzine". By the 1950's we established the Hugo Awards, including Best Fanzine along with Best Short Story, Best Professional Artist, and the rest. Fan activity is one of our bright sparks. Likewise fans and pros mixing it up.

I now come to a matter which has caused me a semi-sleepless afternoon, vide-licet Steve Stills' [Avram Davidson, here quoted from the letter column, knew the artist was Steve Stiles, and how to spell videlicet - JH] vertical cartoon strip by name "Lin Carter's Fantastic Bunny Rabbit" (it will never catch on with the syndicates, Lin & Steve): Why are rabbits called bunny? Bulwinckle [Bulfinch's Mythology + Bullwinkle the Moose of Jay Ward's cartoons - JH] says of this only, "A pet or familiar name for rabbits, conies, or squirrels." That's a big help. If anyone can tell me why rabbits are called bunny I'll tell him why cats are called pussy.

Davidson, Carter, and Stiles all contributed to *Xero*; Stiles, who in 2004 was on the Best Fanartist ballot, then drew with a stylus on mimeograph stencils, the technology of the day. Pat & Dick Lupoff typed stencils in their Manhattan apartment, printed them on a machine in Noreen & Larry Shaw's basement, collated by hand, and lugged the results to SF cons or stuffed them in mailboxes. The machine had not been given by Damon Knight, A.J. Budrys explained in a letter after a while, but lent. Eventually drawings could be scanned by electro-stencil, a higher tech. Colored ink joined colored paper, sometimes wildly colored. *Xero* could be spectacular.

Knight later founded the Science Fiction Writers of America; he and Budrys were each later Writer Guest of Honor at a Worldcon. James Blish won two

Retrospective Hugos in 2004; in *Xero* he reviewed Budrys' *Rogue Moon* (not reprinted by Tachyon), and Kingsley Amis' *New Maps of Hell*. You'll also see Anthony Boucher, Harlan Ellison, Ethel Lindsay, Fred Pohl, Rick Sneary, Bob Tucker as "Hoy Ping Pong", Harry Warner — fans and pros mixing it up. Roger Ebert, later a movie critic, contributed poetry, often free-style, or formal and funny in his fanziner's version of Browning's "Last Duchess":

*This crud
I print for you disgusts me; the thud
Is of your fanzine dully falling.*

Earlier in 2004, I happened to be at dinner with Ann Monn, Tachyon's layout artist and typographer on the *Best of Xero* project. She, editor Jacob Weisman, and the Lupoffs were all striving at it. One problem was selection. Another was the giving of some context to a cuisine whose meat was freely salted with in-jokes. A third, kin to both, was the treatment of graphics.

You might not recognize her wizardry without seeing the originals. The letter column was "Epistolary Intercourse", edited by Pat; for one issue it was illustrated by an abstract face in red and blue, which Monn reproduced in black & white somehow. The original of the Eddie Jones cover included in *Best of Xero* was orange and blood-red. Less dramatic, but probably still harder, were the stylus drawings, like Andy Reiss' "Harlan Ellison Playing Skittles". Bhub Stewart (yes, with an "h"), who became art editor for *Xero*, with everything from caricature to montage, is well represented. Then

there's where to put what, and the sizes, and the shapes. I'm impressed.

Did I mention comic books?

They were a thread through *Xero* from beginning to end. Roy Thomas, later editor-in-chief at Marvel, wrote of Bulletman, Captain Midnight, and other Fawcett folk; Don Thompson, later of the *Comic Buyers Guide*, wrote of the Spectre and Doctor Fate. The book jacket is Larry Ivie's "New Rendering of the Old 'Atom'", also done in gold on the cover. Walter Breen applauded the combination of "comic books and genuine intellectuality" (not reprinted); F.M. Busby, whose *Cry of the Nameless* won Best Fanzine in 1960 — another of us active both as fan and pro — wrote, "The idea of a sophisticated sercon ["serious and constructive" - JH] fandom centered around comic books just naturally breaks me up" (not reprinted). You be the judge.

Doctor Fate and the Spectre were, of course, too super to last, even in an age of flamboyant comic book superheroes. But ... nowhere in science fiction, even in the cosmic settings of Doc Smith's Lensmen series ... do you find such lavish backdrops for the action. Even fantasy can't match them.... it is a new, startling and, for a time, fascinating thing to find stories in which there are no limits, where every card is wild.

Fanzines roar along today, on paper, on the Web, or both. Some folk who wrote letters to *Xero* have also had letters in my fanzine. It's bracing to realize how science fiction, and fandom, have been around long enough that we can cultivate a sense of the classic, of what was done before our own time which we find to hold interest,

even nourishment, for us whose times are changed.

The Best of "Xero" - Pat & Dick Lupoff - Tachyon - hardcover

Last Exit to Sanity

It is pretty easy to spot a novel that is full of romantic nonsense designed to appeal to women. The tropes are very clear: talk dark handsome strangers who appear to be cruel but turn out to be Mr. Right; evil stepmothers and spiteful, jealous older sisters; loyal rustic servants; super-intelligent pets; and not forgetting lots and lots of shopping and chocolate. There's a formula, and it is pretty obviously the stuff of fantasy.

Well I'm beginning to think that there is a male equivalent. The tropes go something like this: prostitutes who love their job; wives who happily forgive all manner of infidelities; drunken sots who achieve great things despite that fact that they seem too indolent and inebriated to get off their bar stool; nerds with an obsession with masturbation who not only achieve great things but also run across their aforementioned happy prostitutes and achieve sexual confidence; pedophiles who are loved and admired by their victims. Boy, men have some weird fantasies.

