

EMERALD CITY #116

Issue 116

April 2004

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Introduction

Well, as it turned out, I didn't get to go to Brisbane, so this issue is getting online more or less on time. This is a good thing, because I have realized that I forgot to tell you about this year's *Locus* Poll. If you haven't voted yet, go and do so now. You probably have only a matter of hours left. The voting form is here <https://secure.locusmag.com/2005/Issues/02PollAndSurvey.html> and you don't have to join anything or pay any fees to vote.

Meanwhile Anne is starting to take a look at the short fiction Hugo nominees, and I'm doing my best to keep up with all those great new novels that keep coming out. But first there is the small matter of an Eastercon to attend to.

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A Tale of Two Conventions

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times..." Sydney Carlton, bless him, was able to see the good and bad of a situation. Science fiction fans aren't very good at that. They tend to work in binary. Things are either exceedingly wonderful, or utterly awful. So when I see some people claiming that this year's Eastercon was the best ever, and others claiming that it was the worst ever, I know that there is something very fannish going on. Interestingly Paragon 2 was also the smallest Eastercon in a long time, which perhaps had something to do with the situation. We shall see. But first, let's have some programming.

Let's Talk About Books

As we shall see, one of the charges laid against Paragon 2 was that it had drifted away from the core values of Eastercon and perhaps (shock! horror!) had become a media convention. One contributor to the debate identified 16 "literary" program items, as compared to 24 non-"literary" items. To me 40% doesn't sound at all bad. Certainly literary programming was the largest stream, and for what I expect to be a generalist convention (of which again much more later) I think it is the best I could hope for.

No, the trouble with Paragon 2's literary program was not that it did not exist, but that it was banal. I had volunteered to be on program, and consequently got sent a list of what was planned beforehand. Aside from the Not the Clarke Award panel, there wasn't anything that was remotely interesting to me. In defense of the Paragon 2 committee, many of the people who could have helped put

together a decent lit program were busy working on Interaction and consequently unavailable. The important point here is that I think there would have been a lot less complaint about lack of literary programming if what was available had been more interesting.

Having said that, we did have a couple of great panels. Not the Clarke Award was good fun as usual, and I was surprised and delighted to see *River of Gods* come out not just on top, but as the unanimous choice of all five panelists. British fandom seems to have really taken to the book.

In past years the rule has been that you could only be on the Clarke panel if you had already been a Clarke judge. This year that rule was relaxed, leading to the presence of Third Row Fandom on the panel. Niall Harrison and Geneva Melzack were a fine addition to the line-up, and they enjoyed themselves so much that after the Hugo shortlists came out they volunteered to organize an impromptu Not the Hugo Awards panel. That was great fun too (and standing room only as we had to hold it in one of the smaller programming rooms). The general view of the panel was that *River of Gods* was the book we wanted to win, but *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell* is the most likely to actually win.

I did catch the tail end of the Getting Published panel as well, and then wished I had asked to be on it as the panelists talked mainly about UK markets and there are plenty of online and US markets that British writers ought to be submitting to as well.

EuroClarion

A surprise panel at Eastercon saw Geoff Ryman and Justina Robson launch EuroClarion, a UK version of the famous writers' workshop. As yet the project is still in fund raising mode, but assuming all goes well with that (and most of the money is expected to come on the form of Arts Council grants) then actual courses will get started in 2007. I talked to Geoff to get some idea of what he had in mind.

CM: Why EuroClarion?

GR: It will be a Clarion for us. It is EuroClarion because I think the UK is part of Europe, and because I think it sends the right sort of messages about writing in an international market, in English.

CM: So you are expecting students from the Continent?

GR: I have just finished editing an anthology of Canadian stories with Nalo Hopkinson, and what the French Canadian writers do is very interesting. They write the story in French, sell it in French, re-write it in English, and sell it in English. I think there might be a stream in EuroClarion about how to re-purpose your work for sale to the States or the UK.

CM: And why specifically Clarion rather than something homegrown?

GR: I've taught creative writing at a university and I've gone to different workshops that use different models, and I absolutely swear by Clarion. I think it is the way to do it, the way you make people better writers. It is not far off the way there has been a shift in helping people learn foreign languages, which is you don't have lectures, you don't have lots of knowledge input, what you increasingly rely on is production, production, production of the language. And then

feedback later once they have produced it. And that's how Clarion works. It is a boot camp for writers.

CM: What will a course be like?

GR: The Clarion pattern is a six-week course with six instructors: five writers and one editor. Five of the writers have to be experienced teachers, and the reason we can do a Clarion in the UK now is that we have enough experienced teachers and can start growing new ones. And of course by having it here new UK writers can get the Clarion experience without the expense of flying to the US.

CM: Is there a formal connection to the American Clarion?

GR: Oh yes. Kate Wilhelm has said that it is OK for us to use the name. Leslie Howle from Clarion West is on the Steering Committee. The purpose of that is to make sure that what we actually deliver is a Clarion. So whenever we are slightly going off the rails Leslie will say, "Hoy, five weeks? You can run a workshop that only lasts five weeks, but you can't call it Clarion."

CM: And you now need fundraising?

GR: That's exactly what we are doing.

CM: How can people help?

GR: Write a check.

GR: Our budget for the first year is £23,000. If we get that money that we can run the first year at no financial risk. And if there is a market for it then the fees from each year will make the process self-sustaining. So we need private donations, we need sponsorship and we need to apply for grants. Our main hope is to get an Arts Council grant, which means our target for donations and sponsorships is £2,300 because you have to have 10% matched funding.

CM: Hopefully someone from Noreascon 4 is reading this and looking for some way to spend their surplus.

CM: So assuming you get it running, how do people apply?

GR: You have to submit two pieces to show what you can do. We need to have some sort of process to keep the bar reasonably high. But we are looking for people who are not yet professional writers.

CM: Will you be in competition with Milford?

GR: Clarion is based on something like the Milford model. But they won't be in competition, except perhaps for teachers if they were on the same weekend, because Milford is a workshop for people who are actually publishing whereas Clarion is for people who are more at the start of their careers.

So, there you have it. More details are available on the web site: <http://www.euroclarion.org.uk/>. And if you happen to know anyone with a bit of money to spare who would like to donate it to the furtherance of excellence in British and European SF, I'm sure that Geoff and his colleagues on the Steering Committee would be delighted to hear from you.

Hotels, Numbers and Space

I want to make a small diversion here onto the subject of the hotel and use of space. The Hinckley Horror has had a change of ownership this year and it seems to have had some beneficial effects, although the tat windows are still very much in evidence. For various reasons I did not manage to get out of the hotel until Monday night (thank you, Charlie &

Fèdrag!), but I did not starve and I did not get food poisoning, which is a great improvement on my previous two visits to Hinckley. Fans being fans, there were inevitable complaints about the menus, and I think that if you had been on any sort of restricted diet then you would have had problems. But for people who don't have food problems the hotel did quite well. The curry night was particularly good, although I gather that it was so popular that if you arrived late the food wasn't nearly as good because the kitchen was under such strain. And the evening meals were only £5.50, which was excellent value, especially as they were buffets.

