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Introduction

The start of a new year is traditionally a time to try new things, and those of you who follow the *Emerald City* blog will have noticed that it has a rather different look to it than the rest of the site. I spent the holidays playing with software techniques such as CSS, XML and PHP. I am painfully aware that technically speaking the *Emerald City* site is still somewhere in the Dark Ages. The new look of the blog is a first step in moving it away from that embarrassing state.

This will take time. There are real problems with compatibility in web programming, and the flagrant disregard for supposed agreed standards by Internet Explorer is just flabbergasting. I don't want to release stuff and then have people not able to view the site. But at the same time a little programming is going to make it much easier to maintain and use.

The other real problem I have is that my skills in graphic design are so far off the scale at the negative end that it isn't funny. There's not much I can do about this. I've never had any artistic talent. If anyone wants to offer suggestions I would be very grateful.

Meanwhile, back with New Year traditions, this issue sees my review of the year in SF&F. It has been a very good one, I think. Here's hoping that 2005 is even better.

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Best of 2004

Best of the Best

I'd like to start by drawing a distinction between my Best of the Year List and my Hugo nominees. The Hugos have specific rules that allow books to be eligible more than once, depending on how they were published. Consequently two of my favorite books of all time, *Light* and *The Course of the Heart*, both by M. John Harrison, are Hugo-eligible this year. That rather constrains my nominations. (Though I am, of course, delighted for Harrison and very much hope that he gets on the ballot.)

Emerald City, on the other hand, attempts to cover the English-speaking world. And therefore I try to limit my Best of the Year selections to books that are getting their first English publication in the year in question. So, M. John Harrison books aside, here we go on the best of 2004. Within categories books are listed in alphabetical order by title.

Science Fiction

Air – Geoff Ryman's wonderful tale about how we humans adjust to information technology is one of those books I thought would probably be too good to get the recognition it deserves. Really clever and subtle books often leave many readers going "doh?" and the more cynical ones saying, "this isn't commercial enough." Plus being about the inhabitants of a small village in Central Asia is not likely to endear the book to a mass market. So I'm delighted to see Ryman's book on the Philip K. Dick Award short list.

Banner of Souls – Liz Williams keeps being on the brink of writing an utterly brilliant novel. This one came very close. It certainly boasts the most lyrical and atmospheric prose we have seen from her to date. Here's hoping that she keeps on getting better. Williams is a regular feature on the Philip K. Dick Award short list, and this book is no exception.

City of Pearl – Karen Traviss's debut novel was quite outstanding. It is a fairly fast paced and very political piece of SF that is both in the thick of the genre and fresh and interesting at the same time. Another Philip K. Dick Award nominee.

Cloud Atlas – I don't think than an SF book has ever been the hot favorite to win the Booker Prize before, and it may be several millennia before one is again. If it happens again in our lifetime, David Mitchell will be the man to achieve that honor. He's the darling of the mainstream literature set, but at the same time you tell from reading *Cloud Atlas* that he is familiar with SF classics and is pretty competent at writing

SF. I'm really looking forward to his next book.

Iron Sunrise – Charlie Stross is about as hot as it gets in the SF world right now. His cutting-edge cyber-driven space operas are quite possibly incomprehensible to anyone without a background in SF and computers, but if you know what Stross is talking about then you quickly become in awe of his command of the jargon. All of the crazy, far-future technology he makes up sounds utterly plausible.

Newton's Wake – Ken MacLeod does comedy. Really he does. And what is more he manages to do comedy about politics. The scene where his heroine steps through a wormhole, falls onto a beach, and looks up to find a statue of Karl Marx towering over her will stay with me for a very long time. This being MacLeod, there is a lot of serious speculation about economics and politics in *Newton's Wake*, but it is a hugely entertaining book as well.

River of Gods – Ian MacDonald has never been afraid to do something different with his novels. But taking on the task of writing the quintessential Indian SF novel is probably the bravest thing he has done yet. AIs and nanotech explode across a landscape imbued with Hinduism, regional rivalries, caste politics and some interesting speculations about gender, or rather lack of it. Besides, how can I not love an SF novel that features a cricket match?

Stamping Butterflies – North Africa still runs strongly through Jon Courtenay Grimwood's fiction, but his latest novel is worlds away from El Iskandria. Although parts of the book are firmly rooted in Morocco, other sections drift dreamily through a massive, artificial world light years away and centuries into the future. The strands are connected through the political decisions of a present-day US present. Truly, the flapping of a butterfly's wings can cause a storm on the far side of the galaxy.

The Fourth Circle – If there is one book in this list that is going to get panned as "un-commercial" by most reviewers, this is it. Zoran Živković pulls no punches in this delightfully strange and experimental story. And somehow it still manages to sound wonderful even after having been translated into English from Serbian.

White Devils – Move over Michael Crichton and Margaret Atwood, this is how a real science fiction writer does a biotech disaster thriller. Sure the book has a bunch of cartoon thriller villains, sure lots of people die in inventively nasty ways. That's what thrillers are all about. But along the way Paul McAuley manages a much more sophisticated and adult approach to both the science and the politics than Crichton or Atwood seem capable of managing.

Fantasy

Iron Council – I still have my reservations about the central third of China Miéville's latest Bas-Lag story, but there is no doubting the continued fabulous inventiveness of his writing and world creation. It was also a delight to see Miéville introduce an actual political revolution to New Crobuzon and not have it turn out happily ever after. As for the way in which he elevated Torro from being a memorable character walk-on from *Perdido Street Station* to a central part of *Iron Council*, well, love it!

in the night room – mainstream reviewers have been talking endlessly about the cleverness of the structure of David

Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*. They should also take a look at Peter Straub's wonderful new novel that mixes up writers and characters until the reader is hard-pressed to tell the difference. A lot of horror fiction is so bad and formulaic that even us SF folks look down on it with disdain, but Peter Straub is an author who can hold his own in any company.

Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell – I don't think that Susanna Clarke's debut novel conquered the world in quite the way that Bloomsbury expected it to, but it certainly made a very big splash. It was also highly entertaining for most of its 800 or so pages, and this from someone who loathes Jane Austen. I guess it must have been the footnotes. Or the portrayal of Faerie. Or the Raven King. Or the brilliantly obnoxious Yorkshireness of Gilbert Norrell. England hasn't read so well in a long time.

Mortal Love – In the interview I did with Elizabeth Hand for *Strange Horizons* she talks about the edginess that a writer obtains by setting fantasy novels in the present day. Anyone can make magic believable in a pseudo-medieval, cookie-cutter fantasy world. It isn't hard to make it believable in the 18th Century. But to make people believe that magic happens in present day Camden Town, without the aid of any chemical supplements at all, is not only very difficult but profoundly disturbing as well. Elizabeth Hand can really make us believe that the world we know can be turned upside down in an instant, and that our lives will never be the same again.

Olympic Games – OK, so it was kind of cheesy for Leslie What to release a novel about Greek Gods in New York in a year in which the Olympics returned to Athens. But hey, everything else about the book was wonderfully inventive, not to mention very funny. Zeus and Hera are the archetypes of the sex war, and What used them to their full potential, while managing to have some very real human characters as well. A very promising debut.

Perfect Circle – Ah, class. With this book Sean Stewart has produced a perfect little ghost story. Several of the books in this list were published by small presses, but this is the only one of them where I was absolutely amazed that no major publisher had picked it up. The mainstream press should be raving about this book.

Shadowmarch – I'm a little disappointed that such a traditional fantasy book should follow the brilliant *War of the Flowers*, but having been part of the *Shadowmarch* online community for several years I well know that *Shadowmarch* the book was written first. Besides, traditional fantasy is something that Tad Williams does very well indeed. There is a huge market for it, and if people are going to buy books with elves and dwarves in them (or at least near facsimiles thereof) then I want them to be buying Tad Williams because nobody does it better.

The Last Light of the Sun – I try very hard to fit as many newly released books into each issue of *Emerald City* as I can. That means I have little or no time to catch up on books I should have read years ago. Which is frustrating, because sat on my bookshelves are several unread Guy Gavriel Kay books. I know that they will be very good. His *Sarantium* series was excellent, and his latest book is even better. Besides, how can I not love a book with such wonderfully Welsh characters in it?

The Wizard Knight – Everyone agrees that Gene Wolfe is a genius. Many reviewers, however, don't quite know what to make

of *The Wizard Knight*, because it appears to be less obscure and puzzle-filled than the New-Long-Short Sun series, but at the same time is more opaque. Just what is Wolfe getting at? Why the Norse gods, when Wolfe makes it clear that a single creator God exists above them and an archangel makes an appearance in the book? Well, because Wolfe is talking about layers of power and responsibility. Wolfe is making a case for the world being more than the stark Protestant division of Us and God, of Saved and Not-Saved. We all have free will, and we need to learn to use it responsibly.

The Year of Our War – Wow, three debut novels in the fantasy top ten. The world is indeed turned upside down. And perhaps nowhere more so than in Steph Swainston's wonderfully imagined *The Year of Our War*. Any book will contain echoes of other works that the author has read and admired, but I don't think I have read anything else quite as strange and unusual as Swainston's book all year. I do hope that she can keep up this level of creativity.

Collections and Anthologies

All Star Zeppelin Adventure Stories – This anthology was a little patchy, but nearly all of the stories were really good fun. Zeppelins are cool — what can I say?

A New Universal History of Infamy – Rhys Hughes at his bizarre and hilarious best. Do you need another excuse to laugh at Margaret Thatcher? Of course you do.

Novelties & Souvenirs – I don't spend enough time reading John Crowley. I should do, it would be good for me. There are some wonderful stories in this book. Is it New Wave Fabulism? Who cares, just read it.

Secret Life – I guess that compared to *City of Saints and Madmen* this collection of more or less conventional and largely unconnected stories by Jeff Vandermeer will seem quite ordinary. But it isn't. There are many very good stories indeed in this collection. Highly recommended.

So Long Been Dreaming – Another patchy anthology, mainly because too many of the authors let their anger or desire to make political points run away with their stories. But there are some very good stories in there as well, in particular Vandana Singh's excellent "Delhi".

Stagestruck Vampires – Suzy McKee Charnas does vampires as only she can. Plus some very interesting background on the Motherlines series.

Stable Strategies – Eileen Gunn takes a very long time to write stories, but seems to come out with good ones whenever she does. Tachyon padded a little to get a book out of them, but it is well worth a look.

The Atrocity Archives – So you didn't know that the British government has a special spy network specifically dedicated to protecting the country from slimy, tentacled monsters from beyond the stars? Thankfully Charlie Stross did.

And look, every single one of these books comes from a small press publisher.

Short Fiction

Quite a few very good books of novella length, or just within the stretch limits of novella length according to the Hugo rules, have been published in 2004. I

confess that I am much more likely to read and enjoy such things than short stories.

Not Before Sundown – Johanna Sinisalo's wonderful tale of a photographer finding a baby troll in his yard deserves a place on everyone's bookshelf.

The Healthy Dead – Steven Erikson might be the king of big, fat fantasy novels in the UK, but it is the novellas he writes for PS publishing that I love best. They are seriously funny.

The Labyrinth – Quite the most startling book of 2004, though possibly way too poetic for everyone's taste, is Catherynne M. Valente's wonderful tale inspired by Greek myths.

Viator – Some of the things that Lucius Shepard does to create books are quite mad, but they always result in something wonderful. Viator also has the benefit that writing very long sentences is much less dangerous to Lucius's precious existence than living amongst Hobos on the railroad.

"tourism" – OK, I have to have some short stories, and how could I ignore the little tale from the Light universe that M. John Harrison produced for Amazon.

"The Annals of Eelin-Ok" – I suspect that the anthology this story comes from will join my list as soon as I get to read it, but in the meantime I continue to marvel at the brilliance of Jeffrey Ford.

Other Stuff

There are a few other things that I want to mention about 2004 that were particularly good.

A Serious Life – This "biography" of one of the UK's oldest and most notorious small presses was my non-fiction find of 2004.