Edward Whittemore deploys just about all of that lot in *Quin's Shanghai Circus*, and a lot more besides. His characters are, for the most part, utterly despicable. But he does it all for a reason, or maybe several reasons. We should never forget that for many years he was an undercover CIA agent. A real spy, not some romantic

James Bond fantasy. Whittemore knows that the job of a spy is to find people with weaknesses and exploit them ruthlessly. But I think his main reason for populating his spy ring with such a bunch of obnoxious losers is to make plain to us just how much worse war is than espionage.

Now for the setting of this particular circus, Shanghai in those last days before the war.

Enormous wealth, enormous poverty. Thousands of entrepreneurs and tens of thousands of slaves. The opium rights to a province lost at a game of cards. Women given fortunes in exchange for an evening of pleasure, or thrown into the baggage train of a warlord as a different kind of payment. Peasant boys reigning as queens one day and tortured to death the next.

The plot of the story involves an investigation by a young Brooklyn man called Quin into the activities of the parents he never knew. Approached in a bar by an enormously fat drunk called Geraty, Quin discovers that his parents were known to certain people in the Far East during the period leading up to World War II. He learns that there is some connection with an autistic boy with the unusual name of Gobi, and with a Canadian priest called Father Lamereaux. Inspired by Geraty's tales, Quin picks up Gobi from the orphanage where he lives and heads out across the Pacific.

Once there he discovers other participants in the story. There is Mama, the owner of the most prestigious brothel in Tokyo. There are two Japanese brothers from a noble family: one an army general and one a convert to Judaism. There is the most powerful gangster in Japan. And there is a Russian spy, a man who is friend to both

Trotsky and Mao. Most importantly there is a spy ring which, if the tales are to be believed, greatly reduced the length and horror of World War II.

Not that this did anything for the people of China who were in the path of Japanese invasion.

These people, you see, would have died soon anyway. They were looking for death, and one way or another they would have found it. They were on edge, voyeurs a step away waiting for the final spectacle. They must have known they had gone to the warehouse that night to witness their own deaths. After all, there was nothing else left to see.

Although published by Old Earth Books and referred to respectfully in Jeff Vandermeer's *Veniss Underground*, it is difficult to describe *Quin's Shanghai Circus* as a fantasy except that it is hard to believe that the story happened exactly as told. Nothing in it is quite believable, from the vast number of coincidences of relationships to the horror of the final circus. But that is exactly the point, because the real subject of the book is not Quin's search for his lost parents, nor the tragedy of Gobi's life, nor even the supposed spy ring. The subject of the book is the Rape of Nanking, a military atrocity so horrible in both its scope and its intimate human nature that it would be impossible to believe it really happened if we didn't have the historical record.

There are some things that are so terrible that fantastical fiction, no matter how outrageous, cannot top them. Edward Whittemore has found one, and has set out to show us just how unbelievably horrible reality can be.

So, um, can someone please explain to me what Japanese men find to arousing about matchstick games?

[Which is to note that even Whittemore is unable to face the bleakness of his own tale without leavening it with humor.]

Quin's Shanghai Circus - Edward Whittemore - Old Earth Books - Trade Paperback

Interview: Jacob Weisman of Tachyon Publications

I have seen Jacob Weisman at conventions around America for many years and was vaguely aware that he produced books, but recently the output of Tachyon Publications

(<http://www.tachyonpublications.com/>) has increased significantly, including books by a number of big name authors. Given that we were both in the Bay Area, I met up with Jacob for lunch on Valencia Street, one of those nice parts of the world where the only thing more common than bookshops is interesting ethnic restaurants. The food was Ethiopian and very good. This is what we talked about.

CHERYL: Let's start with a little bit of background. How long has Tachyon been going?

JACOB: In its present shape as a book publisher we've been in business since 1995. Before that the name Tachyon was used on a fanzine I started back in 1982. So the name has been around for over 20 years, but as a book publisher next year will be our tenth anniversary.

CHERYL: Did the publishing business grow out of the fanzine, or did you just choose to use the same name?

JACOB: Mostly we just chose to use the same name.

CHERYL: So why did you decide to start a publishing company?

JACOB: That's a good question. It probably wasn't the smartest thing I could have done, but it is what I've always wanted to do. I've always wanted to run a science fiction line, but I was never willing to move to New York. My writing teacher in college was a friend of David Hartwell. This was back in the early 1980s when Hartwell was heading up Timescape. And I just knew then that that was exactly what I wanted to do. So when desktop publishing came along I couldn't wait to jump in and see what I could do. I published a book, with no idea what I was doing: *Ganglion & Other Stories*, a fantastic collection of stories by Wayne Wightman. I managed not to lose my shirt on that first attempt, and I've been publishing books ever since. That was kind of a miracle, actually, but it got me going.

CHERYL: So essentially the motivation was that the technology was suddenly there so you decided to use it.

JACOB: Well, even for the fanzine we were using offset printing. I was looking at the price list we had from the printer and realizing that I could do a book. And the nice thing about books is that you are dealing with only one author, and maybe a cover artist, and that's a lot easier than doing a magazine where you've got bits and pieces that you have to pull in from many different sources. Running the fanzine took more work than one of our books does now.

CHERYL: I feel your pain. And clearly you were producing something much more sophisticated, production-wise, than

Emerald City. Have you always been interested in publishing?

JACOB: I have worked in magazines and newspapers most of my life. The first fanzine I did was a comic book fanzine at the age of 6. No copies survive, thank goodness, or I probably wouldn't be talking about it. It was something that my friend Nico and I used to put together on the ditto machine at school. I worked on school newspapers and was an editor of my college newspaper. I worked for the Seattle Supersonics, the professional basketball team, helping produce their game programs. I also worked for *Asimov's* and *Locus* as an intern.