I also think that Hinckley works better with a smaller con. It was inevitable that Paragon 2 was going to be small, because so many people are saving up to go to Worldcon instead. But because it was small the committee was able to allocate the largest room for the dealers' room, and find space for a non-smoking bar. The old dealers' room, now the main program room, only seated around 200, but this wasn't a problem except during the showing of the first episode of the new Dr. Who series, where the entire 500 or so membership was trying to get in at once. The use of the Rotunda for some programming was also interesting, although for the one panel I did in there I found that people would walk through the area talking loudly, and a number of people very rudely sat around the edges of the space talking loudly.

All things considered, I thought that the Paragon 2 committee did a darn good job given the circumstances. It is really hard running an Eastercon in a Worldcon year. They were short on staff, short on volunteers, short on members, and short on attending writers. To put on any sort of

half-way decent Eastercon under those circumstances would have been difficult. To put on one that many people really liked was a notable achievement.

Togas and Masks and Casinos, Oh My!

So what was on the rest of the program? Well, there was a costuming panel. I know this because I was on it. It would have been nice if someone had told me in advance I was scheduled to give it, rather than me finding out the night before. And it would have been even better if someone had coordinated with Maggie Percival, who was the person supposed to be giving the panel and was only at the con for one day. Thankfully everything went well. Teddy, Giulia and I managed to wing our way through some stuff for a while, and Maggie arrived halfway through to give the proper masterclass stuff.

Another somewhat impromptu item was that I gave a showing of the Noreascon 4 Masquerade DVD. This drew a surprisingly good crowd for Monday afternoon. It also highlighted another issue with the con. If you were running a small program item you had to go to ops to get the room key yourself, and if you needed tech you had to operate it yourself. The reason for this, as far as I could gather, was a serious lack of volunteers. Whether that is because of the small size of the con, or because con attendees are becoming less and less willing to help out, is not clear. But I do hope that it isn't the latter.

Aside from those two program items, there were also lots of events that involved dressing up. As well as the masquerade, there were a toga party, a masked ball and a casino night. And possibly quite a few

things I missed as well. Even the traditional robot-fighting item, Beyond Cyberdrome, took on the flavor of ancient Rome. Clearly a lot of fun was being had by many people. James Bacon appeared to be the source of much of the merriment, which was a surprise to no one.

Sadly costuming is not one of those things that is easy to do when you are of no fixed abode, and I spent an awful lot of time at the con doing Interaction and Concussion business. Also I have two left feet, and am therefore a positive menace on a dance floor. But I don't mind other people enjoying themselves. This sentiment was not shared by all, and there was much raising of eyebrows in certain quarters. Proper fans, we must remember, do not dress up in costumes and have fun. They sit in the bar drinking warm beer and complaining about how things are not what they used to be.

Looking for a Future

And so back to the main debate. As you may have heard, there was no bid for the 2007 Eastercon. That isn't a complete disaster, because a bid can still come forward and be selected at Concussion next year. But it is worrying. That worry was carried forward to the traditional Eastercon Forum panel. Dave Lally had chosen as the subject for debate, "The Greying of (non-media) Fandom" and the thrust of his argument was fandom was doing very nicely thank you, but they were not coming to Eastercon. I think he's right.

The debate quickly settled down into two main camps, which might be described as the Outreach camp and the Ghetto camp. The former group would like to try to get Eastercon larger again by making it more

attractive to younger fans. This would (hopefully) have the useful side-effect of bringing in people who might actually have the energy and enthusiasm to run future Eastercons. The other group wants to return Eastercon to what one might call "core values." The official line is that those core values involve talking about science fiction, but I have this awful feeling that for many of the people involved they actually mean talking about fandom.

Peter Weston wrote a long and interesting review of Paragon 2 for Trufen.net, and that in turn sparked a furious debate that captured much of what went on in the Eastercon Forum panel. You can find it all here:

<http://trufen.net/article.pl?sid=05/04/06/0211226>. It is well worth a read if you are interested in fannish politics.

Peter is one of those people who did not enjoy Paragon 2 much. This is a real shame, because Peter is a lovely chap and a great asset to fandom. I'd hate us to lose him. But at the same time, I don't think that Eastercon can regain "focus" and survive. Here's a bunch of things to think about.

Pontifications

1. I'm all in favor of specialist conventions, especially specialist conventions where the main topic of conversation is books. If someone wants to start a specialist literary convention in the UK then I'll be delighted. But somehow I don't think it will happen. Look how many fans attended the Foundation conference in Liverpool last year. About a dozen, I think.

2. British fandom is already very much ghettoized. In one of the comments on that

Trufen.net thread Alison Scott says that no one was willing to do an article on "British fandom" for the Interaction souvenir book because no one felt they had anything near an overview of the field. And I am still encountering people who tell me that they won't go to Worldcon because they have tried going to Eastercons and they know that they are not welcome amongst "science fiction" fans.

3. The usual lit-fan complaint about media fans is that all they ever want to do is be entertained. They want to sit in a big hall, listen to some bit-part actors talk about themselves, and they pay absurd sums of money for signed photos. That is certainly a characteristic of most commercially run media conventions. But Redemption is not like that. Discworldcon is not like that. Wardrobe is not like that. Many UK anime conventions are not like that. The UK is full of fannish communities that run fannish conventions but whose members, in general, do not come to Eastercon.

4. Very few people are fans of just one thing. Here's a classic example. I was in the dealers' room getting an earful from Roj Peyton about how Farah Mendlesohn and I had "betrayed" fandom by stuffing the guest list of Concussion full of media people. (For the record we have four novelists, one who also writes comics, one editor, who used to write role-playing games, one artist, a fanzine fan and a prop designer.) While Roj was venting I happened to be stood next to Ian Watson, who had spent much of the weekend done out in a long, curly wig and false moustache pretending to be a villainous Spanish pirate. I'm afraid Ian and I were a little irreverent. "What, costumes, us?"

5. UK fandom needs a "broad church" SF convention to bring all of these people together and help cross-fertilize the

various fandoms. Eastercon, being the supposed "national" convention, is the ideal vehicle for that.

6. Generalist conventions don't work well unless they are fairly large. Paragon 2 was probably too small to be generalist. The larger the con is, the easier it is for every special interest group to keep itself to itself if it wants to. Those who do have cross-over interests can indulge them, but those with ghetto mentalities have enough of their own things to do that they don't feel it was not worth going.