Lyda Morehouse doesn't quite get into my SF top 10 on the strength of *Apocalypse Array* alone, but I loved the series of which it formed the final volume.

Being there to witness *Bibliomancy* winning Best Collection at the World Fantasy Awards was definitely a highlight of my year.

The Concrete Castle Gig – I got to see Billy Bragg in concert, from a distance of about 3 feet. Magic.

And of course… Winning a Hugo

Suffer a Witch

The new Graham Joyce novel, *The Limits of Enchantment*, is to some extent a follow-on from *The Facts of Life*. In that book there is mention of how, in the middle of the 20th Century, professional midwives with years of experience but no professional qualifications were being hounded out of work by the new, official, government health service. In modern, technological Britain, old witch women were no longer to be allowed to practice their arts. Especially when those arts also included abortion advice. It was, after all, well known that young women who became pregnant outside wedlock were mentally disturbed and should be put in asylums, not given abortions.

So, enter old Mammy Cullen, resident wise woman of a small village near Leicester. Mammy has successfully delivered well over 100 babies, including some that looked quite dead on their arrival into this world. The women of the village mostly think she is wonderful. The men regard her with some suspicion but are cautious because it is known that

whenever a girl comes to Mammy to get an abortion part of the price is the name of the man responsible. Mammy can't write, but she has a very good memory.

The local authorities have already outlawed amateur midwifery. If Mammy is caught helping deliver a baby then she can be put in jail. But she doesn't mind over much. She is old, and will doubtless not be long for this world. It is her adopted daughter, Fern, that is the problem. Fern certainly has the talent to be a good midwife. She has assisted at many births. And she has Sight. But she doesn't altogether believe in the Old Ways. Her main interest in the Moon is that President Kennedy said he was going to send men there, not in its magical powers. Ah well, at least she isn't going stupid over mop-topped pop stars and wearing mini skirts like the rest of the village girls.

I stared hard at these words on my notepad and I couldn't see any extra value in them. Any at all. Vertex presentation? We say: head first. I counted the syllables. That's three times as long to say the same thing. Why had I come to college to learn words that added no more than a lot of extra noise to the sum of my knowledge?

Unfortunately Mammy waits too long. An unfortunate incident in the village leaves her in hospital, an institution dominated by her enemies: doctors and freemasons. It is a prison from which Mammy will not escape. Fern is left to cope on her own. Her only allies are her worldly friend, Judith, the hippies who live on the farm up the road, and a village lad called Arthur whose main interest in Fern appears to be getting her into bed.

Compared to *The Facts of Life*, *The Limits of Enchantment* is a much less edgy book. It is hard to beat the Second World War for dramatic horror. But *The Limits of Enchantment* is rather more angry. There are times which it descends into situation comedy, which is very British of it, but for much of its length it rails against the injustice imposed on well-meaning, ordinary people by those in authority: the nobility, the medical establishment, social workers, the police and so on. In many ways it is a book that is just as applicable today, except you could use gays instead of independent women and Blacks or Muslims in place of pagans and hippies.

The hare told me that we had moved into the time of Man and that was not a good thing, even for men and women. It complained bitterly of the leverets killed in the blades of combine harvesters. It asked me if I knew how many combine harvesters there were in the country, and when I shook my head it specified an exact figure. The corn bleeds, it said pointedly, we bleed.

Gollancz clearly think a lot of this book. My review copy has the now famous Isabelle Allende blurb for *The Facts of Life* on the cover. On the back cover it proudly says, "The Limits of Enchantment will be submitted for the Booker Prize." And you know I think it might get somewhere. To start with Graham Joyce is a wonderful author and this is a very readable and entertaining book. Also it doesn't read like a fantasy. Most of the "magic" that happens can be rationalized if you work hard enough at it and are pig-headed enough to not want any of it to be "true".

But it is fantasy nonetheless. Like *The Lord of the Rings* it is an elegy for a lost time in

which life was simpler and closer to nature than it is now. Unlike *The Lord of the Rings*, Joyce accepts that time moves on, and that magic can be found in other ways and in other places. Fern does not fade and go into the West. She picks herself up, adapts, and gets on with doing what needs to be done. In her own way she will become part of the nascent Feminist movement. And when she is old like Mammy she will doubtless shake her head at Grrl Power and wonder what the youth of today is coming to. But along the way the Moon will have traveled with her, for all that it has been trampled on by male feet. And while much of the Green and Pleasant Land has been overrun by the pressures of over-population, there are still places where the hares box in the dawn light of March. The Goddess is not dead yet, and Graham Joyce is doing his bit to keep Her memory alive.

The Limits of Enchantment – Graham Joyce – Gollancz – publisher's proof

The Music of the Spheres

So, the Revelation Space series is ended, and Al Reynolds has to come up with a new setting for a story. What, we might well ask, will he do?

Wendell Floyd is an American in Paris. He is in Paris because he has been told that it is the best place in the world to make it as a jazz musician. Paris does, after all, have that café culture. The French seem to like American jazz musicians. Unfortunately for Floyd, he isn't a very good jazz musician, so he has to have a day job. Which is where the private investigator gig comes in. Only right now Floyd seems to be making more money as a poor jazz musician than as an OK private eye. What he needs is a nice, mysterious murder to solve.

So, *Century Rain* is a hard-boiled detective novel.

Of course, one of the problems with being a private detective in Paris in 1959 is that the authorities are getting a little full of themselves. Adolf Hitler might be languishing in jail after the botched invasion of 1940 and subsequent coup in Germany, but that doesn't mean that Fascism is dead. Indeed, the French seem to be rather taking to the idea. Which makes the position of any independent investigator — especially a foreign independent investigator who happens to play decadent Negro music — rather precarious.

Ah, beg pardon, *Century Rain* is an alternate history.

Which just leaves us with Verity Auger. She is in Paris too. But she's not playing jazz. Auger is an archaeologist; one of those brave people whose job it is to dig into the ruins of Earth to try to find out what life was like on the planet before the Nanocaust.

Human society of the 23rd Century is divided into two main political factions. The Slashers (short, I believe for Slash-Dotters) think that only further accelerated technological progress, particularly in the realm of nanotechnology, can save human civilization. In contrast the Threshers (short for Thresholders) believe that there are limits beyond which technology should not go (and beyond which it has already gone). Auger is a Thresher, which is why she is obsessed with the lost past.

The Slashers, of course, are merrily exploring space. They have found a network of wormholes left behind by a

vanished civilization. At the far end of many of those wormholes they have found what they call Anomalous Large Objects (ALS) — solar-sized manufactured hollow spheres. Inside each of those spheres is a planet, and on the inner surface of the spheres a whole fake sky: sun, stars, galaxies, the lot. It is just as if the old mediaeval idea of cosmology was true after all. And on a planet inside one ALS…

Yes, you've got it, *Century Rain* is a delightful piece of genre blending.

A few things come to mind about the book. The first is that Reynolds clearly has a deep interest in jazz and that the book will mean more if you know the characters he talks about. The second is that Reynolds also has a keen appreciation of the difficulties of having to hold down a day job that isn't really what you want to do in order to be able to keep a roof over your head while you do the thing that you really love. Here's hoping that Reynolds is having rather more success than poor Floyd.

Of course with this being Reynolds there is also the physics to bear in mind. I rather like the idea of wormholes being made of "pathological matter" (and I have a sneaking suspicion that is a real physics term). There's no FTL in the book — with wormholes you don't need it. But some of the Slasher ships have something called a Bleed Drive which, if I have understood things aright, bleeds energy out of the zero point field (or maybe from the vast reservoir of vacuum energy, or they may be the same thing) to power the ship. And then there are the spheres. Not the ALS spheres, the little solid ones. I was so pleased with myself when I found that I had figured out what they were for correctly. It is all good stuff.

In the end, however, a story like this stands and falls on the quality of the plotting. Mysteries and thrillers require things to make sense. And *Century Rain* had rather too many points at which the authorial hand showed through and could be seen moving the puppets around. That's sad, because *Century Rain* is a very entertaining, highly readable book. It might be 500 pages, but I read it very quickly. Unfortunately it was clear that what I was reading was an artifact and not a real story.

Century Rain – Al Reynolds – Gollancz – hardcover

Business Unusual

Imagine for a moment that you have fallen into one of those classic parallel world fantasy scenarios. By some arcane means you are able to travel freely between our world and a parallel version of Earth that is still stuck in the Middle Ages and is full of kings and earls and knights and damsels. What do you do?

Quite correct, you set up an import/export business. Miraculous items can be brought from our world and sold at a huge profit in theirs. Important goods can be transported via our world in a fraction of the time it takes the medievals to get the job done. And certain sensitive goods that might have difficult being shipped through customs posts in our world can be safely stuck on the back of a mule in the other one. You could clean up.

All of this assumes, however, that you are not an ordinary fantasy reader, or indeed a fantasy writer. Instead you are Charlie Stross, king of hard-boiled, cutting-edge

SF, writing a fantasy novel. You are the sort of person who, given a classic fantasy scenario, wants to do something very weird with it. Hence *The Family Trade*, in which Stross's heroine, Miriam Beckstein, discovers that she is actually a long-lost countess from a mediaeval society in a parallel world and her folks got rich by running the biggest, most successful drug-smuggling ring in the USA. Oh dear.

All of this depends on the ability to travel between worlds. Only Miriam's family has the DNA that allows them to do it. And that is why the business is a family affair. It also explains why a long-lost pure blood member of the family (hereinafter called The Clan) turning up 30+ years after she was presumed dead causes a big stir amongst The Clan. There are shifts in inheritance patterns to be calculated and, this being a mediaeval society, a marriage to be arranged. The Clan might bring a lot of interesting things back from our world, but Women's Lib is one thing they want firmly left where it is. This is not the sort of thing calculated to appeal to an independent-minded investigative journalist from Boston.

Then again, The Clan do tend to make the Mafia looks like a bunch of kind-hearted amateurs, so our Miriam is not going to have too many choices. "Do as you are told" and "dead" seem to be the limits of her options. Except that some Clan members are not very interested in the former.

So, what we are left with is the usual, fast-paced, rollicking, intrigue-filled Stross adventure with a plucky heroine, her dumb but SNAGy boyfriend, and more assassins that any girl really needs when she has just become a fantasy princess and needs to look her best at Court. Thank goodness for New York winters and a muff in which one can conceal a pistol. This isn't serious, Dorothy Dunnett style intrigue, it is much more popular thriller level stuff, but my goodness Mr. Stross has had fun here.

I suspect you will too. But you might want to be warned that Tor have done their by now usual trick of serializing the novel. *The Family Trade* is merely part I — the first 300 pages of what will presumably be a 600-page novel — and ending thoroughly *in media res*. Having spent a long time talking to David Hartwell about this, I understand the commercial reasons for doing it. But please Tor, if you are going to do this, can we have both halves of the book published in the same year so that we can put them back together for awards purposes?

The Family Trade – Charles Stross – Tor - hardcover

The Long Game

I've said this before and I'll say it again. Probably many times. In the field of science fiction, no one thinks bigger than Robert Reed. There is opera, there is space opera, and there is Reed. Compared to Reed, Wagner's *Ring* looks like a small rubber washer. The paltry concerns of Norse Gods seem quite trivial on a galactic stage.

I was swimming through the Milky Way at one-third the velocity of unencumbered light. My engines were as big as moons, and I was bigger than most of my patrons' home worlds: twenty Earth masses, and fifty thousand kilometers in diameter, with a hull whose

surface area was nearly eight billion square kilometers.

When last we saw the Great Ship, in *Marrow*, the great war between the Captains and the Waywards resulted in some unexpected course changes. A near collision with a large black hole has sent the vessel careering off on a trajectory that will eventually take it out of the galaxy. You don't turn something like the Great Ship easily, at least not without the help of a big gravity field, nor when it is desperately in need of major repairs. So for the next few centuries it will have to follow pretty much the course it currently has. The new novel, *The Well of Stars*, tells that story.