CHERYL: You mentioned that you started out using offset printing. Have all of Tachyon's books been offset?

JACOB: They have.

CHERYL: So you don't have anything to do with Print-on-Demand?

JACOB: No, nothing at all.

CHERYL: Is that a policy decision, or just that you started out doing offset and have never considered anything else?

JACOB: Well, we have a distributor, and in order to make good use of having a distributor we have to sell at least 2,000 copies of everything we do. POD costs a lot more to produce per unit and is only cost effective if you aren't selling in large quantities. There are other issues involved as well, mostly with the quality of the books. We like to produce very nice books, from the quality of the cover to the look and feel of the book. There are problems with how POD books look.

JACOB: I think that Print-on-Demand technology will get there, in the end. The problem it has is that it has been hijacked by a couple of outfits that do POD for lots

of people. They tend to use one sort of cover stock and one sort of paper stock, and get their customers to fill in the blanks. The books just don't look all that nice and can be downright abysmal. I think you can still do a very nice job, but you have to customize everything to fit the project you are working on. If someone will do that, indeed someone probably already has, then they'll do OK. Print-on-Demand will succeed when the books no longer look like Print-on-Demand books.

CHERYL: So you have a distributor?

JACOB: That's right, we use IPG – Independent Publishers' Group – they are the same outfit that distributes both Golden Gryphon and Benbella. They are something like the fifth biggest distributor in the country, although the drop-off these days is pretty drastic after you get past Ingram and Baker & Taylor. Fortunately IPG can sell our books through the big distributors, so our books are available pretty much anywhere you can buy books.

CHERYL: So the books will all be available through Amazon, but to get them from Barnes & Noble or Borders you might have to special-order.

JACOB: You might. They carry our books in ones and twos and seldom reorder. They have hundreds of stores. For 500 stores they'll order 500 or 1000 copies. You'll find two copies in some stores and none in others. The end result is that we are better represented in bookstores than a lot of small press companies, but if somebody has already bought a copy at your local chain store you may have to find it somewhere else.

CHERYL: The Tachyon logo on that very splendid t-shirt you are wearing: a rhinoceros at a typewriter?

JACOB: We talked about a logo forever but could never figure out what it should be. We wanted something traditional, meaning some sort of animal: Bantam has a rooster, Knopf has a borzoi. We wanted something like that, but couldn't figure out what to use. Then we had a lot of success with Peter Beagle's *The Rhinoceros who Quoted Nietzsche* so we decided to go with a rhinoceros. Mike Dashow, who won a Chesley award in 1998 for the cover of that book, also designed the logo for us.

CHERYL: But tachyons are very fast and invisible, whereas rhinoceroses are rather more lumbering and obvious.

JACOB: That's true, the name and logo came about separately. Thank God *Star Trek* popularized the word "tachyon," which happened after I created the company. Otherwise no one would ever know how to pronounce or spell the word. They wouldn't be able to write us checks.

CHERYL: Is there an overarching business plan for the company, or is it more a case of, "We do what we find interesting?"

JACOB: A little bit of both. Mostly we make it up as we go along. Right now we are growing very very fast. When we started we printed very small numbers of our books, typically 1,000 copies. And we would sell them directly to bookstores and to customers. There was no distributor. At a certain point that became too difficult to manage, so we now have a very good distributor. But that means we had to go from doing 1,000 copies to 2,500 copies. And instead of doing 2, 3 or 4 books a year we have to do at least 6 a year. Right now we've got 9 books scheduled for 2005. So there's a plan to grow the company, which is a bit scary. But we don't think in terms of slots we have to fill. We have 10 slots for books next year, but we only have 9 scheduled. If the right book doesn't come

along (and it would have to come along pretty quickly at this point) then it's not something that we ought to worry about. The important thing is the quality of each book we publish.

CHERYL: This drive for growth is driven by having a distributor, because working through them you need to have the volume, correct?

JACOB: You need to have volume, and you need to have a certain degree of regularity in your output. They need to know that there will be a steady stream of output. You need to have books scheduled in the future to get people to take notice of what you are doing now.

CHERYL: Is this a big financial risk? Have you had to go and talk to the bank manager?

JACOB: It is a little uncomfortable, yeah. But we've been through it before. We've grown in the past. We knew we'd have some losses in the process, and we budgeted for them. And now we are growing yet again.

CHERYL: There are three members of staff listed on your web site.

JACOB: Jill Roberts, my production manager, handles almost everything. We have a part-time publicist, Jennifer Privateer. And we have several other people who volunteer their services.

CHERYL: You are also the only small press I know of that has both a dog and a cat listed as members of staff.

JACOB: It is a very small staff and we need everyone we can get. They all have their own skills. Koufax actually foiled a burglary the other day. It is nice having a big German Shepard in your office.

CHERYL: You have an excellent list of authors for your forthcoming books so I'm

sure there will be plenty of interest in your output. But you are not taking submissions, so how do you go about getting the books?

JACOB: We publish by invitation, which requires a great deal of reading on my part to keep up with what is going on in the industry. Mostly what we try to do is figure out what projects are not being done that someone should be doing, and then we do them.

CHERYL: There's a fair amount of West Coast influence amongst your writers. Is that because local people are easy to get hold of?

JACOB: I hadn't thought about it all that much. The split is probably about 50/50. We are doing a Brian Aldiss book next year and he's a long way away from the West Coast. Andy Duncan lives in Alabama. But three of the four Tiptree collection editors live locally. Tim Powers, Terry Bisson and Peter Beagle are all West Coast.