7. A large traveling convention is insupportable without a base of local conventions. Putting on an Eastercon is a big task if it is something you only do every five years or more, and you don't run cons at all outside of that. People don't have the experience and they don't understand how much work is involved until it is too late, at which point they resent having to do it. We'd get much better Eastercons if there were a bunch of smaller, regional conventions such as Novacon and NewCon that could take it in turns to have a year off to run an Eastercon instead.

8. Large, traveling conventions are really bad places for people to learn con-running. It is much easier to learn how to run a con if you come on board an established committee of a small, local con where most things are predictable.

9. No matter how much some of us might want to grow Eastercons again, we won't succeed unless we are able to market the convention to people outside of the traditional Eastercon community. Sadly most fans have absolutely no idea how to sell a convention to people who were not already intending to attend.

Does Eastercon have a Future?

Given how apathetic UK fandom has become, I doubt it. I was very saddened, for example, to hear many people at Paragon 2 loudly boasting that they had no intention of going to that awful Worldcon thing. Those people don't really have any interest in science fiction any more. They just want a relaxacon where they can hang out with their friends in a good bar for the weekend. They are not the sort of people who are going to want to put on a good con.

I gather than one bid for 2007 has emerged. Goddess help us, it is for the Adelphi. It is a lovely old building, and actually I quite like Liverpool, but it is not a good place for a convention. The security problems are acute, and the service in the hotel is several levels below abysmal.

In addition the people who are running that bid are the same people who are running an anti-Worldcon on the same weekend as Interaction in a bid to persuade people not to go to the Worldcon, which I think shows just how much they care about British fandom. I can't see them wanting to put on anything beyond a big relaxacon.

And yet, now that there is a bid, I'm sure everyone else will breathe a big sigh of relief that someone else has volunteered so they don't have to. Consequently the 2007 Eastercon will be even smaller than Paragon 2, and everyone will then start wondering why there are no bids for 2008.

Of course if someone would like to try to prove my gloomy prognostications wrong...

Time to Shift

One of the hardest things for an author to do is follow up a hugely successful debut novel. Steph Swainston recently won the Crawford Award on the basis of *The Year of Our War*. Now she is back with *No Present Like Time*. The whole industry will be watching to see if she can have the same success again.

By and large, the “more like this” crowd is going to be happy. *No Present Like Time* is not exactly a sequel to *The Year of Our War*. The war against the Insects is over, and the new novel takes place some five years later. You don’t have to have read the first book to have any chance of understanding the second. And yet it does help, because the characters are largely the same. Jant is still the focus of attention. Lightning, Mist and the Emperor San are still around to provide support. What Swainston is doing here is continuing to explore the fascinating world of The Fourlands.

One of the two major plot strands revolves around the discovery, by Mist, of an inhabited island far out in the ocean. It seems that the Fourlands are in fact not four, but five. The Emperor, of course, wants these newly discovered people brought into the fold. After all, the Insects might come back one day, and then they will want protecting. Mist, who knows rather more about the mysterious island than she is letting on, is quick to offer to organize a diplomatic expedition and poor Jant, despite his phobia about boats, has to come along because he is The Castle’s language specialist. But there is no guarantee that the people of Tris will want to become Imperial subjects. They seem to have very strange ideas about politics, ideas that Jant doesn’t quite comprehend:

We went along an open corridor that joined the library to the taller square building. Its entrance was an alabaster arch with an inscription engraved above it. Mist stretched up and swept her finger over the words. “What does this say?”

I considered it, “You’re reading it the wrong way. They write left to right. Um... It says ‘All men are the same.’”

“You bet they are,” said Mist.

The other major plot strand concerns the very nature of The Castle and its cadre of immortal heroes. A young man called Wrenn manages to defeat Gio Ami in combat and become The Castle’s new Swordsman. But Gio is unwilling to go. Swainston correctly identifies that after five years of Insect-free peace the people of the Fourlands are going to have begun to resent their obligations to the Emperor, and Gio is able to foment rebellion.

This being a novel, the two stories gradually move together. The history of Tris causes Jant to reflect upon the origins of The Castle, and how San got to found an empire. At the same time the existence of an idyllic island, rich in precious metals, sunshine and pretty women, but poor in almost everything else, provides an excellent source of discontent for Gio’s political machinations.

Equally inevitably the solution to Jant’s problems involves visiting The Shift, and Swainston fans will be pleased to hear that it is still as bizarre and pun-filled as ever. The only significant change is that the Tine have invented automobiles. But being Tine, they have done so in their own idiosyncratic and stomach-churning way.

Lying under the bonnet, a mass of green-purple guts quivered and heaved. Clear rubber tubes ran red liquid round them. They stank of ripe meat. Diagonally across the centre were six big hearts, doubled up in a line. Solidly red-brown muscle pumped in unison. I had an impression of the mighty strength they produced to drive the spoked wheels.

So, those fans who like new books to be just like everything else the author has done will by and large be happy. But what about the “gosh, wow” people? What about those whose attraction to *The Year of our War* was the feeling of, “I’ve never seen anything like this before!”

I suspect that they will be happy too. OK, so the setting and the characters are the same. But the new book does not re-use the plot of the old one, and there is plenty still to discover. It is very clear from reading Swainston’s books that The Fourlands is not just a slightly weird but still cookie cutter fantasy world. It is a world with a rich and complex history that Swainston already had well mapped out before beginning to write novels. To date she has revealed only a small part of that history. I was particularly intrigued by the giant shark, Tarragon, who claims to be able to travel at will between her own world, The Shift and The Fourlands. The seas of all worlds are connected, she tells Jant, if only you know how to swim them. This suggests a multiverse far beyond the lands we know. I suspect that there is a lot of interest and excitement in this series yet to come.

So what can I say? “Another brilliant Steph Swainston novel” sounds a bit like faint praise, but *no Present like Time* is just as good as *The Year of Our War* and it would be hard for it to be much better. What I can say, however, is that the cover

is fabulous. Gollancz have gone for a bright white background, a line drawing of a rapier hilt and some simple text, both in blue. That will leap off the shelves in bookstores. Here’s hoping that it helps Swainston get the sales she deserves.

no Present Like Time – Steph Swainston – Gollancz – publishers’ proof

Playing with SF

One of the interesting things about SF is that its leading critics often take to writing novels. *Emerald City* readers will be familiar with John Clute’s *Appleseed*, but Damien Broderick, who was Scholar Guest of Honor at ICFA this year, has a much longer track record of novel writing.

Broderick’s latest novel, *Godplayers*, is due out from Thunder’s Mouth Press in May. If you are wondering who they are, they are the imprint of Avalon under which the catalog of Four Walls Eight Windows will henceforth be published. 4W8W is now wholly owned by Avalon.