Up ahead is a great black nebula known as the Inkwell. There are many dangers to the inter-stellar traveler. Black holes and asteroid fields are nasty, but small and easily avoided. Nebulae, on the other hand, might not be very dense, but they are huge. And a collision with even the smallest dust particle won't do you much good at one-third lightspeed. Well, unless your hull happens to be covered in the finest grades of hyperfiber and covered in batteries of lasers. Then again, nebulae contain billions upon billions of dust particles.

But if collision is not a major consideration for the Great Ship, what about the inhabitants of the Inkwell? Surveys show that there are definite signs of technological activity within that great cloud. Very sophisticated technological activity. And the inhabitants of the solar systems close to the nebula insist that it is inhabited. They are all scared stiff of whatever dwells within the cloud. The Great Ship has no choice but to trespass on the territory of some mighty and as yet unknown alien species. This causes the Master Captain some little concern.

"We're running out of time," she muttered.

Eyes focused on the barren alien rock, she reminded everyone, "We've got less than a hundred years to get ready – and we still don't have any clear idea what for…"

Less than a hundred years? Oops, better get on with some serious hard work then. Who knows what kind of life might have evolved in the black, starless skies of the Inkwell, and how mad it might be.

Well, as you might expect, battle ensues. And it is the sort of battle that makes the mere tossing around of black holes that you get in Wil McCarthy novels seem like a child's game of bows and arrows.

There are many ways in which I could attack Reed's novel. His cast of super-competent and immortal engineers and scientists are quite dull. The plot is, to a large extent, driven by the requirement to top each technological marvel with something even more awesome. Vast energies are expended on destruction; millions of sentient creatures die with barely a sentence to mark their passing.

Yet the novel is not entirely inhuman. At its core is the question of how small thinking creatures that have evolved sufficiently to give themselves enormous powers and seemingly endless lifetimes cope with the far greater vastness of the universe. In space you can be very, very alone. For all their manifest cleverness, few SF authors manage to convey just how big and awesome the universe really is. Robert Reed does.

I am reminded of a blog entry I made last week. Astronomers have discovered what

they describe as the biggest explosion in the universe. It is driven by a black hole the size of a billion suns, and it has been burning for 100 million years. Robert Reed hasn't done anything quite that big yet. (Well, perhaps he did in *Sister Alice* — I should check.) But I think we will. After all, bigger bangs have happened in the universe.

"I don't know these equations as well as I might. But from what I have heard and what little I've read… they claim that if you are one of the shadows, and if you happen to find where the Creation was halted — where the little ball lies — and if you can give that stubborn ball a good shove in just the right direction…"

With a toe, he kicked a tiny lump of iron.

Quietly, almost inaudibly, Locke said, "Boom."

Ah yes, *Mere*. The interesting character that Reed introduced in the novelette from Golden Gryphon plays a major part in *The Well of Stars*. You don't need to have read that story, but it does help. Someone who spent her first few thousand years trapped in an autodoc in a damaged spacecraft, unable to do anything except watch the stars outside her window, is just the sort of character that a Robert Reed novel needs.

The Well of Stars – Robert Reed – Orbit – mass market paperback

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Fantasy Politics

The tradition of small press companies publishing interesting new novels is continued by Prime with a debut novel from Welsh author, Bryn Llewellyn (whom I have never heard of before – Wales isn't *that* small). *The Rat and the Serpent* continues the current fad for fantasy novels set in dark and mysterious cities. But on closer examination it has more in common with traditional fantasy than with China Miéville or K.J. Bishop. Allow me to explain.

The book is set in the city of Mavrosopolis, although it is known by many other names by different strata of society. Our hero, Ugli, is a "Nogoth", a homeless beggar with no civil rights. Although a cripple, he is possessed of considerable self-confidence, the powers of a rat shaman, and the guiding hand of the mysterious sage, Zveratu. Ugli decides that he will attempt to take the test to become a "citidenizen" so that he can have a home and a job. Thus begins his ascent through the social structure of the city, and our discovery of its true nature.

The best thing about the book is the city itself. I loved the idea of an ancient metropolis, covered in soot, whose rulers employ teams of people to scour it for water, wind and ice so as to prevent any of its structure being eroded. On the other hand, I have to say that words like Mavrosopolis and citidenizen do not exactly trip off the tongue. Unlike the last Prime book I reviewed, Catherynne M. Valente's *The Labyrinth*, which positively sits up and begs to be read aloud, *The Rat and the Serpent* skulks in the shadows where it hopes no one will speak it.

More generally I'm not sure that Llewellyn ever got a handle on whether he was writing an allegory or an alternate world fantasy. With a lead character who is a beggar called Ugli the reader automatically expects an allegory. In

addition the descriptions of Mavrosopolis are sometimes so cartoon-like in their portrayal of evil that the book feels more like Pilgrim's Progress than a fantasy novel. But the book has many of the elements of traditional mythic fantasy, so presumably the world is supposed to be taken seriously.

It is the mythic fantasy angle that worries me most about the book. As you will have noticed from the plot summary above, the book is a classic "Lost Prince" tale. Ugli is clearly fated to take on the moral failings of Mavrosopolis and win. And so he does, very easily. This is not a book like *Perdido Street Station* that attempts to teach lessons about real world politics in a fantastical setting. It is more like *The Book of the New Sun* with most of the convoluted Wolfe puzzles and obfuscations removed and a wizardly guru added to help Severian out of any trouble he might get into on his way to becoming Autarch as the plot requires it.

That in itself is not necessarily a bad thing. Mythic fantasy has a long and honorable tradition. What worries me about *The Rat and the Serpent* is that the "wrongness" in the world that Ugli seeks to redress is nothing to do with the divine right of kings, the health of the Land, or any of the usual things that mythic fantasy addresses. Rather Ugli is fighting very real problems such as social injustice and corruption.

I am reminded of the two different approaches to alchemy during the Renaissance. Some alchemists were happy to see their craft purely as a spiritual journey; with the various chemical transformations they performed being an allegory for the development of the soul. Others genuinely believed that they could turn base metals into gold, and it was those alchemists who ended up getting executed by disappointed kings and emperors.

Mythic fantasy clearly has a place in literature, and there are things that it does very well. But it would be foolish of us to believe that the rightness of our cause can cure all of the ills of the real world. You won't find China Miéville introducing a Lost Prince who will save New Crobuzon from Evil. Indeed, much of the point of *Iron Council* was to say that such romanticism is hopelessly naïve. So although Llewellyn has his heart very much in the right place, the message he sends is nothing more than a comforting fantasy. It has no bearing on practical politics.

Here again I have gone off at one of those tangents where a philosophical aspect of a book has caught my interest. Doubtless this will once again have been hugely annoying to those people who believe that fiction is fiction and not supposed to "mean" anything. But I'm rather more concerned about Bryn Llewellyn because *The Rat and the Serpent* is a better book than I have probably made it sound in this review. It has some interesting ideas, a new take on the cityscape, and some lovely imagery. And any book that causes me to think so much about its intentions has to be worth a read.

The Rat and the Serpent – Bryn Llewellyn – Prime - hardcover

In the Blood

Sometimes you find genre-bending in the most unexpected places. Stel Pavlou certainly isn't a name I was familiar with

as an SF writer, and when Simon & Schuster sent me his new book, *Gene*, it clearly wasn't packaged as SF. There's no hint of genre marketing on the cover, and Pavlou's previous novel, *Decipher*, is described as a thriller. There are quotes from reviews in three national newspapers, including the *Mail on Sunday*, so it can't have any of that awful geek stuff in it, right?

Well I don't know about *Decipher*, but *Gene*, while certainly recognizably a thriller, has SF that Greg Bear might have written, a hefty lump of police procedural, a fair dose of history, and a small but essential hint of fantasy.

"A man's blood is dark and mortal," I pleaded. "Once it meets the earth, what song can it sing back? None. Yet I have sprung back from wormed torment? I should be dead!"

"Death is a skill you will find elusive." The Oracle washed her hands in the mixing bowl as if to wash her hands of me.

Genetic memory is a dodgy business. Just how much is hard-wired into our genes, and how much more might be? A lion cub learns to hunt by watching its mother, but an antelope knows how to run from the moment of birth? Do baby birds examine their nests to learn how to build one? They never see their parents actually build the thing. So much of what we are, it seems, comes packaged in that double helix at birth. And one piece of encoded information is much like another.

A woman is born fully equipped with every egg she will ever produce. Men, on the other hand, make new sperm on a regular basis. They do, after all, use them up at a frightening rate. What might they secrete away in those dynamic little packages of life? What part of themselves can they pass on to their sons?

In ancient Babylon the magus, Athanatos, discovers that a preparation of certain elixirs will cause a boy to remember things that happened to his father. Enough of the elixir, delivered at a young enough age, will cause those memories to flood and suppress the boy's own personality. Athanatos has not quite discovered immortality, but he has made substantially more of the traditional male wish of immortality through your sons.

All goes well with his long, if punctuated, life, until the rise of the Greeks. Athanatos is in Crete, acting as a spy for Trojan raiders. It is the raid by Paris on Sparta that plunges the Eastern Mediterranean into a 10-year war, but it is an ordinary Cretan warrior called Cyclades whom the Greek gods choose to wreak their vengeance on the magus.

The cover of *Gene* shows the head of a bull, a typical piece of Minoan iconography. Its horns are twisted in a spiral reminiscent of the helical structure of DNA, and perhaps of two lives intertwined down the millennia. The bull, of course, is also a prime symbol of male power and aggression.

But let us not forget that *Gene* is first and foremost a thriller. Therefore we cannot start with any of these biological speculations, and certainly not with the machinations of Greek gods. We have to start with guns and car chases. Let us therefore repair to present day New York where NYPD detective James North has been called out to a hostage situation at Metropolitan Museum of Art. Some loony who seems to think he is an ancient Greek warrior has been terrorizing visitors with

an old Bronze Age sword, and he seems to be remarkably adept at using it.

So the first fifty pages are spent in furious action and a chase around New York. The perp gets away, and much of the rest of the book is filled with Detective North's efforts to track him down. Except that during their struggles the perp manages to inject North with a strange serum that turns out to be full of odd herbs and drugs. And from then on the Detective starts to suffer some very strange nightmares.

Pavlou carefully cuts the present day action with flashbacks through the centuries, charting the conflict between Athanatos and Cyclades backwards down the centuries. We visit the court of the alchemist emperor Rudolph in Prague, the lush palaces of Byzantium, the decadent court of Nero, and eventually the plains of Ilium themselves. There is much name-dropping of historical characters that might embarrass an experienced SF writer whose audience knows all these things already, but is doubtless fresh and new to thriller readers.

At the same time Palvou introduces the SF elements of the story. He talks of genetics and retroviruses. He does that classic novice SF author thing of writing a paragraph in which the characters talk about technical stuff and following it with a paragraph explaining what they were talking about. (This is probably essential for thriller readers, and as I recall Michael Crichton does it a lot.) Very quickly it becomes clear that a showdown is in the offing because at long last civilization has progressed to the point whereby Athanatos can both understand how his own elixir works, and discover how Cyclades keeps coming back to haunt him without any medical intervention.

I worried about the book for a long time, because there was something missing. Hollywood might think you can expunge the supernatural from the Trojan War, but no reputable author would attempt to do so. Thankfully Pavlou got there in the end, and it is this final addition to the mix that makes the ending crackle furiously.

It took me quite a while to get into this book. There is a lot of stuff there purely for the benefit of the thriller audience and an experienced SF&F reader will find some of it tiresome. But by the end I started to get quite impressed, because I don't think Pavlou was just writing a thriller, he was trying to say something about men.

Of course you don't expect much in the way of strong women characters in thrillers. But *Gene* is particularly notable for viewing its women through testosterone-tinted spectacles. Sure they are there, but they are all objects. Women are weak and unreliable, they are devious and treacherous, they cheat on their husbands, they are whores, they are hot, they are desirable, they are irresistible.