CHERYL: The next book you have out is *Stagestruck Vampires* by Suzy McKee Charnas. Is that a novel or short stories?

JACOB: Short stories.

CHERYL: And are they all about vampires?

JACOB: About half. It has "Unicorn Tapestry," part of *The Vampire Tapestry*, which won a Nebula in 1981. It has several other vampire stories. The full title is *Stagestruck Vampires and Other Phantasms*.

CHERYL: Can we expect a lot of feminist fiction along the lines of the *Motherlines* series?

JACOB: There are a few things in *Stagestruck Vampires* that are overtly feminist. It has the story, "Boobs," which was also a Nebula nominee and won the

Best Short Story Hugo in 1990. But while feminism obviously informs all of Suzy's writing, the book is probably more phantasmagorical than overtly political.

CHERYL: You have a fair amount of James Tiptree-related books in your schedule: an anthology of stories from the Tiptree Award lists and *Her Smoke Rose Up Forever* by the lady herself.

JACOB: Any opportunity to publish Tiptree is good.

CHERYL: So I guess I'll see you at Wiscon next year.

JACOB: Yeah, I was there this year, and I'll be there next year too. It's one of my favorite conventions.

CHERYL: Talking of which, I see you at quite a lot of conventions. You seem to do more than any other small press I know. How successful is that for you?

JACOB: It can be very successful. We do Worldcon, World Fantasy, ICFA, Wiscon and several local conventions. Worldcon is the best convention for us from a financial point of view. The others are great opportunities to get the books in front of people and get feedback on the job we're doing. And to meet some of the people we've worked with.

CHERYL: Worldcon is going to be out of the US two of the next three years. Will that pose a problem for you?

JACOB: I'm hoping that we are going to be in Glasgow. I don't think we are going to be in Japan unless something dramatic happens. I'd like to go to Glasgow and then swing back for NASFiC in Seattle.

CHERYL: Talking of the UK, how did you end up publishing a book by Brian Aldiss?

JACOB: We talked about it at ICFA, the International Conference on the Fantastic

in the Arts. It is a great convention and Brian is a regular guest there. *Cultural Breaks* is a collection of Brian Aldiss's most recent stories and our goal is to have that out at the Worldcon in Glasgow. Aldiss will celebrate his 80th birthday on August 18th, 2005, which is just after the convention. The book is sort of a birthday tribute to Brian.

CHERYL: *The Best of Xero* — what prompted you to put out a collection of material from a fanzine?

JACOB: My friend Bernie Goodman and I went to visit Pat and Dick Lupoff after ConJosé. I forget what prompted it, but he took out a bound copy of his fanzine to show us. We spent a lot of time looking at issues, and it turned into a project just like that.

JACOB: The hard part was figuring out what the format would be. How do you take 900 to 1,000 pages of fanzine material (all single spaced) and condense it down into something like a small coffee table book.

CHERYL: So was there a conscious effort to make it look like a fanzine?

JACOB: No, it is a book design of a fanzine. The important thing was to keep the spirit of the magazine intact. So there are articles that appeared in the fanzine, and there are letters that refer to the articles. We had to do quite a bit of editing to eliminate side threads. A letter to a fanzine can range over many topics. The material had been edited once by Pat and Dick when they first published it in the early 1960's, but I had to edit it again. Thus, we ended up with the original article, followed by the letters that responded to that article. It took us a long time to figure out how to do that.

CHERYL: Tim Powers is one of my favorite authors. Can you tell me a bit about the book of his, *Strange Itineraries*, that you are publishing?

JACOB: It is his complete short story output, although there's not very much of that. It does include the stories from *Night Moves and Other Stories*, published by Subterranean Press in 2001, and a number of stories that he has since published.

CHERYL: This will be a big thing for Powers fans then – everything collected in one place. My guess is that not many people will have the Subterranean book as they tend to cater to a collectors' market: great quality but very high price and limited availability.

JACOB: It will be nice. You can buy all of these stories in other places, but it would probably cost you at least \$100. We are doing a trade paperback for \$16. It will be the first time that all of the stories are available, not only in one place and at a reasonable price, but also through your local bookstore.

CHERYL: Most of the books you publish are trade paperbacks, but for the Brian Aldiss book, and also for Terry Bisson's *Greetings*, you have gone for hardcover. Why is that?

JACOB: We are still trying to feel our way. When we started we only did hardcover. Then we moved into trade paperback. Now we've decided to experiment a bit. The other two science fiction companies that use our distributor publish mostly hardcover, and we wanted to keep a toehold in that market. We will see which of these formats do better.

CHERYL: Anything else in next year's output that you particularly want to talk about?

JACOB: I think it is a pretty impressive list all the way through. Some of the titles are more commercial than others. *Greetings* by Terry Bisson will be an enormous short story collection: 400-500 pages. *I Live With You* by Carol Emshwiller is a very good book, it is our lead-off book for 2005. But it's hard to compare books. We have titles by Tim Powers, Peter Beagle, Andy Duncan, and James Patrick Kelly all scheduled for next year. Take your pick.

CHERYL: Are any of these novels, or are they all collections?

JACOB: *Burn* by James Patrick Kelly is a short novel. Or at least it was proposed to us as a short novel. It is still being written so it may end up being a novel yet. Andy Duncan's *The Man Who Rode the Mule Around the World* is planned to be a set of linked short stories that will come together to form a short novel.

CHERYL: It will be one of those things that people argue endlessly over as to whether it is a fix-up or a collection.

JACOB: Yes, although "fix-up" is a term that people tend to apply to a novel made from previously published work, whereas in this case my understanding is that most of the material will not have been published elsewhere first.