Another interesting thing is that when critics write SF they tend to dive headfirst into the genre and produce something wonderfully over the top. *Appleseed* did Space Opera on a truly grand scale. *Godplayers*, on the other hand, goes down the Zelazny route of superhuman beings with fabulous powers. August Seebeck thinks he is just a carefree young Aussie male, living with a slightly eccentric old aunt. Little does he know that he is in fact the long-lost brother of a clan of garrulous, fractious multiverse hopping superbeings, *Players in the Contest of Worlds*.

Or something like that anyway. It really doesn’t matter. Broderick is having a lot of

fun with SF tropes and gets to send his hero all over the place, put him in and out of terrible danger, and most importantly have him meet a truly gorgeous girl with utterly amazing tits. (Australian male, remember – very limited set in interests, especially if not too keen on sport.) The plot, such as it is, depends almost entirely on no one ever telling poor August what is going on, and for the most part refusing to even accept that he is a Seebeck at all. It is an old and hackneyed idea, but it serves its purpose well.

And what exactly is that purpose? Why, to allow Broderick to write a fun SF novel in which he gets to explore a whole bunch of outré scientific ideas about the nature of the universe. And there he manages to catch me on the hop at least twice. Firstly he points out, in words of so few syllables that even I can't miss it, exactly what Jon Courtenay Grimwood was doing with the seemingly part-finished Dyson Sphere in *Stamping Butterflies* (sorry Jon). In addition Broderick leaves me regretting that I have not yet read Stephen Wolfram's massive book, *A New Kind of Science*, and that it is sitting on a bookshelf in the office in California rather than here where I can get at it. Oh well, Broderick has a number of interesting web references a well. I guess I'd better go check them out.

As for those of you who are saying, "but what about the story?" please note that when you read a book by someone who has a PhD in the comparative semiotics of science fiction and literature, you are not likely to get it easy. But with Broderick you will at least get a lot of fun, and much to think about.

Godplayers – Damien Broderick Thunder's Mouth Press – publisher's proof

Pulp Fiction

If ever a book didn't need a sequel it was Martin Sketchley's *The Affinity Trap*. The ending was perfect. The hero, Alexander Delgado, and the alien princess, Lycern, are both lying dead. Lycern's baby, the heir to the Seriatt throne, has been rescued by a couple of no-hope street punks. And evil General Myson turns out to have a substitute baby that he can announce to the world and bring up as the Seriatt prince. End of story.

Except that Martin Sketchley is not writing New Space Opera. Sketchley is writing New Pulp. And what does a good pulp writer do with a successful story? Correct: he writes a sequel, and the first thing he does is bring his hero back from the dead.

So here we have *The Destiny Mask*. It is year later. Delgado was, of course, never really dead. He, Bucky and Girl (who now wants to be called Ashala) have raised baby Cascari to be a fine young half-Seriatt man. And General Myson has raised his baby, Michael, to be cruel and ruthless. All we need now is for the existing Monosiell, the Seriatt ruler, to die, and we have a new story.

Ancient and of unknown origin, the mask had been discovered by archaeologists in one of Seriatt's most barren regions, but was believed by many to be non-Seriattic. Bearing the appearance of polished golden glass with a slightly metallic quality, it was delicately fashioned from a substance scientists had been unable to identify.

Ah, that good old stuff that scientists can't identify: a staple of all good pulp SF. Nor does Sketchley disappoint in other areas of the book. Scarcely a page goes by without

Delgado and his comrades getting into a fight, or exciting vehicle chase, or titanic explosion, or prison of some sort. The whole thing is one long Bruce Willis movie, even down to the wisecracking asides between Delgado and Ashala. The only real difference between this and Flash Gordon is that Flash would dispatch his enemies with a deft right hook to the chin while Dale Arden fainted in his arms, whereas Delgado dispatches them with a dozen bursts from a high velocity plasma rifle, or a switchblade to the throat, while Ash gives covering fire.

Happily Sketchley's writing has preserved the improvement we saw at the end of *The Affinity Trap* and is now assured right from the first chapter. He is comfortable with novel writing now, and knows just what he wants to do, which is create cartoon violence with an air of gross comedy.

Imps' lack of cognitive processes, coupled with modern cloning techniques, made their replication quick, easy and – most importantly – cheap. As a result they were used as cannon fodder in most campaigns, deployed whenever overwhelming numbers were considered likely to be the most effective strategy. For a particularly bloody or prolonged campaigns basic imp replication equipment could be transported to the field to enable the immediate replacement of losses – a cloned cell group could be transformed into a ready-to-go imp in less than eight hours, although this was up to four times their expected combat survival time.

For some reason the ape-like imps, whose off-duty recreation activities are brawling, bugging each other and masturbation, reminded me of a cross between Ewoks

and what our Scottish friends politely term "neds".

Sketchley shows definite signs of geekiness in his loving descriptions of weaponry and vehicles. He even manages to invent a new form of Death Race with which to torture his characters. It turns out that the Seriat have a rather rough and tumble approach to deciding which of two rival princes will inherit the throne. But he is probably best at inventing absurdly over-the-top killing devices.

The Gorgon Class cyborg was a lithe woman with bright green skin covered with elaborate, swirling tattoos in maroon and gold. She wore only bands of black leather around her breasts and waist. Every muscle was well defined. Upon her head a clutch of semi-sentient blast weapons writhed on flexible stems like agitated vipers.

It is very clear that in reading a Martin Sketchley book you should not expect the plot to make much sense. Nor, just like a Bruce Willis movie, should you expect the action to stop for long enough for you to realize that the plot makes no sense. Clearly this is not the sort of high grade, intellectual SF that you expect to see reviewed in *Emerald City*. Nor does it share the elegant prose of Richard Morgan's equally violent and corpse-strewn novels. But I can see comic books, film options and computer games in Martin Sketchley's future. And a horde of admiring fans, all of them male between the ages of 12 and 14. Sketchley knows what he is doing, and he's starting to do it very well.

As for the ending, well, that would be giving the game away. But it is not a spoiler (because it is in the back cover

blurb) to tell you that a time machine is involved. I think that you can guess a lot of the rest.

The Destiny Mask – Martin Sketchley – Simon & Schuster – trade paperback

Fashion Gurus

Despite my interest in costuming, I try not to bore you folks with reviews of books about clothes. This is, after all, a science fiction and fantasy magazine, not a fashion glossy. But every so often something comes along that happens to treat of both style and fantasy. Not that I expected it. I never quite know what to expect from a new Patricia Geary book. Except of course that it will be good.