Cyclades himself is a complete shit. He spends ten years at war against Troy to win back his stolen wife, but it is very clear that he would have killed her in an instant had he thought that she had "betrayed" him by "allowing" a Trojan to have sex with her. Thankfully both his wife's ghost and Helen get to whisper in his ear, though that is entirely for our benefit and does him no good at all.

And let us not forget that the entire book is about the male wish for immortality through siring sons. Women are mere vessels in that process, and I'm rather surprised that Pavlou didn't bring cloning into the equation to further emphasize the point. There are elements too that suggest that Cyclades, and maybe Athanatos as

well, are deeply disturbed by the idea of androgyny. It is no accident that the goddess who sets Cyclades on his journey is Cybele. Presumably the whole role of women in the process of conception, all that combining of pernicious female DNA with the pure male strand, is deeply repugnant to them.

Overall, therefore, a very interesting book. A basic SF premise, some well-used fantasy elements, and in addition the way in which Detective North and his colleagues track down their perp is a nice piece of slow, painstaking police procedural. You might not find this book in the SF ghetto at bookstores, but it is worth looking out all the same.

Gene - Stel Pavlou – Simon & Schuster - hardcover

Moving Shadows

When I started out on *Shadowgod*, the second volume of Michael Cobley's *Shadowkings* series, I was expecting more of the bleak and brutal tale that we had in the first volume. It is, after all, only the second volume, and if it were to follow the fantasy trilogy formula closely then book two should end with everything looking completely hopeless and the bad guys about the triumph. I wasn't alone either. Some of Cobley's characters had the same suspicions as to what was about to happen to them.

…she and Gilly and Medwin were due to leave by ship for Sejeend and from there overland to Scallow in Dalbar. "An undertaking of some importance" Bardow had called it, which probably meant they would encounter trials of unsurpassing horror and peril.

Keren of course was right. Cobley does seem to save some his most horrible fates for the poor girl. But overall *Shadowgod* is much lighter in tone than its predecessor and, without giving too much away, it doesn't follow the formula that closely at all.

That is a good thing. It is always nice to see a writer of epic fantasy trying to do something different. But in other ways Cobley falls foul of some of the classic traps of the sub-genre. The most obvious one is runaway escalation of magic. As soon as you start involving demons and demigods and gods in the plot you very quickly get to the point where your ordinary human characters can have very little influence on the outcome of events. OK, so this is fantasy, so we know that Good is going to triumph in the end. But it is nice to think that the heroes had some active part in this, rather than simply being brave and loyal vessels through which the Good Gods express their powers.

The other issue that I have with the book is excessive wolf-crying. If, as an author, you bring a major character back from the dead very quickly, then no reader is going to believe you when you kill off other characters. Especially if you bring them back from the dead as well.

Other elements of the book are a lot more to my taste. Cobley's world is rather more real than those of many fantasy books. There are merchants and farmers and peasants as well as nobility. Some of his characters spend a lot of time worrying about how the royal treasury is going to raise enough money to pay the troops

when the country is ravaged by war. And I particularly like the fact that some of the problems his heroes face include greedy merchants trying to make a profit out of the war effort and racist violence between the various elements of the anti-Evil coalition.

I should also note that Cobley writes just the sort of battle scenes that Peter Jackson would love. Tolkien did his best to make his battles come over as believable medieval warfare. Very little magic was involved. But you could see from the movies that what Jackson wanted to film was a succession of ever more over the top special effects as one great spell topped the next. Cobley has just the stuff for him. There are fortresses that grow themselves out of the ground, magical war machines that can demolish mighty city walls in a single blow, and vast regiments of creatures that can only be rendered with sophisticated CGI. Jackson would love it.

I'm certainly looking forward to reading the final volume in the series because, having seen what Cobley has done in book two, I have no idea what he is going to do next (well, other than bring back a bunch of characters we are supposed to think are dead). But at the same time I am just enough divorced from the book world to compare it two the real one. Cobley's world has humanity uniting to face the menace of an Evil God who wants to destroy the world. In a fantasy novel that can be true. But in Iraq right now we have two groups of humans beating the hell out of each other because fanatics on both sides believe that the other side is working for an Evil God who wants to destroy them. Sometimes I think we are better off without fantasies.

Shadowgod – Michael Cobley – Pocket Books – mass market paperback

Writers of the Future?

Anthologies can be very difficult things to review. Take this one for example. Australia has produced a lot of very good SF&F novelists over the past few years. Consequently many people want to follow in their footsteps. They now have their own Clarion workshop. So Maxine McArthur and Donna Maree Hanson of the Canberra Speculative Fiction Group have put together an anthology, *Encounters*. I'm proud to have promoted a lot of good Australian writers in *Emerald City*, and I guess I'm an obvious person to send the book too. Except that it is an anthology.

What does that mean for me? Well, there are 22 hopeful young writers in *Encounters*. All of them want to make it big as SF&F writers. How many of those are going to be the next K.J. Bishop? Very probably none of them. How many might be the next Sean McMullen, Sara Douglass or Cecilia Dart Thornton? One or two if they work at it. Those are the hard facts of life in the writing business. Not everyone will make it. It is brutal but it is true.

So I sit down to read and review this book, or any number like it, and what do I have facing me? That rather depends on how I look at it. If I were to put myself in the place of, say, Jonathan Strahan or David Hartwell trying to pick a "best of the year" anthology then certainly it would be none of them. If I put myself in the place of Ellen Datlow or Gordon van Gelder choosing stories for *Sci Fiction* or *F&SF* I might still choose none of them. But I know that Maxine McArthur and Donna Maree Hanson did choose these stories,

and they will be the best of what was submitted.

I think it is easier with novels. There are far more opportunities to find something to praise. There's plot development, there's world building, there are philosophical issues to be worked through. But short stories either work or they don't. There doesn't seem to be much middle ground, at least as far as I am concerned. And that makes anthologies (and fiction magazines) hard to review. Inevitably there will be a lot of material that I find uninspiring.

After all that I hope you will have come to the conclusion that anyone whose story in *Encounters* that I actually liked must be pretty damn good. Well, maybe not in Ted Chaing or Jeffrey Ford territory, but here are a few names to look out for. Lee Battersby is one of the most experienced authors in the anthology and his "Vortle" makes an excellent leadoff story. His aliens are both well drawn and amusing.

Dirk Flinthart's "The Flatmate from Hell" is also amusing and has a serious point to make. Again the characters are good. You could tell from an isolated line if it was the vampire speaking. And I like the fact that his viewpoint character is drawn flawed, feeling herself cast into the Buffy role because her flatmates won't take on evil and then learning a lesson about the true nature of evil. Trent Jamieson's "Don't Got No Wings" is impressive for sustaining the dialect narration throughout. Michael Barry and Cat Sparks also produced stories that got me to take notice. As for the rest, and in addition to Maxine and Donna, I am very sorry; this was just not my sort of book.

For those of you who do like short fiction, the book isn't available from Amazon, but you can order it from the CSFG web site <http://www.camrin.org/csfg/main.htm>.

Encounters – Maxine McArthur & Donna Maree Hanson (Eds.) – Canberra Speculative Fiction Group – trade paperback

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Look Forward in Hope

Pamela Sargent is one of those writers whom I have heard a lot about, keep meaning to read, and never quite get round to. There are a depressingly large number of people in that category. But thanks to Golden Gryphon, Sargent has been elevated from that position and has instead joined my "must read some of her other books" list. I'm sorry if that doesn't sound a great step forward, but hey, there are just so many books.

The excuse for this change in status is *Thumbprints*. Sargent has had three other short story collections published. The last one, *The Mountain Cage & Other Stories*, came out in 2002. There doesn't appear to be any overlap between those two, and the previous collection was published in 1987 so clearly Sargent has a lot of material deemed collectable. Reading *Thumbprints* confirms the quality of her short fiction.

What readers may find slightly jarring about *Thumbprints* is that it contains a range of different types of story. There are two set in ancient Mongolia at the time of Genghis Khan. Two are what Sargent accurately describes in her afterword as "Twilight Zone" style stories. One is a straightforward ghost story used as a vehicle for exploring family relationships. The story "Thumbprints" is a crime story all about the villainous things that literary agents might get up to in order to make

money out of authors whose careers are fading. And there are several straight SF stories. To my mind this simply highlights the breadth of Sargent's talent, but I can see it would disturb those who prefer to only read certain types of story.

Then again, maybe it says a lot about me that it is the SF that interested me most. These are, after all, the stories that have most of a point to make. "Originals", for example, is a new take on the idea of a post-scarcity society. Most SF writers tackling this idea (e.g. see Ken MacLeod's *Newton's Wake*) assume that once we have Drexler machines that can make any goods we want then people will naturally seek out that which cannot be duplicated, for which read human creativity. But Sargent agues that this will not automatically be the case. Most people, she argues, will be so overwhelmed, and so spoiled, by living in a world of plenty that they will be too lazy too seek out excellence unless they are actively sold on the idea. It is a rather depressing view, but I suspect that she may be right.

"Venus Flowers at Night" is essentially a prequel to Sargent's *Venus of Dreams* trilogy, which is about a terraformed Venus and the first two volumes of which pre-date Kim Stanley Robinson's *Mars* trilogy. I want to read these books. But the story is not about the actual work, it is about the dream. It is set in a world beset by climate disaster in which a much-cowed USA is ruled from afar by a conservative Muslim empire. One of the Muslim lords, however, shares the American propensity to dream big. Sargent, it seems, worries that her country has lost the ability to dream.

My favorite story from the collection, "Utmost Bones", is also about dreaming. It is set at the far end of human time. A woman whose body is more machine than animal wakes from her latest resurrection to find herself alone in a tent in the wilderness. Slowly she discovers why she died, and what prompted her to wipe her memories before doing so. It is a depressing story, and echoes the themes from "Originals" and "Venus Flowers at Night" that humankind has become too lazy, or perhaps too fond of "safety" to dream about the future. And ultimately that will be the end of us. Sargent, I think, intends this as a much-needed wake-up call. I'm with her.

Thumbprints – Pamela Sargent – Golden Gryphon - hardcover

Mouth Parts Watering

If you are looking for a way to get your book reviewed in *Emerald City*, here is a cunning plan you might like to try. Tell me that it is about food. The moment I heard about Jason Erik Lundberg's anthology, *Scattered, Covered, Smothered*, I knew that it was a book I had to read. It is, after all, subtitled "An anthology of food & fiction". And yes, it does contain actual recipes contributed by some of the writers (including Nalo Hopkinson whom I suspect is a very good cook).

I should start by praising the production of the book. Janet Chui's cover painting of a woman trying to cram a giant green octopus into a casserole dish is a perfect complement to certain parts of the fare on offer. And the book is produced spiral bound so that it can be laid open flat in the kitchen just like a real cookbook. Neat.

Subsequent encounters with other patrons suggest that the combination of ambiance and food in the Café had a profound effect.

"There shall gelatinous be our fate and the roilsome seas, and we shall take to it blissfully," one individual said.

Of course one of the things about an anthology about food is that it tends to get authors thinking in terms of kitchens, of hearths, and of families. This tends to lead inevitably to character-driven stories about family relationships: often mother-daughter or grandmother-granddaughter. There are stories in the anthology that you won't even recognize as speculative fiction, let alone SF for fantasy. Still, they are perfectly readable, if occasionally lacking in any obvious purpose.

The other obvious tack for a story about food is to talk about the relationship between recipes and spells, between cooking and alchemy, and in a more modern setting cooking and chemistry. These stories too permeate the book, and are of rather more interest to the SF reader.

There are also a series of Rhys Hughes poems about curry, which serve to reinforce just how delightfully disturbed Hughes can be. "You are as fickle as a Rogan Josh!" he writes to a sweetheart. Goodness, I hope not. Dump her, Rhys, she's trouble.