JACOB: The rest of our planned output is collections. We have an as-yet untitled short story collection by Peter Beagle, which will obviously be awfully good.

CHERYL: Looking forward a bit further, where do you see Tachyon going from here? Do you have any plans to start publishing people's first novels?

JACOB: Well, we have done a few first novels. We did *Olympic Games* by Leslie

What, which you very kindly reviewed for us.

CHERYL: I did, and it was very good.

JACOB: Eileen Gunn's short story collection, *Stable Strategies*, is not a first novel but it is her first book. We can publish something that is a first-time book, but we won't publish something by someone who is just entering the field. Both Leslie and Eileen have a presence in the field that makes them work for us. They are already part of the conversation.

JACOB: One of the things about science fiction is that there is a constant dialog between its writers: about the future, about what's important, either about literature or science or just science fiction in general. That's how all of the conventions that science fiction has started have been built. And I think one of the things we try to do with our books is ensure that they all speak directly within that dialog. Its part of what I find fascinating about this field, and it helps to keep me focused.

CHERYL: I like that slogan you have on your web site: "Saving the world... One good book at a time."

JACOB: It feels like that sometimes.

CHERYL: Was the slogan your idea?

JACOB: I'm not quite sure where it came from. It was probably my assistant, Jill Roberts.

CHERYL: It is very San Francisco.

JACOB: Yeah, well, you want to do your part, but sometimes it feels like one book at a time is taking a long time.

JACOB: One of the frustrating things with the publishing company is that you can look at some of the books that we have done over the last year, and they are very

good books. Then you look at some of the things we have coming next year, and there are some excellent titles. But we've been working on those for a couple of years now. So in our minds we are doing all this great work, but no one knows we are here, no one is paying any attention to us, and the hard thing for us to remember is that no one has actually seen most of the books yet. People are just starting to become aware of us now, and that's how things should be, but in a couple of weeks I'll start looking at the books we'll be doing in 2006. You are always living two years ahead of yourself.

CHERYL: It reminds me of the comment on your web site that you are called Tachyon because you meet your deadlines by going backwards in time.

JACOB: That can be very helpful.

CHERYL: Talking of things that people need to be aware of, what books in your back catalog have been most successful?

JACOB: It depends on how you define "successful." Certainly Peter Beagle's *Rhinoceros* is the most successful book we have ever done. I'm very fond of Michael Swanwick's *Cigar-Box Faust*. It is one of the most enjoyable books we have ever done. One of the books that sells best is Robert Nathan's *Portrait of Jennie*, which is a completely forgotten classic. But every year when we do the totals it is always our fourth or fifth best-selling title. There are still some people around who remember Nathan. Sometimes people come to us saying that their parents or grandparents recommended the book. And the movie made from the book is still a favorite of many people.

CHERYL: There's a mention on the web site that you are working on a novel.

JACOB: It is a recurring joke. I am working on a novel, it is a collaborative effort with a friend of mine. But we also say that Jill is working on her first novel, which she is. And then we go on to say that Koufax has just finished his first novel, and that Clyde the cat received an honorable mention in the Writers of the Future contest. That's not quite true, they haven't done that, at least not yet.

CHERYL: But there's always a first time, right? Everyone knows that cats love keyboards, so with sufficient cats and sufficient keyboards...

JACOB: I remember that idea from somewhere.

CHERYL: And presumably when it happens you will publish it. The first cat-written science fiction novel.

JACOB: If it is good enough we will.

CHERYL: I'm not sure that Clyde will let you get away with that.

JACOB: Well, the way publishing is I am sure that a novel by a cat, with a picture of the author on the cover, will probably sell sufficiently well.

CHERYL: I've seen the picture of Clyde on your web site. I don't think you need have any worries on that score.

CHERYL: Jacob Weisman, thank you for talking to *Emerald City*.

N4 Updates

Given the size of Worldcon, it is not easy to get everything right in a report. Here's a bit of feedback on last issue's report. I'm very impressed with the way that several

N4 staff have come forward to share credit and take blame.

Hugo Sizes

Scott Lefton writes: "Let me assure you that all of this year's Hugos are the same size. The hand-sculpted flames portion of the base is ornamental, not structural, and the support tubes (which effectively determine the height of the rocket above the wooden base) were all cut to be identical. So all of this year's winners will need to find other criteria for playing "mine's bigger"."

Frank Wu and I were comparing ours the other day. Frank came up with this idea that my rocket was leaning ever so slightly from the vertical, making his about 1mm taller than mine. Hugo winners are endlessly ingenious.

Michael A. Burstein

My apologies to Michael A. Burstein for managing to mangle his name at various places within the con report.

First Night

Leslie Turek writes to say that the original idea for First Night came from Priscilla Olson and that much of the work was done by the original Area Head, John Pomerantz, who unfortunately had to resign before the con due to pressure of work. Many good ideas also came from committee brainstorming sessions.

Signage

Further to the signage story, here's Deb Geisler doing the good Chair thing and taking responsibility.

"Our decorating company, which provided the nasty chairs and lots of very nice stuff, would have charged us \$100-\$300 a sign for a lot of what we needed. We ran the numbers, and decided, as you noted, to buy the wide-format printer. (I'm now a fan of HP's wide-format printers. That sucker does **not** suck ink. Brilliant!)

"We guess that the signs we actually printed, had we ordered them from the decorator, might have been as much as \$30,000.

"Pam Fremon, our sign shop maven, was basically shackled to the printer for the months of July and August, and had to be forced to leave the office at the convention to eat. She (and N4's favorite logo artist Bill Neville, who helped her at con, too) was a marvel.