So we have *Guru Cigarettes*, a strange little tale of an innocent Florida girl with an eye for style, a handsome young film maker, and a bunch of English pornographers with way more psychotropic substances than they know what to do with. We have Bernard, who wants to be Svengali, Malcolm McLaren and Oscar Wilde all rolled into one. We have Phillip, who knows he is an Artist but has long since given up hope of ever getting anywhere as a result of his talent. And we have Norma, who knows very little except how to spot a truly cool new look. We also have one of those classic first sentences:

The way I see it now, I should have murdered them both.

Well of course you should, Bernie. But when it comes down to it you are never

quite as manipulative and ruthless as you would like to think, are you?

What we have here is a book about sex, drugs and imagery. And the fantasy conceit is that you can get better at the latter through chemistry. On the one hand there is the fabulous Fountain of Youth, which our gang set out to steal. On the other we have Bernie's mysterious Guru Cigarettes:

This time when she inhaled, the flavor was raspberry and walnut. Each time the flavor was delicious, a little different, and yet more distinct. Wasn't there something like this in Alice in Wonderland?

If you liked Elizabeth Hand's *Black Light* then you are going to enjoy this book as well. *Guru Cigarettes* is not quite as hard-edged, but it has very much the same feel of fashion, music and drugs. If you don't like that sort of thing, you'll probably still keep on reading because of Geary's smooth, liquid prose.

The one area where the book falls down is the "American writing scenes in London" thing. If they haven't been to the UK much you can tell it a mile off. Geary has her London geography mostly off pat (save I think for the location of the ICA), but everything seems much smaller than it really is. You can't walk from Camden Town to Kensington in half an hour. The real giveaway, however, and they all make this mistake, is that their characters always pay for their coffee with pound notes.

That minor gripe aside, I really enjoyed this book. Sure it is just another teenage angst story, but it works, and Geary writes so well I'd be happy to read almost anything she put in front of me. The book

also has the most subtle and elegant use of a transsexual character that I've ever seen. I guess *Guru Cigarettes* won't be to the taste of most regular readers, but part of being editor is that I get to indulge myself every so often. And one of my favorite drugs is Patricia Geary.

Guru Cigarettes - Patricia Geary - Gorsky Press
- trade paperback

Fantasy History

This was a book I was rather looking forward to. When Pyr sent me a copy of *The Crown Rose* I had not heard of Fiona Avery, but I very quickly discovered that she had an impressive reputation in comics. This was her first novel, a fantasy story set in 13th Century France. It tells the story of Isabelle, the pious sister of the equally saintly Louis IX. Hopefully it would be a stunning debut.

Sadly it was not to be. Avery can certainly write, but she has a little way to go with novels. And while *The Crown Rose* is a competent story, it is one that I'm most definitely not the right audience for.

The first problem that I had is that the story took ages to get going. For about 200 pages the book read like it was intended for 12-year-old American girls. It was a clear case of "headstrong but naive princess fights for her identity and to Do Good against the constraints of a royal upbringing." It was good YA stuff, but had little to interest either the fantasy reader or the reader of historical novels.

It was, however, clear that the book was a fantasy rather than a historical novel. How can you tell? Well, you know how fantasy novels always concentrate on a small

group of characters of noble birth, with no sign of the hordes of servants and retainers that ought to follow them around? And historical novels generally try to give a sense of period, whereas fantasy novels are more like Hollywood movies in which kings and princes go around calling each other "buddy". *The Crown Rose* isn't Hollywood, but it does have a distinctly contemporary feel.

This is not to say that Avery hasn't done her research. There is a fair amount of it dropped into the book as background color (or possibly as education, given the YA slant). I think I only caught her out once, which is when she referred to her heroine riding a palomino horse. Horses of that color were known in Europe at the time - the first recorded instance was a gift from Saladin to Richard the Lion Heart. While they were very rare, it is possible that the French royal family owned one. What they would not do, however, is use the term "palomino". I'm fairly sure that only came into usage when the horses became highly fashionable in 15th Century Spain.

However, while the history is there, Avery doesn't show much interest in engaging with it. For example, she's absolutely right that Conrad, the son of Frederick Barbarossa, was the King of the Germans. But this didn't mean quite the same thing as being King of France or England. Frederick was elected King of Germany, and is still alive and kicking as Holy Roman Emperor when the story takes place. You would have thought that Isabelle's mother, the redoubtable Blanche of Castille, would have explained German politics in detail to her daughter on deciding to arrange to marry Isabelle to Conrad. But you don't do that in a YA fantasy. While the Queen might be a scheming politician, it is more important

for the reader to see her as a caring mom who wants to shield her daughter from the nasty realities of the world. Thankfully we started the story with the kids almost grown up; otherwise we might have been treated to Blanche getting out the Sports Utility Coach so that she could drive Prince Robert to a school tournament.

Then there is the University of Paris. It is a wonderful place. We get to meet Roger Bacon, Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas. And we get to hear how Isabelle is familiar with mathematics and astronomy to show that she is a smart, independent-minded girl. But do we get any philosophical debates? Very little – that might tax the poor readers too much.

The second 200 pages of the book get somewhat more interesting as we get a war between France and England. But this is not *Ash*. Avery's research did not extend to finding out the names of obscure bits of armor and weaponry. And there are absolutely no foul-mouthed soldiers or cross-dressing noblewomen. This is a nice book.

It is so nice, in fact, that you can tell the heroes and villains a mile off. The good people talk about God a lot and worry about falling into sin. The bad people do bad things like going to brothels, oppressing peasants or being unfaithful to their husbands. And the schemes of the bad guys always get telegraphed in advance so that the readers don't get upset when bad things happen. I'm sure that poor Pierre Mauclerc would have been a much more interesting bad guy as he really was, Duke of Brittany and a sort of French equivalent to Simon de Montfort, rather than the love struck, thuggish pantomime villain doing dirty work for the Templars that Avery makes of him.

Eventually, right near the end, we get to find out what the book is all about, and it is an interesting idea, if one that has become a little over-exposed these days (which is doubtless not Avery's fault as she will have been working on this book for some time). It could have made a really good book. But I can't escape the feeling that Avery chose to dumb it down all over the place because she thought that was the right thing to do. Instead she has ended up with a book that, but for a few elements, would do well in the YA market, being published as an adult fantasy novel.

I'm sure that Avery can and will do better than this. To start with she could just decide to write YA novels. I'm sure she'd be very successful. But if she wants to write cutting edge historical fantasies then she needs to do some reading first. She could start with Sharon Penman to get the feel of the period. She absolutely must read Dorothy Dunnett – a little later historically but very much the Queen, Empress and Ruler of the Galaxy of historical fiction. And if she still wants to throw in some fantasy she should read Mary Gentle. If she can put all that lot together I'll be first in the queue for the next book.