Deep Fried Ones *– For the truly hungry, a stick to the ribs meal of glistening fried meat, fibrous yet gelid, served with old fashioned barbecue sauce or twenty-year-old balsamic vinaigrette. A side of squid larvae is highly recommended as the perfect complement to this dish.*

But the star contribution to the anthology, without a shadow of a doubt, is "The Strange Case of the Lovecraft Café" by M.F. Korn, Des Lewis and Jeff Vandermeer. As you may just have guessed, all of the quotations above are taken from that story, and there are lots more where they came from. Pan-Tossed Nemonymi From Yuggoth anyone? Flaming Whole Giant Penguin, delivered fresh from the Mountains of Madness? Darioles of Nethermost Blight in Black Being Sauce? I haven't laughed so much in a long time. The book may well be worth the cover price for this story alone.

I must warn you not to peruse the menu items for very long at one sitting. Otherwise you may, as have I, feel the compulsion to create these dishes, and down that path, I fear, lies our complete and utter ruination.

Quite.

I can't find the book on Amazon. It is available direct from Lundberg's web site <http://www.jasonlundberg.net/twocranes/scs.html>, but I hear rumors that the first print run may be sold out.

Scattered, Covered, Smothered – Jason Erik Lundberg (Ed.) – Two Cranes Press - spiral bound

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An Artist at Work

I don't normally review art books in *Emerald City*, and with good reason. I got chucked out of art lessons in school as soon as the curriculum regulations permitted my teachers to do so. If

anything my drawing is actually worse than my singing, which will give some of you an inkling as to just how bad it is. Then again, there are people out there who think that I have no place reviewing fiction either, and Alan Clark was very encouraging when I expressed doubts about my suitability to comment on his work. He seems very happy for anyone to approach his work, regardless of artistic talent.

That becomes obvious very quickly from looking at the book. *The Paint in My Blood* is a retrospective of Clark's work and contains a wealth of images produced by him over the years. But it also contains short written sections by Clark in which he talks about his philosophy of art and explains some of the techniques he uses. He talks openly about the difficulties of working to spec when producing a book cover. And the hardcover edition even includes a CD with short films of Clark at work explaining what he does.

Being an illustrator of fiction, Clark is acutely aware of the potential for storytelling in art, and some of his opening comments struck an immediate chord with me. In parallel to the old writerly maxim, "show, don't tell", Clark adds a maxim for artists: "suggest, don't define." He adds, "If I provide only three out of five elements of a story, my audience is compelled to fill in the rest. This can make their viewing memorable and personally meaningful as they bring their own emotional experiences to the process."

This makes a lot of sense to me, and probably explains why I find Constable paintings incredibly dull but have a fascination for Salvador Dalì. It also explains my love of Richard Dadd's wonderful "The Fairy Feller's Master Stroke". I'm not terribly interested in art that is merely a perfect rendition of what the artist is looking at. I like pictures that tell a story, and that is exactly the sort of picture that Alan Clark likes to paint.

The passion that Clark has for involving his audience in his artwork is nowhere more starkly demonstrated than in the "Deadwood" series of paintings that is included in *The Paint in My Blood*. Clark says, "With the Deadwood pieces I want the viewer first to believe he is looking at corpses, then realize these shapes are composed of merely sticks, leaves, rocks, and so forth. Finally after careful study, he may find evidence of a real corpse, but hopefully only after he has reassured himself that there are no actual dead bodies in the piece."

I should note here that Clark's work is mainly within the horror genre, and while he is clearly very talented I don't think I would sleep well at night if I had too many Alan Clark pictures on my walls. Then again, sometimes he is so good I would buy works anyway if I could afford them. I particularly like his fish (possibly an echo of too much time spent watching *Stingray* as a kid). The paintings, "City Fishing" and "Between the Devil & the Deep Blue Sea" are particularly wonderful.

Clark has done SF work, however, and has a much cleaner, brighter style for it. He has this wonderful knack of taking everyday objects with a streamlined appearance and using them as the basis for images of starships. "Fishing Reel Ships" is a favorite of mine.

I'm sure that people with more artistic skill than I possess will get a lot more out of Clark's book that I did. In particular they will have intelligent things to say about Clark's discussions of technique.

But I can tell you that *The Paint in my Blood* is not just a book of beautiful (and often deeply disturbing) pictures. It is a book by someone who very much wants to reach out to his audience, whoever they might be.

Yet another book that you need to go to the publisher's web site to order. Here: <http://www.ifdpublishing.com/>.

The Paint in My Blood - Alan Clark – IFD Publications – large format paperback

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Interview: Immanion Press

One of the most active small press companies in the UK is part owned by a very successful fantasy writer, Storm Constantine. She and her business partner, Gabriel Strange, started Immanion Press (IP) <http://www.immanionpress.wox.org/immanion/home.htm> (named after the capital city in Constantine's famous Wraeththu books) in 2003. The company already has 17 books in print, with a further 20 titles planned for this year. I spoke to Constantine and Strange about how all this came about.

CHERYL: Let's begin by putting something to rest. When people see an author start a publishing company they might be tempted to think, 'vanity publishing', but Storm is still a very successful writer. The new Wraeththu series is being published in hardback by Tor, who are probably the biggest SF publisher in the world, correct?

GABRIEL: Technically the company is a partnership, between us both. I would say this discounts it being a vanity press, because we have the two of us and we tend to pull each other in if we go too far. Also, we are concentrating on other authors and bringing new authors into the fold. Anyway I think Storm has more to say on this.

STORM: The reason Gabriel and I started Immanion Press initially was to republish my out of print back catalogue novels. Unless you're one of the very few 'big name' authors, you can't expect to see your work staying in print for long, which is annoying for both writers and their loyal readers. At the beginning, I think both Gabriel and I just regarded IP as an extension of other services that we offer fans, but then other author friends began to get in touch with us, asking, "will you do my back catalogue too?" and then a few new authors sent us great manuscripts that we couldn't bear not to publish! So we had to think again, and decided to press ahead as a bona fide small publisher.

STORM: Personally, I don't really care if some people regard me bringing out my own work as 'vanity publishing'. It sells, and my work (and that of other established writers we publish) keeps the company going, allowing "unknowns" to be published. We get so much amazing writing to look at, and sometimes I'm astounded that major publishers have turned it down. We're very glad to be able to give these writers a chance. Once they've had something out through us, it might be easier for them to sell to a major, for more money, next time.

CHERYL: On the Immanion web site you talk about books "having the shelf life of a magazine" these days. This is something you obviously feel strongly about.

GABRIEL: Yes we both do. Think what place we would be in now if great authors like Tolkien and Shakespeare had had a

shelf life of a month. Personally it's not a world I would like to be in. With the rapid recycling of books, classics are not made because they endure the test of time; they are made on the whims of fashion and intensive marketing.

GABRIEL: One example of the way the current publishing industry is working is China Miéville's latest book, *Iron Council*, which was released mid September 2004. It has now been remaindered and sold off by his publisher to discount stores. And it's now only January 2005. That's three months of shelf life for that book before it was pulled out and basically dumped. Other books, and popular ones at that, have a shelf life of one month, before being remaindered or pulped. I'm not sure what book turnover in the US is like but in the UK it really does seem that some magazines last longer than a novel now.

STORM: I agree totally with Gabriel on this one. Sadly, the advent of the personal computer means thousands more people now write novels, because it's much less of a chore than it used to be. I wrote my first two novels in longhand and then on a cranky old typewriter, with multiple revisions and drafts. Now, that was work! There are so many more authors nowadays, the market is absolutely flooded, and unfortunately not all of what comes out is that good.

STORM: It especially galls me that good writers get shunted to the side, because their work is challenging or cross-genre, and typically the lesser talented writer is more vocal, pushy and confident than the highly talented one, who is often loath to blow her own trumpet. (A sad but true fact noted from editing experience with magazines over the last 15 years or so.) Publishers want to publish new writers constantly, flinging wads of them at the wall in the hope that some will stick (i.e. sell). Most of them are one novel wonders, who you never hear of again, because they don't get the long term back up from their publisher that they need.

STORM: There was one author in particular, a young lad, who got a six-figure advance for a fantasy novel that was hailed as the Next Big Thing. It sank, and he is now forgotten. It would be virtually impossible for him to sell another book, because of his 'reputation'. It's better to start small and grow naturally. You're more likely to endure. Big publishers don't support that, but small presses like IP do. We look on every book we bring out as 'special'. We want every one of them to sell well. Sometimes, this might take time, but because the books have a longer shelf life we can keep promoting them and their authors, and hope that a following will build up from word of mouth and so on.

CHERYL: Although you have a US publisher for the books, Immanion is doing the British versions of the new Wraeththu series. Is the UK market harder to crack, less diverse in its tastes, or what?

GABRIEL: I would say the UK is harder to crack, as the number of shops being controlled by big corporate bosses makes it hard to sell a book which may only sell 1,000 units a year. It seems publishing is about fast turn over and high profits at the moment and with a market like that the larger publishers are looking for some angle to spin a new author from.

STORM: I couldn't place the new Wraeththu trilogy with a UK publisher, even though Tor in the States had snapped it up within a week of my agent sending it them, so we started doing some of my new novels in the UK too. This is now also the case with Ian Watson and Brian

Stableford. We've purchased both of their new novels here in the UK. It's a sad state of affairs, but more and more established authors in this country, who have big followings, can no longer get published here. But the good side of it is that more independent publishers like us are springing up to fill the gap. I believe David Langford and Christopher Priest have started a company, and I know that friends of Tanith Lee have set up Egerton Press to publish some of her work — I hope they bring out some of her back catalogue again too. Tanith has written some classics that should definitely be still available.

CHERYL: I see you are listing your edition of *The Wraiths of Will and Pleasure* as a "UK revised edition". Can we assume that is an author's preferred version, and how different is it to the Tor version?

GABRIEL: This is the main advantage of DIY publishing. Editors might cut content based on the current political climate and social values. However, we believe a book is for life not just for Christmas, so the current world state should not affect what is still classified as an art form. So we add the cut content back in, as well as bonus material for the fans. At the end of the day, if people are prompted to think about what is written in a book all the better. I hate it when a book I read has nothing memorable about it and nothing to think about afterwards. I think Storm can add more specifics about the book itself.

STORM: There are several reasons why there's an 'author's preferred' version. First, there were little bits I thought about once the manuscript had been delivered to the American publishers, and there were mistakes that needed correcting. One reader spotted that a particular character had the wrong name through an entire scene, (which appeared in the US edition), and I can't tell you how many times I'd read it, or editors had read it. There were a few areas I wanted to expand, to fit in with later ideas. As for specific content, which Gabriel mentioned, it's more to do with me than any requirements of my publisher in the States. I know things have got a lot more conservative recently, so I trimmed some of the more erotic scenes in the last volume, *The Ghosts of Blood and Innocence*, for the US edition, which are there in their full glory in the IP edition. I must point out I wasn't asked to do this; it was just what I felt I wanted to do. In the past, I've been asked to cut scenes simply from a page length point of view, but so far (knocks wood) I haven't been overtly censored.

STORM: Also, from a marketing point of view, we want to make the UK editions special. We can't compete with a big publisher, but we thought we should produce editions that fans would want to collect, including various appendices, expanded scenes, etc.

CHERYL: You also list 2003 editions of the original Wraeththu series. Again, are they very different?

GABRIEL: Yes they have been completely revised and updated to remove any inconsistencies and bring them in line with the new trilogy. They are what we call a collector's edition, which will soon be removed from print and distributed as an omnibus collection without the appendices, and again over to Storm to give more details.

STORM: The first Wraeththu books are really what set IP off. I had sent the proposal for the new trilogy out to publishers in the States and UK, and had pulled the original books down off my shelves to reacquaint myself with the

details of the Wraeththu world. I thought the books should come out again in the UK, since they'd been out of print for a long time. (The US edition is still in print.) The first thing that struck me was how bad the grammar was in book one, and how many plot holes there were… or rather the plot was extremely wobbly. I was itching to re-edit the books, using my experience as an editor of other writers' work over the past ten years. My editor head just couldn't bear the thought of these books coming out again in such bad shape! Anyway, to cut a long story short, once I realized I wasn't going to get a UK publisher to look at Wraeththu stuff, of any kind, and Gabriel and I had decided to produce the first trilogy again ourselves, I got to work on them. Tor weren't interested in the new editions, mainly I think because they'd just reprinted the Omnibus edition they have, and had a lot of them to sell.