"Our exhibits folks had figured out where we could put sign kiosks, and they made that happen.

"Pam had bazillions of signs.

"What was missing? Someone or several someones specifically detailed to sort, distribute, and post the signs.

"Well, duh! And that was really my fault, since this was a case of inter-divisional duties, and I should have seen the hole and filled it pre-con. Fortunately, others twigged to it at the convention, and the signs got put out — but not as soon as they should have.

"We probably had more signs than any other Worldcon, but that doesn't help if they're sitting on tables in the office.

"The printer malfunctioned only for about 3 hours at con, and that was because we needed to replace a print head. Once that was bought, Pam was re-chained to the printer and kept plugging away."

Hugo Book Offer

Pam Scoville writes to let me know that the Hugo-winning *The Chesley Awards: A Retrospective* is available direct from the publishers (<http://www.hometown.aol.com/appraiser1/DECAMERON/aapp11.html>) at a 35% discount.

Retro Hugos

The gentleman who danced so splendid with Susan de Guardiola at the Retro Hugo ceremony was Jeff Poretsky.

More Reportage

Grant Kruger has a long and thoughtful report available here: <http://members.aol.com/scifisa/perssfn4.htm>.

Program Participants

Priscilla Olson writes to inform me that some people who are nominated for Hugos don't actually deserve the nomination. This presumably explains why some Hugo nominees didn't deserve program slots at N4. I hadn't been aware beforehand that there was someone whose job it was to decide who was worthy of a Hugo and who wasn't. Perhaps next year we can just ask Ms. Olson who should get

the rockets and not have to waste all that time and effort on voting.

Short Stuff

Precise Shots

Everybody in the SF community knows Eileen Gunn. She's that lady with the Ursula Le Guin mask who keeps turning up at award ceremonies, right? And Le Guin wins a lot of awards, so her official acceptor gets around a lot. Or perhaps you know her as the editor of the web site, *The Infinite Matrix* (<http://www.infinitematrix.net/>). But Eileen Gunn is a writer too. She has twice been nominated for the best Short Story Hugo. And the reason you might not have heard of her as a writer is that her entire output, stretching back to 1989, consists of twelve short stories, two of them co-authored. She is perhaps the only person in the world who writes more slowly than Ted Chiang.

Now twelve short stories (actually eleven and one novella) is not really quite enough for a collection, so for *Stable Strategies and Others* Tachyon Publications has padded things out a bit, adding a forward by William Gibson, an afterword by Howard Waldrop, and a poem by Michael Swanwick. A few other reviewers have commented that this seems a bit over the top, especially given the effusive nature of the praise heaped on Gunn. I have to admit that Swanwick's poem is the sort of thing that you roll out in an after-dinner speech when the audience has consumed a bottle or two of wine each, not as an introduction to a book. But I think that most of the praise is a result of the fact

that everyone really, really likes Gunn. And they like her writing too.

I've always been of the opinion that a really good short story is much harder to write than a good novel. In a novel you can get away with so much, because there is so much of it. Only M. John Harrison writes novels the way you write short stories. There is an awful lot of bad short fiction published, and a vast amount of mediocre stuff. People like Ted Chiang and Eileen Gunn set out to do the job properly, which is why their output is so low. Gunn even explains this in her own introduction to the book where she quotes William Gibson on the secret of writing. Gibson told her, "You must learn to overcome your very natural and appropriate revulsion for your own work."

Now fiction is very much a matter of taste, and short fiction perhaps even more so if the vast spread of nominations for the Best Short Story Hugo is anything to go by. Therefore, if I describe Gunn as a perfectionist, a whole bunch of people will cry, "but her writing is far from perfect." Well to you it may be, but to others it isn't. And that is beside the point. Gunn is a perfectionist because she won't let anything out unless she thinks it is really, really good.

Do I like it? Mostly I do. To start with I finished every one of the stories in the book, which is more than I can say for, for example, the last Le Guin collection I read. Some of the stories are rather dated because they involve ideas of computer science that were contemporary a decade or more ago when the stories were written. But Gunn has a wonderfully wry way of looking at American society (see "Nirvana High", co-authored by Leslie What) and a deft touch with standard SF

tropes (see “What are friends for?”). I like the idea of a gang of Latino kids rescuing Earth from destruction by introducing the aliens to that great human invention, pornography. I like the delicious weirdness of “Lichen and Rock”, and the pointed observation of a cranky old man in “Coming to Terms.”

And, of course, if you don’t buy the book for anything else, there is always that classic novella, “Green Fire”, written by Gunn along with Andy Duncan, Pat Murphy and Michael Swanwick. It features Isaac Asimov, Robert Heinlein and Grace Hopper in *The Philadelphia Experiment*. Very silly.

So, well done to Tachyon for finally getting an Eileen Gunn collection into print. And will someone now persuade Gunn to take Gibson’s advice so that we don’t have to wait more than a decade for the next one?

Stable Strategies and Others - Eileen Gunn - Tachyon - trade paperback

Various Voices

The Wheatland Press anthology, *Polyphony*, seems to get bigger with each year. The latest volume, #4, is around 400 pages and contains 24 stories. I confess that I haven’t managed to read them all yet, but there is some good stuff in there.

My favorite so far has to be the contribution from the wonderful Stepan Chapman, which tells you all that you need to know about the legendary wooden continent of Ataxia. Everything from the worship of The Great Lectern to the culinary delights of Toothpick Grass and the horrors of The Termite Realm is lovingly described.

EYE KNOBS: These organs provide vision for the clans of the Ebony Dressers, the Acacia Tallboys, and the Sectional Cabinets. Eye knobs are still collected illegally by the Cannibal Pantries of the Off-True Archipelago and used in their hideous cork gumbos.