The Crown Rose - Fiona Avery - Pyr - publisher's proof

Thrills and Spills

British SF is on top of the world right now, so of course everyone wants to know who the hot new British writers will be, preferably before they are discovered by anyone else. Once of these days the name people are looking for might be Ian

Hocking, but those days have not quite arrived yet.

Hocking's debut novel, *Déjà Vu*, is published by a British small press but has been gaining a fair amount of notice nevertheless. One of the reasons is that Hocking has tried very hard to get noticed. And it is not difficult to see why people notice him and his book. His heart is clearly in the right place. He understands his SF, and he wants to have fun with it. There is an enthusiasm to *Déjà Vu* that is admirable. Unfortunately the book is also intended to be a near-future techno-thriller, and what it gains in enthusiasm and good ideas it loses again in believability.

Let's start from the beginning. Saskia Brandt is an agent for the FIB, a sort of privatized EU-equivalent of the FBI. But she's not a professional police officer. The FIB doesn't work like that. It takes a thief to catch a thief, so the FIB takes the world's finest criminals and puts them through a medical procedure that overwrites their personality with a more socially responsible one. Saskia's job is to fight crime. All she knows about her previous life is that she is a convicted serial killer.

David Proctor is an expert in computers, specializing in virtual reality systems. Twenty years ago a secret research establishment he was working at was bombed. Proctor's wife was killed. He escaped, but found himself the prime suspect. The case against him was inconclusive. Now British Intelligence tells him that they want to re-open the case. Is it a chance to clear his name, or a plot to get him to reveal his guilt?

So far so good. Hocking has a wealth of interesting ideas here. He just doesn't quite have the experience to carry them

off. Most of the problems are not to do with the SF (Hocking has a PhD in psycholinguistics and now works in software) but in the thriller bits. Some of it a lot of readers will gloss over. You probably have to be a biker to realize that someone who has never ridden a bike before and has trouble with hand-eye coordination is not going to win a Steve McQueen style trail bike chase through the Scottish countryside. But some of it is just screamingly obvious.

The worst example is where Saskia finally catches up with Proctor at Heathrow. By now Proctor is suspected of killing two British army officers, one a Colonel. I can quite understand that the security guards at Heathrow would react badly to the sudden appearance of an EU secret agent and a Scottish detective, and would get in their way. But if a departing plane really did contain a terrorist suspect, wanted for two murders and with an All Points Bulletin about him posted in every police station in the UK, the pilot of the plane is not going to be able to plead commercial necessity and insist on taking off. Indeed if, as happens in the book, Saskia manages to get on board with a gun, the pilot would probably refuse to leave the ground until she and her target were removed.

And even if the plane does take off, there's no way it would get anywhere near US airspace. It would get diverted to Iceland or Canada, and be met there by a throng of US Secret Service agents. There is no way that it would land in Chicago and hop on to Las Vegas, and that Saskia and Proctor would be able to just disembark and enter the US without any trouble.

Maybe I'm being over-sensitive here. I wouldn't complain so much in a different type of book, or in a different setting. But *Déjà Vu* is a near-future thriller. It is set in

our world, not in the world of James Bond. It has some serious scientific, political and social points to make. To do that it has to be credible, and in my view it isn't.

The book could have done with better editing as well. There is sloppy stuff like a character whose surname changes at least twice. And someone should have advised Hocking not to try doing Gene Wolfe style narrative shifts until he has regular novel writing down pat.

All this is very sad. With a bit of work *Déjà Vu* could have been a really good novel. Instead it is a shining example of why small presses can be bad for authors as well as good for them. This book got pushed out long before it was ready.

Déjà Vu - Ian Hocking - UKA Press - trade paperback

The End of All Things

The Nebula Awards have a habit of throwing up books to which one's immediate reaction is, "where did that come from?" This year's Best Novel short list contains to very good books and some very predictable entries. It also contains *Omega*, by Jack McDevitt, which is a book I've not noticed on recommended reading lists at all. Still, it is a Nebula nominee, so I bought a copy.

The first thing to note is that *Omega* is the final volume in a series that also includes previous McDevitt such as *Chindi* and *Deepsix*, and possibly others. It is possible that the nebula voters are recognizing the overall achievement rather than the single volume. But to McDevitt's credit *Omega* is perfectly understandable to someone like me who has not read the previous books.

If you know that the books exist it is easy to spot references to them, and indeed some characters do carry through, but *Omega* works reasonably well as a standalone novel.

The plot concerns something called omega clouds, which are vast clouds of nanotech that roam the galaxy searching for signs of civilization and obliterating anything they find. The omegas were discovered in the earlier books, and this final novel explains how humanity finally learns to defeat them. As a plot device this idea is quite similar to that used by Al Reynolds in his *Revelation Space* series. But whereas Reynolds is firmly in the realm of New Space Opera, filling his stories with baroque excesses, pomp rock and hugely flawed characters, McDevitt is equally firmly in the tradition of hard SF. *Omega's* characters are, by and large, highly competent scientists who never touch drugs, listen to classical music, are utterly faithful to their beloved spouses, and have few character flaws beyond the monstrous egos common to all highly successful academics. *Omega* is more Bach than King Crimson.

As you might expect from the style of the book, McDevitt's true subject is not the omega clouds but science and mankind's attitude to it. An omega is indeed heading for Earth, but it will be 1,000 years or so before it arrives. Naturally no Earth politician is in the slightest bit interested in working out some way of stopping it, or even finding out more about it. Things happening that far in the future are someone else's problem.

This would be all very well if Earth's omega were the only one in existence. But there are many of the things roaming the galaxy, and the invention of FTL drives has allowed humanity to discover the

remnants of many, omega-obiterated civilizations. It would appear that we are alone in the galaxy, not because life itself is rare, but because whenever a race of beings reaches a particular level of technological development an omega comes along and wipes them out. It is, of course, only a matter of time before mankind stumbles upon a primitive but promising race of beings that is faced with imminent extinction, and when we do McDevitt's book suddenly has a plot.

McDevitt shows good understanding of the way that politics and the media work. He makes his endangered aliens cute: green skinned, pear-shaped with large feet and a waddling walk that makes them look like something out of a children's TV show. The media christens them Goompahs after the denizens of a 23rd Century equivalent of Sesame Street. And having become something that all kids love, the Goompahs must be saved, and the omega therefore has to be defeated.

From them on the story becomes a relatively simple tale of smart, honorable and hard working scientists and technicians pitted against time, against the dangers of space travel, against the omega, and most importantly against those terrible shibboleths: politicians, religious fundamentalists and the media. The outcome is predictable, the required number of people die, mainly as a result of not thinking logically, and the universe is saved. It is classic science fiction.