STORM: The books are groomed, but not essentially 'different' in that I took care to preserve the tone and style of the original writing. There is also a lot more background material included to give the plot a backbone. I moved scenes around, and added more to give coherence and depth. For example, the end of book one was originally simply a newspaper report, outlining what had happened to Pellaz and Caeru in Immanion (the city in the books, not our press!). I thought, no, that won't do, and rewrote the lot from Pell's perspective. It added a couple more chapters to the end, but I think made the book a lot stronger. I don't know why my original editor let me get away with a throwaway ending like that. I certainly wouldn't allow one of my authors to do it!

CHERYL: Immanion also publishes books by a range of other authors. Some are newcomers and others are well-respected British authors that have been prematurely discarded by publishers. Ian Watson is an obvious example of the latter. How did you come to have him in your stable?

GABRIEL: Well we do advertise ourselves wherever we can, and many of these authors have come to us. Recently we have signed up Tom Arden, Brian Stableford and Michael Moorcock (back catalogue work). I think over the next year we will probably get more established authors who want to see their work back in print. Oh, and talking of advertising everywhere we can, the submission guidelines are on our web site <http://www.immanionpress.wox.org/> and submissions can be sent to editorial@immanionpress.wox.org.

STORM: I can't really add anything to that. Ian heard about us and contacted us, and we were delighted to take him on. His work is amazing and it's ridiculous it hasn't stayed in print.

CHERYL: Ian's *Mockymen* was one of my top ten SF books of 2003, so I'm delighted you are doing a UK edition. What attracted Immanion to the book?

GABRIEL: Well to be honest, it was available, and when you get offered a recent book which is so highly praised you have to take it. I think this was one of the books we did not have to read to know that we would take it. I know the major publishers turned the book down in the UK. This would mean a great book like this would be sold only on import or through specialist bookstores.

STORM: This is true. I copy edited *Mockymen* and really loved it. Again, it's ridiculous the majors turned it down.

CHERYL: I took a look at the submissions area of your web site and I very much like

your guidelines as to what you don't want. Is there anything you would like to add to the guidelines on the site?

GABRIEL: Not that I can think of, Storm might want to.

STORM: Whenever I get a submission, I see it from both sides: the writer who has probably sweated blood and tears to create their baby and the editor who has to assess it. I hate having to reject work, but I really can't take anything that's derivative or has been done a thousand times before. Also, I like solid, character driven stories, which are credible. I read so many where the characters behave in a totally unbelievable fashion, which jerks me out of the story and then the writer has lost me as a reader. I go for a strong, confident style, in which the author has a definite individual 'voice' that shines out from the first line of the book. Voice, thinking about it, is perhaps the most important thing. You can tell a familiar tale, that many authors have told, but if you do so in your own strong voice, it makes it different to any other.

STORM: I'm also amazed how many writers just sling out novels with virtually no grasp of English language. Sometimes we get a fantastic idea but the execution is tortuous! Occasionally, you see a good writer struggling to get out, and then I — or one of our other editors — will spend a lot of time coaching them. But unfortunately, we don't have enough spare time to hand hold every one that comes along. If I have one piece of advice, it's please brush up your grammar, syntax and punctuation before sending books off to publishers. If it's difficult for an editor to read your work, you'll have far less chance of placing the book.

CHERYL: Have you got a lot of writers and artists through Storm's existing network of fans, or do people generally come to you cold?

GABRIEL: Yes we do get quite a few cold submissions, and a lot of fan submissions. We try to pick the best of both, as it's amazing the untapped talent you get in many fan communities.

STORM: We get submissions from all over. From the fan base, we've picked up a few Wraeththu fanfic authors, whose work we're publishing as Wraeththu Mythos novels. The first of these was *Breeding Discontent* by Wendy Darling and Brigitte Parker. (Wendy is also one of our editors, and she edits all my work.) The next one to appear will be Victoria Copus's *Terzah's Sons*, which we plan to bring out in July. After that, I think it will be Kris Dotto's *Rosa Mundi* – I believe she's nearly finished it, although Wendy will be editing that one.

STORM: I do just want to say a bit about submissions in general though. The worst ones are from people who haven't bothered at all to check us out and discover what kind of work we publish. They'll send us religious tracts or cheesy soft porn. It's kind of insulting when someone does that. We also get manuscripts from people that are really dire and when we let them down gently, they write back to us furiously, telling us that we must be mad to reject them and that if we have any sense at all, and are not complete charlatans, we'll reconsider. Well… quite. (In the bin with it!) The best writers are always, ironically, the most humble ones, who are full of doubts; the worst are just full of themselves!

CHERYL: It is hard to believe that Michael Moorcock has back catalogue works that are out of print, but I guess he has been very productive. I know that Savoy have

some of his very early work. What do you have?

GABRIEL: For now I can say we are doing a combined volume of the two Jerry Cornell books; these were *The Chinese Agent* and *The Russian Intelligence*. They are combined into one book now called *Jerry Cornell's Comic Capers*, due out later this year. We cannot say if we'll have access to other books of his yet.

STORM: To be fair, I think it's the more obscure and stand-alone novels that Mike doesn't have in print at the moment. I do hope he'll let us do more, but as most of them are tenuously connected with his Multiverse, and there will soon be an Elric movie, I wouldn't be surprised if a major publisher wants to republish some of his back catalogue in the near future. Well, if they have any sense they will do, anyway!

CHERYL: Tom Arden is another favorite author of mine. Looking at the cover, I would guess that *The Translation of Bastian Test* is set in Victorian times. Is it some sort of H.G. Wells style adventure?

GABRIEL: Yep *Bastian Test* is just that. I cannot say much about the plot without giving it away. Storm will probably tell you more as she edited the book.

STORM: I edited *Bastian* and thoroughly enjoyed doing so. It has a style and flavor all of its own and the characters are great. It might have a slight dusting of Wells (in its central idea), but is essentially Tom's own creation and somewhat cross-genre. It's a scientific romance/fantasy/slipstream novel. Difficult to categorize.

STORM: Bastian is the son of a famous and eccentric artist who dies in a mysterious fire. Left alone in the world, he discovers he has a bizarre heritage and a new guardian who lives in a crumbling old castle in Scotland. His guardian is something of a mad scientist, engaged in arcane experiments. He lives with what can only be described as a menagerie of unusual people. Bastian finds himself in the middle of a sinister plot, and is also bewitched by a pair of seductive twins, who are staying nearby. It's a testament to Tom's skill as a writer that he can create a character as attractive as the twin, Fleance, even though he goes into somewhat grim detail about the boy's acne! By the time this interview appears, the book should have been released.

CHERYL: Brian Stableford is another wonderful British author who is being sadly neglected by the big publishers at the moment. You mentioned that you will be publishing some of his work.

GABRIEL: Yes, *Curse of the Coral Bride* and *Sheena and other Gothic Tales*. Both of these books were either turned down or could not be published by other small presses. Both are excellent books and have never been published before, so I hope his fans are eager to get their hands on them. However, on a side note, we have experienced some technical difficulties with the first book's cover but we are back on track now.

STORM: Yeah, *Curse of the Coral Bride* had to be delayed, due to problems the cover artist had. He's Ade Daniel, who did the cover for Ian's *Whores of Babylon*. He's a wonderful artist, so we know it'll be worth the wait.

CHERYL: There are also many names on your author list that I am not familiar with. Are there any new writers you have signed up that you particularly want to highlight?

GABRIEL: I will pick one and I'll let Storm pick one. I would say *Digging up*

Donald by Steven Pirie is one of my favorites. I think my words to Storm after reading the first line were "We have to take this book." It's basically a dark British comedy, which blends the humor of *League of Gentlemen* with the brain of Victoria Wood; to be honest, my words cannot do this book justice. So go out and buy it, you will laugh, cry and maybe even have a life changing experience…

STORM: *Donald* is one my favorites too. It's so well written. Another marvelous novel is *Oliphan Oracus* by Neil Robinson. It too has a wry humorous style, but as *Donald* does it tweaks every emotion. Very powerful writing. It deserves to win an award, I think. *Oliphan* is more SF than horror, and is set in a future world. Of those I've edited recently, but are not yet in print, I loved *Necromantra* by Philip Emery, which is a dark Gothic tale set in an alternative world, a sort of 1930s Potteries. The Potteries is an industrial area in England where… well… pottery is made. *Necromantra* is delightfully atmospheric, heaving with smog and phantoms and arcane terms for machinery and mining — and a host of debilitating conditions and diseases! You really feel like you're there when you're reading it; perfect virtual reality. I absolutely love it.

CHERYL: There are two questions I ask every small press I interview. The first is about Print on Demand: are you for, against, or agnostic?

GABRIEL: Well, Print on Demand is the revolution of the future. We would be lost without it, as it offers us convenience and quality control in one package. We don't have to worry about warehousing or storage and a book will never go out of print.

STORM: POD has had a lot of bad press, which the most reputable companies are striving hard to overcome. It's regarded by some as 'vanity publishing' again, but the company we work with will only take accounts from genuine publishers, not from wannabe writers who have no editor and so on. Although the unit costs are higher than with traditional publishing, there are the benefits that Gabriel described, where you have minimal overheads. As well as the storage aspect, you don't have to shell out for a huge initial print run (which can cost at least £10,000) since the books are printed literally as they're demanded, i.e. ordered. It has certainly put publishing within the reach of many more small presses. We've been really pleased with the quality of the books we've had printed.

CHERYL: The other standard question is about distribution. A lot of American small presses seem to manage to get their books into bookstores. I get the impression that it is much more difficult in the UK. Is that correct?

GABRIEL: Yes, the major UK stores are controlled from the head office; the stores themselves have little or no autonomy. This makes it hard to sell a local author, as that author will get good sales in their hometown but in the bigger picture they won't hold up. It also means a book has to sell X number of units to be viable for the big stores to take it.

STORM: This is definitely the case. Some chains, such as Ottakars, support small presses, but on the whole bookstores demand such huge discounts that it makes it unviable for us to sell to them.

CHERYL: Back with the product line, I see you are publishing a Wraeththu role-playing game. It is ages since I played one, but I guess there must still be a demand for such things.

GABRIEL: Yes there is a demand for role-playing. However, the sales base has not significantly increased over the past 5 years. Also, in my honest opinion, there has been nothing new in the industry for the past 10 years. I have role-played for over 20 years now and in my maturity as a role-player I want more than a sword wielding fighter or a gun-toting nut. This made me wonder how many other people out there are like me. Wraeththu offers a setting which is truly unique and styles around a more mature level of role-playing. At the end of the day, role-playing is a great pastime for people of any age. Some people find escapism in soap operas, but there is a bigger world out there and the infinite worlds of the mind, all of which can be explored through role-playing. Not to mention that role-playing in general can be used as a fun educational tool; this is ignored by many people. There is more information about the Wraeththu RPG on our web site <http://www.immanionpress.wox.org/storm/>.

STORM: This is Gabriel's area. I know nothing about role-playing but had immense fun working on the game book, thinking up lots of fine detail for the world of Wraeththu.

CHERYL: I confess to being a role-playing rules geek. Is there anything new and innovative in your game system that you are particularly proud of?

GABRIEL: Yes, the fact that we have not tried to come up with the next big rule or dice mechanic. Out of the thousands of rules systems on the planet, everything has been done, and the best mechanics have stood the test of time. So we adopt and adapt the best ideas and add a few of our own. The biggest differences to mainstream rules systems are the combat and magic. The combat is deadly, and based around the character's physical abilities, skill and type of weapon, as the concept of 'you hit, I hit' is a bit annoying. So in combat the characters that do best are the ones who think and use their abilities to their best advantage. For magic, I took a different approach. I did not want to have hundreds of spells; I wanted to have a system where you can do anything, providing you can describe how it works. We have explained in the book how magic functions in the world and what the characters cannot do. To that we have added a set of building blocks and the rest is down to how you play it.