Another fine story is “The Blackpool Ascensions” by Lucius Shepard. It is, of course, rather creepy to read a story about the Blackpool Tower and Melusine so soon after that infamous Eastercon. But of course Shepard didn’t really mean **our** Melusine, he meant **that** Melusine, the mythological one. Our Melusine wouldn’t go around doing King Kong impressions on famous seaside monuments, would she?

He wanted something more. More light, maybe an explosion or two, a burst of infernal energy from which there would emerge a crimson-skinned Satan flourishing a scimitar or a serene ivory-hued goddess naked but for a diadem of fire, her Miss Galaxy breasts tipped with tiny blue skulls that spoke riddles in trebly voices, and showing her filed teeth in a gloating smile.

Of course the really creepy thing about this story is that Shepard, mad impetuous fool that he is, might actually have visited Blackpool to research it. He does seem to have got something of the feel of the place – much more so than I would expect from most American writers. Then again, maybe he has been listening to the lurid travelers’ tales of Vandermeer and Ford.

Alex Irvine has an interesting tale, “Down in the Fog-Shrouded City”, in which a warehouse full of monkeys clatters daily on typewriters because every so often one of them manages to type out a magic spell.

Sadly the story drops into a traditional sappy ending which rather ruins the weirdness of it.

Jeff Vandermeer's offering is a follow-on to his story, "The City" from *Secret Life*. In "Three Days in a Border Town" he drops a heavy hint that The City is indeed a far-future version of Veniss.

Theodora Goss has been getting a lot of critical attention of late, and from "The Wings of Meister Wilhelm" I can see why. She writes very well, although the story itself was very predictable.

As I said, there are a lot of stories in this book and I have by no means read them all. One or two I gave up on after a couple of pages. There is a difficulty with these slipstream-style stories that in that if you are going to tell a relatively mundane tale you have to write really well to keep people with you until you stick in the twist. But it is a rare anthology that is full of tales that everyone likes. You can't expect something like *Polyphony* to score a hit with every story. What you do get is some excellent variety and an opportunity to sample a lot of different authors. Possibly by next issue I will have sampled a few more.

Polyphony #4 - Deborah Layne & Jay Lake (eds.) - Wheatland Press - trade paperback

Dead Funny

As I mentioned in my review of *Gardens of the Moon*, Steven Erikson's view of the classic fantasy world is pretty bleak. But Erikson himself is by no means all gloom and despondency, as he demonstrates beautifully in his new novella from PS Publishing. *The Healthy Dead* is a sorry tale of the city of C/a/l/i/f/o/r/n/i/a Quaint, currently ruled over by King

Macrotus, the Overwhelmingly Considerate. His Majesty is much concerned with the health and wellness of his citizens, as a result of which...

"All that kills," *Elas Sil* said, "is forbidden. The king wants his people to be healthy, and since most people won't do what is necessary for themselves, Macrotus will do it on their behalf."

What exactly does this mean for the citizens of Quaint? Well...

The manservant's brows rose. "Absolute abstinence?"

"Weren't you listening," *Imid* growled. "All illegal in Quaint. No alcohol, no rustleaf, no durhang, no dream-powders. Not for saints, not for anyone."

Elas Sil added, "No meat, only vegetables and fruit and three-finned fish. Butchery is cruel and red meat is unhealthy besides."

And where does all this wholesome healthiness lead? Why, 'tis obvious...

"*Desire for Goodness, Mister Reese, leads to earnestness. Earnestness in turn leads to sanctimonious self-righteousness, which breeds intolerance, upon which harsh judgment quickly follows, yielding dire punishment, inflicting general terror and paranoia, eventually culminating in revolt, leading to chaos, then dissolution, and thus, the end of civilization.*"

This, however, is the Malazan Empire, in which nothing good is likely to last very long, even if it is likely to lead to the end

of civilization. The unfortunate citizens of Quaint call for help, and the only help that happens to be nearby is in the form of the notorious necromancers, Bauchelain and Korbal Broach (whom I believe featured in Erikson's previous PS Publishing novella, *Blood Follows*). Still, even from the uttermost evil, perhaps a little good can flow.

This is a seriously funny story (and includes what looks like a brief guest appearance by Terry Pratchett's Death). It being a PS Publishing book, there are only 900 hundred copies available, 400 of them expensive hardcovers. But that is more than enough to get a book on the Hugo ballot. PS Publishing books are almost impossible to find in UK bookstores, but bizarrely they do have copies in Borderlands Books in San Francisco. And of course you can buy the books direct from the company's web site (<http://www.pspublishing.co.uk/>). Buy this book. Get the reprint of *Blood Follows* while you are at it. Lend copies to all of your friends. And nominate *The Healthy Dead* for Best Novella in the 2004 Hugos.

The Healthy Dead - Steven Erikson - PS Publishing - trade paperback

Calculator Wars

I've finally managed to pick up a copy of Lou Anders' critically acclaimed anthology, *Live Without a Net*. It is a collection of alternate history cyberpunk stories, many of which got mentioned in connection with 2004 awards. One of those mentions is still outstanding. Chris Roberson's "O One" is a nominee for Best Short Fiction at the World Fantasy Awards: not bad for an alternate history cyberpunk story.

Given that the awards are only a week away, I made a point of reading Roberson's story. It is a nice little tale about a Chinese empire that has conquered the world and is looking to science to help it conquer space. The Chief Computator and his enormous cadre of highly trained abacus operators are threatened when an inventor from a far-off colony called Britain, a Mr. Napier, shows the Emperor a mechanical calculating machine. The story is very well put together, particularly the understated way in which the machinations of the Chamberlain are made plain at the end. I think I still prefer Alex Irvine's "Gus Dreams of Biting the Mailman" out of the nominees I have read, though.