Where the book falls down, and I note that the only other McDevitt book I have read, *Infinity Beach*, has similar problems, is that I just don't believe the plot. Rather too much is dependent on people doing silly things, and on available resources not being used. McDevitt's scientists and technologists seem to spend an awful lot

of time failing to think things through. I was particularly disappointed with the final explanation of the origins of the omegas. It would have been a truly wonderful idea, if and only if the behavior of the omegas could be explained in terms of their design goals. But they can't, so the whole thing falls apart.

For me the most interesting part of the book is the tension between science and religion. The Goompahs, while very civilized in many ways, are too primitive to understand things like space travel, let alone deadly clouds of nanotech. It doesn't help matters that their traditional depiction of the evil demons of their mythology is that of hairless apes. In the end, the only way that the Goompahs can be persuaded to take the necessary actions to save themselves is to send them a message from the gods. What saves them is not rationality, but their religious faith. Those who did not believe in divine messengers died. This is a difficult pill for a hard SF book to swallow, and McDevitt spends quite a bit of time pondering its implications.

Overall, however, I still don't understand what this book is doing on the Nebula short list, especially given the phenomenal quality of the SF that was published in 2004. I can't even complain that the SFWA members were looking for American authors to honor, because if they were there's no way that *Cloud Atlas* should be on the list. Sometimes, I think, the Nebulas are just odd.

Omega - Jack McDevitt - Ace - mass market paperback

Love and War

I'm trying to let Anne do most of the short fiction reviewing because she likes the format much more than I do. But there are some books that I have previously promised to review, and this is one of them. It also happens to be by Carol Emshwiller, which is a good reason for hanging on to it.

Emshwiller's short fiction is very good. The stories tend to be a bit bittersweet much of the time, but they are beautifully observed and written. It is not surprising, therefore, that Tachyon Publications decided to produce an Emshwiller collection, *I Live With You*. But I'm not quite convinced it was a good idea. Here's why.

Individually each story works very well. When viewed as a group, however, you start to notice that Emshwiller has some favorite themes, and that she's not the most cheerful person on the planet. To give her her due, she recognizes this. In her Guest of Honor speech at Wiscon (also included in the book) she admits to writing a lot of war stories. Four of the twelve stories in *I Live With You* are about war in some way. They are all quite different, but they all have the same basic structure: there is a war, some people want to stop it, but others won't let them and it all ends in tears.

This may well be a message that modern America needs to take on board. War does not generally end in glorious victory for the Good Guys and shameful defeat for the Villains, no matter what Hollywood and President Bush's Press Office might have us believe. But taken together, the stories become a little repetitive.

Another theme of the stories is failed love. Over half of the stories involve characters

who have unhappy love affairs of some sort. In some, for example "Bountiful City", the viewpoint character never gets any further than pining for people who don't know her. Thankfully she lives in New York so there are plenty of strangers on whom she can fixate.

The final theme is invisible aliens. The title story, "I Live With You", is a typical example. The narrator is an invisible person who takes up residence in the home of a normal human and proceeds to try to liven her life up a little. Emshwiller seems very interested in the idea that there are people who live alongside us whom we can't see.

So this is a rather odd book. The stories are great, so it is well worth buying. But please people, if you do buy it, don't sit down and read it all the way through the way I did. At least, not unless you have someone around to give you a very big hug afterwards.

I Live with You - Carol Emshwiller - Tachyon Publications - publisher's proof

Them and Now

Some books get to stay in print because they are huge commercial successes. Others because they won awards. But some books ought to stay in print simply because of the light they throw on the history of science fiction. That, I suspect, is an important role of the academic press. And it is probably why Wesleyan University Press is re-issuing novels by Joanna Russ.

Why is it so important that Russ stays in print? Because she is a pivotal figure in the development of feminist science fiction,

and indeed of feminism. We can learn a lot about history simply by reading Russ.

The interesting question, however, is whether what she wrote is still relevant today. Are her novels simply a product of the 1970s sex war, or do they have something to say to young women today? Bearing in mind, of course, that many young women today claim that feminism has outlived its usefulness.

Wesleyan has sent me two Russ novels. The one I am going to look at here is *The Two of Them*. It is very much about the position of women in society. The two characters of the title are Irene Waskiewicz and Ernst Neumann. She is a rebellious tomboy teenager living in 1950s America who decides to run away from home with her family's mysterious and handsome friend. He turns out to be an agent of the Trans-Temporal Authority, and he offers her a job in the agency.

Ernst's surname is almost certainly deliberate. He is a "new man", someone sympathetic to the female cause. And the point of the story, I suspect, is to show that even he has limits.

The bulk of the book is taken up by an operation that takes Irene and Ernst to Ka'abah, a fundamentalist Muslim community. I suspect Russ would have got into a lot of trouble had she written the book today. Ka'abah is an obvious caricature, emphasizing all of the patriarchal aspects of Islam at the expense of anything else. It is the sort of society that Sheri Tepper would create as a source of bad guys. Russ does occasionally point out that it is something of a mockery of true Islam, but I still think the book would cause a big fuss if it were published new now.

That aside, we are in familiar Tepper territory. The men of Ka'abah treat their women abominably, and essentially keep them as pets. Many of the women go along with this because a) they have been brainwashed from birth to believe that this is the way society is supposed to be, and b) because apart from getting slapped around a lot they think that having nothing to do all day except beautify themselves, shop, and watch soap operas is a pretty cushy number. Irene finds a little girl who wants to be a poet, and determines to rescue her.

So far the book is very much over the top. The men of Ka'abah are cartoon villains. But they are not the point of the story. Certainly the complicity of the Ka'abah women in their own suppression is important. But the real meat of the story comes when Irene analyses Ernst's reaction to the whole affair. Because, the book seems to suggest, when it comes down to it, all men are the same.

So yes, Ernst might be a Neumann. But while he might support Irene's right to have a job and to not marry and not have kids, his basic attitude to her can be summed up as, "I'm happy to support you, but you have to understand that women are fundamentally irrational and intellectually inferior, so they can't be let loose on their own." Of course he never comes out and says that. The genius of the book is that Russ makes Ernst's attitude clear while doing nothing more than describe ordinary man-woman interaction. Many women readers will recognize aspects of their male partners in Ernst.

So what is Irene to do about Ernst? She kills him.

Questions for the readers' group: was that the only viable solution to Irene's predicament? Is the same true today?

Hugo Nominees: Best Novella

By Anne K.G. Murphy

Cheryl already gave her picks from the Hugos Short list, but she also asked me to review the short fiction so I'm starting with the Novellas this month.