CHERYL: Hmm, that sounds just like my sort of game. I tried for ages to come up with that sort of magic system but could never manage it. But then I don't have Storm's in-depth knowledge of magic.

CHERYL: Talking of which, another non-fiction line that you have is books about magic. Serious theoretical books. It is clear to me from reading your novels, Storm, that this is something you know a lot about. But I guess other people may find it a strange thing for a fantasy writer to do: a bit like an SF writer talking about UFOs.

STORM: To me, my magic and my writing have always gone hand in hand, throughout my life. I teach witchcraft, Egyptian magic and Reiki to augment my writing career. It amuses me really when I read stuff in some fantasy novels that is supposed to be magic. To me, it's like someone who has never worked on an oilrig trying to describe the minutiae of day-to-day events in such an environment. I can see the gaps and the holes and the misunderstandings. Real magic is not about special effects, or wizards zapping each other with spells. It's a meld of quantum mechanics, probability theory

and psychology… with the odd X factor thrown in that you really can't explain.

STORM: One thing that both Gabriel and I felt that we wanted to do when we started IP was to eventually have a separate esoteric non-fiction list. We've only got a few titles so far, so it doesn't warrant a separate imprint, but hopefully that will come in the future. As with the fiction, we're looking for different, cutting-edge and challenging works. So no fluffy, watered down paganism or anything to do with teen witches. I'm not against teenagers being into magic, but I hate that whole cozy, hip 'teen witch' thing, as if it's an accessory for Barbie or something! I.E. "how cool are your spells?" and "make sure you wear the right make up for ritual". Oh, please! (Sorry, a rant was brewing.)

CHERYL: Can you tell me a bit about the *Grimoire Dehara: Kaimana* that you have on your forthcoming books list?

STORM: One thing that was missing from the original Wraeththu books was a fully worked out system of magic. This was more to do with the fact that I was still a novice myself at the time, working with various teachers to learn more. I wasn't equipped then to create the system. However, nearly 20 years on, I am, so I spent a lot of time working everything out. It occurred to me that, from a Chaos Magic perspective, I'd created a system that was viable, and as workable as any other model. At one time, every magical system on Earth was new, and just because something is new doesn't mean it isn't valid. Wicca is a prime example of that. From the evidence I've read, I'm convinced Gerald Gardner made it all up in the 1950s, with help from others, cobbling together bits and pieces from other systems to create his own. This is not a criticism; the system was elegant and it worked. It still does. Also, even though H P Lovecraft was not into magic himself, several different systems have evolved based entirely on his fictional mythos — and they work too. With these inspirations in mind, I set to work.

STORM: For *Dehara*, I got together a group of people, mainly those into magic from the fandom, and created an online group to work on the rituals, experiment, and see what came out. *Grimoire Dehara: Kaimana* is the result of that work. Some people had more input than others, and they get full credit for what they did. We're still working on it. The Wraeththu system consists of three tiers of three levels each, and the first book represents the first three tiers — Kaimana. As Gardner did, we've called upon systems and practices that we already know and have adapted and added to them to create something different. So, to anyone who reads it, I hope it will be both familiar and fresh at the same time.

CHERYL: Some of the small presses I have talked to attend a lot of conventions, but you guys actually run a convention: Grissecon. I guess this is a result of starting with an established fan base for Storm's work.

GABRIEL: Yep, Grissecon actually started before Immanion Press. Storm is best telling you the history. However, currently we have a track at Lunacon in NYC next March. Then in July we've got a track at Feencon in Bonn, in Germany. The concept of Grissecon is to offer the unconventional at a convention. We try to come up with panel ideas which blend topics and concepts and offer different points of view. Also, we don't stick to a rigid set of guidelines for the questions. We tend to throw things open to the

audience so they can put people on the spot. This offers a much more organic and exciting panel.

STORM: Grissecon began life in the Stone Inn chat room, which is an online meeting place for people into Wraeththu. I drop in there occasionally, and one night was talking to a few women and we thought it might be a nice idea to have a social weekend some time, when we could perhaps meet up in a hotel and talk about our interests. Some of them had known each other for years, but had never met in the flesh, as it were. As England was pretty central to where everyone lived, I said I'd try and find a venue. Then more people got to hear about it and eventually I realized I'd have to organize a proper event. It all went very well, considering our inexperience as con-runners, but we learned a lot very quickly. We had to!

STORM: On the strength of the first Grissecon, we were asked to run a track at the massive Dragon*Con in Atlanta last September. It was called Gothic Journeys, and included events associated solely with my work as well as more general Gothicly inclined subjects. It was a fabulous success, but it costs too much to get us all over there, and it doesn't look like the committee wants to pay for my team to go out there again. They're still running the Gothic Journeys track, I hear, but I don't know who they'll get to be in charge of it. I can't help thinking, smugly, that it won't be as good as when we did it!

STORM: We'll carry on moving Grissecon around, as the fans are spread out all over the place. As Gabriel said, this year we'll have tracks at Lunacon and Feencon. Possibly, in 2006, we'll do another independent Grissecon that's not part of another convention. The main problem with that is having the time to organize it. Hitching a lift on someone else's con saves a lot of time and worry.

CHERYL: How did the relationship with Lunacon come about?

GABRIEL: Well it's a bit of a tale… Well not quite. In 2004 Storm was invited as GoH at Lunacon. She asked if two of her staff could come, who were Lydia and I. I think it was a combination of our open and friendly attitude to people and that we would help out where we could, and that we connected with the staff of Lunacon straight away. Anyway, at the end we all said we wished there was a way we could come back next year. So one of the Lunacon staff talked with the 2005 chairman and got us some funding and a room allocated, so we could do our track with them. As far as I'm aware we are the first track to be accepted at Lunacon and we will be back again in 2006. We hope to bring a new younger audience to the convention and get a whole new generation of convention goers. For more information on Grissecon and where we will be next visit see <http://www.immanionpress.wox.org/grissecon/>.

STORM: Can't add to that really!

CHERYL: Will your fans be able to see you at the Worldcon in Glasgow this year?

GABRIEL: Due to the cost of getting there, having a stall, and paying for accommodation, we have had to neglect Glasgow. I think it's a matter of timing and financial viability. At the end of the day, we cannot go to a convention and make a loss. It's a case of taking a risk on a convention where we have no track record versus a convention where we know we can cover our costs. We would love to go, but we do need to survive.

STORM: This is true, unfortunately. We're hoping to go to Novacon in England next year, which we know will be a good event, and there is a limit to how many conventions we can attend.

Fantasy Masterwork

Whatever else we might hope for out of the publishing industry, there seems little doubt that literary criticism is not going to sell in huge quantities. Occasionally there is a potential best seller, and when Michael Moorcock decided to write a book about epic fantasy back in the 1980s his name was big enough for Gollancz to pick up the title. Yet even that book, *Wizardry & Wild Romance*, has been out of print for years. Which, as China Miéville says in his introduction to the new MonkeyBrain Books edition, is scandalous.

MonkeyBrain have done three very good things with their edition. Most importantly they have rescued a very good book from obscurity. Secondly they have given it an absolutely stunning John Picacio cover. And finally they have persuaded Moorcock to update the contents. Not that his conclusions needed any significant modification, but it has allowed him to include the younger generation of fantasy writers (Bishop, Ford, Miéville, Vandermeer, etc.) in his considerations. Also the book now includes a number of additional reviews and essays by Moorcock that he has produced since the original publication. And there is an introduction by China Miéville and an afterword by Jeff Vandermeer. All in all there is about 25-30% new material.

However, as I said, Moorcock's views have not needed much updating. The scourges of formula fantasy and comfort reading that he railed against back in the 80s have, if anything, got worse since that time. There must be an audience for this stuff, but that audience (and the writers that serve them) are not exactly well thought of by Moorcock.

It is probably no coincidence that the majority of writers best known as fantasists, at least until the present couple of generations, were introverted, reclusive, misanthropic, or that a strong vein of misogynism built itself into the conventions of the genre over the years, so that women were unbelievably beautiful goddesses, treacherous jades, or silly slave girls. Much fantasy was characteristically bachelor-fiction written and read by that section of the community.

And if you think that is rude, you should see what he has to say about John Norman. (Although actually the short section out of a Gor book that he quotes condemns Norman far more effectively that anything any critic might say.)

Although he is famous for writing sword & sorcery novels, Moorcock has always tried to undermine the genre, and has little time for those who glory in its violence.

Some years ago, as a guest of a fantasy convention, I appeared on a panel with a group of sword-and-sorcery writers who told the audience that the reason they wrote such fantasy was because they (and, they implied, the audience) felt inadequate to cope with the complexities of modern life. "Where today?" asked one, "can you put an arm hold around a man's throat and slip a knife into him between the third and fourth ribs and get away with

it?" The answer was, of course, that the Marines were still looking for recruits. Bu maybe he meant, "Where can you do that and not have someone retaliate?" If that's the main appeal of such stories it probably explains why most people over the age of eighteen stop reading them.

Yet while he might come down heavily on the misogyny and violence of the sword and sorcery end of the genre, Moorcock is equally contemptuous of works that seek to provide comfort and cuteness. Be ye seated, good people, and listen awhile, while ye good sage Michael doth make merry with ye olde fashion for High Fantasy.

Most of the current attempts at this sort of "high" English are pretty pathetic, reminiscent of children trying to write historical stories by peppering the text with phrases like "shiver me timbers." They borrow largely from Tolkien as usual and produce from his original porridge a gruel increasingly thin and lumpy. […] They are moulded from the basest of metals. They are like mass-produced ikons. They are the literary equivalents of the painted plaster saints and statuettes of Christ found in any Lourdes supermarket, or like those toys produced in their thousands in China and Russia. They are actually made by individuals, but there is virtually no evidence for this.

As for Tolkien himself, I think that Moorcock is being a little unfair when he says that *The Lord of the Rings* is entirely without humor. (Either that or Peter Jackson & Co did a much better job with the text than I had thought.) But there is no doubt that Moorcock has some cogent criticisms of Tolkien's work.

It is moderation which ruins Tolkien's fantasy and causes it to fail as a genuine romance. The little hills and woods of that Surrey of the mind, the Shire, are "safe", but the wild landscapes everywhere beyond the Shire are "dangerous." Experience of life itself is dangerous. The Lord of the Rings *is a pernicious confirmation of the values of a morally bankrupt middle class.* The Lord of the Rings *is much more deeply rooted in its infantilism than a good many of the more obviously juvenile books it influenced. It is* Winnie-the-Pooh *posing as an epic.*

Ouch! I know what he means, but I can just see people sharpening their word processors already. Being rude about Tolkien is not exactly a safe practice these days. But if there is anyone with the authority to do it and get away with it then it is Moorcock. And to a large extent he is right. *LotR* is very much a product of the English middle classes as they existed 100 years or so ago. This comment, I think, makes the point rather better.

If the bulk of American sf could be said to be written by robots, about robots, for robots, then the bulk of English fantasy seems to be written by rabbits, about rabbits, for rabbits.

I wish I had written that. Then again, I wish I had written a lot of what Moorcock writes in *Wizardry & Wild Romance*. I also wish I had read even half as much as Moorcock has read of the genre, and knew half as much as he knows. (Although someone really should have told him that *Magic: The Gathering* is not, by any stretch of the imagination, a role-playing game.)

Here I have concentrated on the parts of the book in which Moorcock takes entertaining digs at parts of the genre he doesn't like. But there are huge swathes of the book that are simply a fascinating tour through the history of epic fantasy that will leave you wanting to go out and buy the books he talks about.

So, three cheers once again for MonkeyBrain for giving this book a new lease of life. Anyone who wants to write cogently about fantasy, or even just read it intelligently, should have a copy of *Wizardry & Wild Romance*.