Live Without a Net - Lou Anders (Ed.) - Roc - mass market paperback

Horrors of the Flesh

Too much reading on the Web is a dangerous thief of time, so I don't often pay attention to announcements about new online fiction. When that fiction is by Kim Newman it is another matter. His latest story in Sci-Fiction, "Soho Golem", is another in the series about Richard Jeperson, the Carnaby Dandy from the Diogenes Club. Our hero is called in to investigate when the owner of a prominent strip club is done in by a single person whose handiwork resembles the activities of five guys with sledgehammers. The victim also happens to be a Detective Inspector and head of the Obscene Publications Squad.

The story is an excellent exposé of the nonsense and hypocrisy of public attitudes to obscenity back in the 70's. It is also a perfect period piece. Sadly, even with the copious footnotes, it will not

mean much to American readers. For us Brits of a certain age, however, it is very enjoyable. You can find it here: http://www.scifi.com/scifiction/originals/originals_archive/newman3/newman01.html.

A quick word count makes it a novelette without the footnotes and a novella with them. Now there's a potential conundrum for the Hugo Administrators.

Miscellany

British Fantasy Awards

We have winners, and they are:

Best Novel (The August Derleth Award): Christopher Fowler, for *Full Dark House* (Doubleday);

Best Short Fiction: Christopher Fowler, for "American Waitress" (*Crimewave 7*, The Last Sunset, TTA Press);

Best Anthology: Stephen Jones, for *The Mammoth Book of Best New Horror: Volume 14* (Robinson / Carroll & Graf);

Best Collection: Ramsey Campbell, for *Told By the Dead* (PS Publishing);

Best Artist: Les Edwards;

Best Small Press: PS Publishing;

Special Award (Karl Edward Wagner Award): Peter Jackson for his film trilogy adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings*.

No great surprises there, I think. The BFS members tend to vote for people that they know.

Grand Prix de l'Imaginaire

For some reason that I can't quite fathom our French friends announce their award winners a month before the convention at which the awards are to be presented. I guess that means much less nerves for the nominees. Best Novel went to *Transparences* by Ayerdhal and Best Translated Novel to *Perdido Street Station* by China Miéville. Huge congratulations to Nathalie Mège, who also won the Best Translator prize. Dealing with China's wonderfully Baroque English must have been quite a challenge. SF Site (<http://www.sfsite.com/columns/news01.htm>) has the full details.

Phantastik Preis

This year's Deutsche Phantastik Preis for Best Novel has been won by Andreas Eschbach for *Der letzte seiner Art* (*The Last of his Kind*). The Best First Novel was won by Nina Blazon for *Im Bann des Fluchträgers* (*In the Spell of the Curse Carrier*) and the Best Translated Novel was J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. As I understand it the voting for the award is online, with several thousand voters, which perhaps explains the presence of Stephen King and Dan Brown in the translated novel nominees. However, I was pleased to see Neil Gaiman's *American Gods* and China Miéville's *King Rat* in fourth and fifth places respectively. Full details here: <http://www.phantastik-news.de/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=277>.

Edinburgh wins City of Literature Status

Edinburgh has been successful in its bid to be appointed the first World City of Literature. According to news reports, the city hopes to attract the Whitbread and Booker prize ceremonies, and perhaps even the Nobel Prize for Literature. This, I think, makes it all the more important for Glasgow to make a very big fuss of the Hugos. You know, just to show that there are some things that Edinburgh doesn't have.

End-of-the-Worldcon

I was reminded the other day that the Mayan Calendar predicts that the world will end on December 23rd 2012. A few years back some entertaining folks did some hoax bid parties for Chichén Itzá in 2012, but then 2012 seemed like a long way off. Now, however, there are rumors of extant bids for 2011. I think it is time to stake a claim to the year. Cancun has one fairly successful (though losing) bid behind it. It has good facilities and is only 2 hours drive from Chichén Itzá. We can't miss this one, folks. Cancun in 2012, the End-of-the-Worldcon. Start bidding now.

Strange & Norrell Go Hollywood

I understand that New Line have bought the film rights to Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell*. Ah yes, I can see it now. Johnny Strange (Keanu Reeves), an American teenager, travels back in time to medieval Britain where he engages in thrilling magical combat with Nor-El (computer-generated Marlon Brando), an alien from the planet Krypton who has captured and impersonated the

wizard, Merlin (Ian McKellen). Strange is recruited by King Arthur (Sean Bean) to combat the deadly threat. He is aided in his quest by his pet raven, Geordie, who speaks with a Cockney accent and is voiced by Michael Caine; by Arabella (Britney Spears), a blonde barbarian princess from far-off Cimmeria who has a penchant for chain mail bikinis; and by Milton Keynes (David Suchet), a fat English monk with a passion for Belgian beer. Strange is forced to battle hordes of villainous Yorcs, a twisted and deformed species that lives in vast coal mines beneath gloomy Northern cities such as Leeds, Slough and Basingstoke. Sean Connery makes a guest appearance as the voice of Jock, the whisky-sodden dragon.

Memo to Susanna and Colin: Take the money and run.

Footnote

Thank goodness for that, a shorter issue for once.

If all goes according to plan, the next issue will feature Gene Wolfe, Tad Williams, Geoff Ryman, Gary Gibson, Suzy McKee Charnas and, of course a report on the World Fantasy Convention. And hopefully a few more books off my ever growing "must read" pile.

Ciao,

Love 'n' hugs,

Cheryl