Wizardry & Wild Romance – Michael Moorcock – MonkeyBrain Books – trade paperback

Short Stuff

Faerie Magic

From my point of view, one of the best things about running the Hugo Recommendation List is that I get to find out which short stories are likely to get nominated without having to wade through the vast quantity of short fiction out there. A story that has been getting a lot of attention is Jeffrey Ford's "The Annals of Eelin-Ok", from a YA collection called *The Faery Reel*. Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling are the editors, Sharyn November is the editor at Viking responsible for the book, and Charles Vess did the cover. There are stories by, amongst others, Kelly Link, Patricia McKillip, Greg Frost, Gregory Maguire, Delia Sherman, Charles De Lint, Emma Bull… need I go on?

Utterly shamelessly, I emailed Jeff, and he sent me a copy of the story. "The Annals of Eelin-Ok" is a beautiful novelette about the Twilmish, a species of Faery that lives and dies solely for the purpose of inhabiting sandcastles. OK, so it is very soppy. But it is also very wonderful. If enough people get to read it I'm sure this one will be on the final ballot.

Sharyn is kindly sending me a copy of the book. Expect a review of the whole thing next issue.

Rum in Ruritania

Kim Newman has a Sherlock Holmes story on the BBC Cult web site < http://www.bbc.co.uk/cult/sherlock/shamblesinbelgravia1.shtml>. Well actually it is a Moriarty story. Holmes doesn't feature. Various persons from Ruritania do. And one from New Jersey. Very funny.

The web site has several other Holmes stories by different writers. One is by Jon Courtenay Grimwood and is perhaps is little controversial.

Out of Synch

Somewhat to my surprise, Del Rey has picked up *The Meq* by Steve Cash (*Emcit* #93), originally a Pan Macmillan book. Good luck to you, Mr. Cash.

Tor is releasing the second of Steven Erikson's Malazan Empire books, *Deadhouse Gates*, on the unsuspecting American public. Still, hopefully lots of them will have read *Gardens of the Moon* by now and will have some idea what to expect. Hopefully I'll get a copy of *Deadhouse Gates* in time for the next issue.

But the star event of February in the US has to be the release of Steph Swainston's *The Year of Our War* (*Emcit* #103). Congratulations to HarperCollins for having the sense to snap it up for the US market. As you may have noticed, it is one of my top ten fantasy books of 2004. Go buy.

The Meq – Steve Cash – Del Rey – trade paperback

Deadhouse Gates – Steven Erikson – Tor – hardcover

The Year of Our War – Steph Swainston – HarperCollins – trade paperback

Miscellany

SFWA Preliminary Ballot

Best Novel: *Paladin of Souls*, Lois McMaster Bujold (Eos); *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom*, Cory Doctorow (Tor); *Omega*, Jack McDevitt (Ace); *Perfect Circle*, Sean Stewart (Small Beer Press); *Conquistador*, S.M. Stirling (Roc); *The Knight*, Gene Wolfe (Tor).

Best Novella: "Walk in Silence", Catherine Asaro (*Analog*, Apr 2003); "Off on a Starship", William Barton (*Asimov's*, Sep 2003); "Time Ablaze", Michael A. Burstein (*Analog*, Jun 2004); "The Tangled Strings of the Marionettes", Adam-Troy Castro (F&SF, Jul 2003); "Sergeant Chip", Bradley Denton (*F&SF*, Sep 2004); "Arabian Wine", Gregory Feeley (*Asimov's*, Apr/May 2004); "The Cookie Monster", Vernor Vinge (*Analog*, Oct 2003); "The Green Leopard Plague" Walter Jon Williams (*Asimov's*, Oct/Nov 2003); "Just Like the Ones We Used to Know", Connie Willis (*Asimov's*, Dec 2003).

Best Novelette: "Zora and the Zombie", Andy Duncan (*Sci Fiction*, February 4, 2004); "Paying It Forward", Michael A. Burstein (*Analog*, Sep 2003); "Basement Magic", Ellen Klages (F&SF, May 2003); "The Voluntary State", Christopher Rowe (*Sci Fiction*, May 2004); "Dry Bones", William Sanders (*Asimov's*, May 2003); "The Gladiator's War, A Dialogue", Lois Tilton (*Asimov's*, Jun 2004).

Best Short Story: "The Strange Redemption of Sister Mary Anne", Mike Moscoe (*Analog*, Nov 2004); "Travels With my Cats", Mike Resnick (*Asimov's*, Feb 2004); "Embracing-The-New", Benjamin Rosenbaum (*Asimov's*, Jan 2004); "Shed Skin", Robert J. Sawyer (*Analog*, Jan/Feb 2004); "In the Late December", Greg van Eekhout (*Strange Horizons*, Dec. 22, 2003); "Aloha", Ken Wharton (*Analog*, Jun 2003).

Best Script: *The Incredibles*, Brad Bird (Pixar); *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, Charlie Kaufman & Michel Gondry (Anonymus Content/Focus Features); *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*, Fran Walsh & Philippa Boyens & Peter Jackson, based on the novel by J.R.R. Tolkien (New Line Cinema, Dec 2003).

Note that this is the preliminary ballot. SFWA members will vote to whittle down the categories to no more than five nominees before the final ballot. (Best Script, having only three nominees, will go forward as stands).

Indian SF Conference

The 2004 conference of the Indian Association for Science Fiction Studies took place in Pondicherry University on the 18th and 19th of December. Dr Srinarahari, the General Secretary, has

sent me a report of proceedings, which I'll summarize here.

Firstly I am pleased to note that several other Western magazines and organizations have taken an interest in Indian SF besides *Locus* and *Emerald City*. A pat on the back is due to Jonathan Cowie at *Concatenation*, to Infinite Matrix, and to Andy Sawyer at Liverpool University.

In recognition of our interest, the folks in India are making an effort to make their work available to us. One of the announcements at the conference was of a 500-rupee prize for the best English translation of a Tamil language novel, *Alexandarum Oru Koppai Theenirum* (Alexander over a cup of tea) by M.G. Suresh. The idea was so warmly received that contributions from delegates raised the prize to 2,500 rupees.

The academic sessions at the conference covered a wide range of topics, including AI and Robotics, the relationship of SF to mainstream fiction, Magic Realism, and nanotechnology. This was also the first year in which there was sufficient interest for the conference to cover fantasy as well as SF.

Some kind person encouraged delegates to attend Interaction. I don't know who it was, but we are very grateful. We would love to see more Indian visitors to Worldcon.

But we also have to come down to Earth occasionally. I don't know how many of you know where in India Pondicherry is located, but the mention of stories in Tamil might have given you a clue that it is somewhere in the state of Tamilnadu and therefore close to another famous home of Tamil people, Sri Lanka.

Exactly a week after the conference took place, the guesthouse where the delegates stayed was flatted by a certain tsunami. Thankfully all of the attendees were home safe by that time. The world SF community has been very lucky.

Next year's conference is in Mysore on December 9-11. I very much doubt that I will be able to attend, but I do hope that someone from the West will go.

Phil Dick Award Nominees

This year's list of nominees for the Philip K. Dick Award has been announced. The lucky books are as follows:

The Coyote Kings of the Space-Age Bachelor Pad, Minister Faust (Del Rey); *Stable Strategies and Others*, Eileen Gunn (Tachyon Publications); *Life*, Gwyneth Jones (Aqueduct Press); *Apocalypse Array*, Lyda Morehouse (Roc); *Air*, Geoff Ryman (St. Martin's Griffin); *City of Pearl*, Karen Traviss (Eos); *Banner of Souls*, Liz Williams (Bantam Spectra).

This is an incredibly strong list. As you will see, I have reviewed all but one of them, and I liked them all. Four of them have made my Best of 2004 list in one way or another, and the other two were very close. If I were a judge I think I would want to give the award to Geoff Ryman, but I foresee some very robust discussion amongst the judging panel because these are all very deserving works.

Must get a copy of the Minister Faust book. I've just looked it up on Amazon and it sounds very, very strange indeed.

As usual the winner will be announced at Norwescon, which takes place in Seattle over the Easter weekend.

Fannish Reading Survey

Farah Mendlesohn is conducting a survey of fannish reading habits when we were young. The questionnaire is here <http://sfquestions.blogspot.com/>. Please take a look. The more people who fill it in the better the results will be.

Interaction Programme Participants

It has become clear to me in doing PR for Interaction that many people in UK fandom have no idea what Worldcons are like. I have lost count of the number of times that people have said or written, "I've never heard of any of their guests, so there is no point in going." First of all it is hugely depressing that there are people out there who have never heard of Chris Priest, Robert Sheckley and Jane Yolen. They need to go just to find out. But the important point is that this is not some tiny local convention where the only authors present are the guests. This is Worldcon. Authors are everywhere.

So one of the things we are doing is making a point of announcing all of the authors who have agreed to be on panel (or at least do a signing). We'll be making regular press releases about this. Probably one a month. Here is the first batch.

Brian Aldiss, Ellen Asher, Stephen Baxter, Jonathan Clements, John Clute, Jon Courtenay Grimwood, Ellen Datlow, Cory Doctorow, Scott Edelman, Esther Friesner, David Gerrold, Joe Haldeman, Peter Hamilton, Elizabeth Hand, David A. Hardy, Harry Harrison, John-Henri Holmberg, Geoffrey Landis, Miller Lau, Rebecca Moesta, Larry Niven, Sharyn November, Jody Lynn Nye, Terry Pratchett, Mike Resnick, Kim Stanley Robinson, Justina Robson, Frank Roger, Stanley Schmidt, Robert Silverberg, Charles Stross, Karen Traviss, Gordon Van Gelder, Liz Williams.

Now tell me, what other UK convention (other than previous Worldcons) has ever had a guest list like that? And that is only the start. There will be lots more.

BSFA Short Lists

Arriving just in time as I was converting this issue to HTML, the shortlists for this year's British Science Fiction Association Awards are as follows:

Best Novel: *Century Rain*, Alastair Reynolds (Gollancz SF); *Forty Signs of Rain*, Kim Stanley Robinson (HarperCollins); *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell*, Susanna Clarke (Bloomsbury); *Newton's Wake*, Ken MacLeod (Orbit); *River of Gods*, Ian McDonald (Simon & Schuster); *Stamping Butterflies*, Jon Courtenay Grimwood (Gollancz SF).

(There are six novels on the shortlist this year because there was a tie for fifth place.)

Best Short Fiction: "Delhi", Vandana Singh (from *So Long Been Dreaming: Postcolonial Visions of the Future*, Nalo Hopkinson and Uppinder Mehan, eds. Arsenal Pulp Press); *Mayflower II* by Stephen Baxter (PS Publishing); "Point of No Return", Jon Courtenay Grimwood (*New Scientist*, Christmas/New Year issue); "The Faery Handbag", Kelly Link (from *The Faery Reel: Tales from the Twilight Realm*, Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling, eds. Viking Books); "The Wolf-man of Alcatraz", Howard Waldrop (*Sci Fiction*).

Best Artwork: "Iguana" (photograph), Sebastiao Salgado (*The Guardian*); "Millau Bridge" (photograph), Eric Cabanis (*The*

Guardian); Cover of *Newton's Wake*, Stephan Martiniere (novel by Ken MacLeod; US edition published by Tor); Cover of *The Algebraist* (novel by Iain M Banks; published by Orbit); Cover of *The Year of Our War* by Edward Miller (novel by Steph Swainston; published by Gollancz SF).

Footnote

Coming up next issue we have novels from Ian R. MacLeod, Richard Morgan, Steven Erikson and Glenda Larke. We have the *Leviathan* #4 anthology and *The Faery Reel*. Sunday Times science columnist Bryan Appleyard explains why people are so keen to believe in aliens. And I will try to comment sensibly about Hugo nominations.

And in amongst all that I get to go to Glasgow for an Interaction staff meeting, go back to California, and make a business trip to Korea. Life is not dull.

Ciao,

Love 'n' hugs,

Cheryl