Electro

By random chance, the first Novella I read was Charlie Stross' "Electro" and you could say I continued with randomness because I plunged into his trademark chaos of ideas and edgy New Geek side references, swirling and flying off in all directions. While I join many in admiring the fecundity of this meme-space, I find it detracts from the story, which is about how members of a special kind of eigenfamily and their entourage come together (literally in the case of grandpa, who's recently been instantiated as a flock of pigeons) to consider how they might shepherd themselves and the rest of humanity out of the path of the Vile Offspring before they turn the whole solar system into a collection of quantum nanocomputers - despite the fact that anywhere they go they will carry the seeds of the next singularity with them. (There is an election involved and yes, for you who follow Stross' work, the Lobsters might factor in somehow.)

I didn't think this was a bad story. I kept wanting it to be a good story. I could see a

good story in there, and of course the constant stimulation of mind-bending ideas is quite titillating. But I found myself hoping that next time Stross publishes a story he finds someone who can actually *edit* his writing. The redundancies, inconsistencies and typos were so frequent that I started to think that whoever had tried to edit the story couldn't tell when Stross meant what was there and when it was a bit off. And I didn't think they should have let him get away with so much unmotivated exposition (including a four-page *Welcome to Saturn* FAQ) that didn't bother to be subtle or spread itself out evenly in the story. I kept wanting to take the narrator aside and ask "so what is your position in all this, anyway?" It was a bit much for a bewildered ducking [sic] like me.

"Electro" by Charles Stross (*Asimov's* 09/04)

Time Ablaze

I found Michael Burstein's story "Time Ablaze" too soft for my tastes. As a time travel paradox story it falls on the weak side of rigor and his romantic pairing doesn't seem that romantic to me even though (or perhaps partly because) it is heavily foreshadowed. "Time Ablaze" has many fairly standard SF scenes produced quite capably, and an interesting look into turn-of-the-20th-century entertainment, but the characters aren't very engaging so some people might find it, as I did, a little flat. The critical message about how the people who make disaster spectacles into entertainment (or historical documentary) ought not to forget to value the human lives involved may be welcome, but it also feels a little obvious.

"Time Ablaze" by Michael A. Burstein
(*Analog* 06/04)

The Concrete Jungle

"The Concrete Jungle", also by Charles Stross, is another kettle of fish altogether. Or at least some things with scales and gills, others with tentacles, and some that are afflicted with a dread disease that makes you harden and burn if they so much as look at you. When it's possible to transmit the Basilisk Stare through a network of traffic cameras, it's Not a Good Thing to find a really hot concrete cow in a traffic roundabout - and that's just the beginning of a topsy-turvy investigation by our man Bob Howard, a field investigator for the CPU (Counter-Possession Unit), who is joined mid-adventure by a non-nonsense police detective, inspector Josephine Sullivan.

This kind of story often doesn't appeal to me, so I was impressed that it caught my interest and kept it. I really liked the tie-in between gorgonism and the quantum observation principle, and the masses of exposition are carried off well enough, mostly as historical documents. It's all very motivated because the reader, like our man Bob, is busy trying to figure out what's going on before Bob finds out first-hand what it's like to be so much hot rubble. I'd hate to work in whatever organization gave Stross this pessimistic view of bureaucratic politics, but from the moment Bob is dragged out of bed for a GAME ANDES REDSHIFT code blue we are drawn into his world; Stross does such a good job of making it real I can even believe part of it's a defensive preparation for when the Great Old Ones return from beyond the stars to eat our brains. And

who *doesn't* think there's a guy in Accounting who's a zombie, anyway?

"The Concrete Jungle" by Charles Stross
(*The Atrocity Archives*, Golden Gryphon Press)

Sergeant Chip

And then for a complete shift, I read "Sergeant Chip", by Bradley Denton. This story isn't the slightest bit funny. It doesn't pretend to be. It starts with blood, and the amazingly consistent voice of the first-person narrator draws you through the inevitable explanation of the heroism and betrayal that lead to that blood. And somewhere in the middle, captured by the simplicity and the naiveté of this sincere K-9 soldier, I honestly cried. The story is very simple, but the execution reminded me of "Flowers for Algernon" - it's quite good.

Denton makes no particular attempt to explain a thought transmission process that is central to the story, but reading it I found myself thinking of something John Scalzi just said at Penguicon. "When," he asked "did Science Fiction start having to be *right* all the time?" This story is an unapologetic reflection of the horror and distrust that are the only decent reaction to some of the atrocities that have been committed by people who are part of our military machine, put into appropriate perspective from the eyes of a loyal creature who is himself distrusted because he is both dangerous and different. It isn't all distrust though. Ultimately this is a story about connection, and the transformation that occurs when two creatures adopt one another into their social structures. The themes aren't new and the SF may involve some hand

waving, but I congratulate Denton on having written a perfectly Hugo-worthy story.

“Sergeant Chip” by Bradley Denton
(*Fantasy & Science Fiction* 09/04)

Winterfair Gifts

In “Winterfair Gifts” Lois McMaster Bujold presents dangerous and different as exotic, exciting and, yes, of course, lonely. A backwater Armsman comes face-to-face with a bioengineered mercenary soldier and *close* friend of his Lord in the tense lead-up to his lordship’s high profile wedding, and learns to appreciate the beauty of her fanged smile along with her other noble qualities. Like, um, how very tall she is. Right. And I said the themes in Denton’s story weren’t new...

“Winterfair Gifts” by Lois McMaster Bujold (*Irresistible Forces* NAL)

Interview: Golden Gryphon

Golden Gryphon (www.goldengryphon.com) has been high on my list of small presses to watch for some time now. I have recently reviewed books by Ian Watson, Lucius Shepard, Charles Stross, Robert Reed, Jeff VanderMeer and Pamela Sargent. And that’s only a fraction of Golden Gryphon’s output. Most recently the company has hit the headlines by getting a novella on this year’s Hugo nominees list. I talked to company boss Gary Turner and editor Marty Halpern.

Cheryl Morgan: Let’s start with some congratulations. You must be very pleased about the Hugos.

Gary Turner: I was extremely pleased to see Charlie’s story, “The Concrete Jungle,” receive a nomination. I had every faith in the story, but there were only 3000 copies of *The Atrocity Archives* sold, which limits the readership compared to, say, *Asimov’s*. It’s high praise that a novella published by a small press gets this notice, and a testament to Charlie’s skill.

CM: What led you to publish Charlie Stross? He got picked up by US publishers well before people in the UK started noticing him.

Marty Halpern: I realized quite early on that Charlie would soon be one of the most in-demand authors, so I approached him in August 2002 about submitting a novella for one of our limited edition chapbooks. Unfortunately, his schedule at the time didn’t allow for a new project, so he suggested a couple alternatives. One of those alternatives was U.S. rights to his first novel, *The Atrocity Archive*. The novel was being serialized in UK magazine *Spectrum SF* and, in fact, the third (and last) installment hadn’t been published yet. As a subscriber to *Spectrum SF*, I had already read the first two parts, so Charlie emailed me part three so that I could finish reading the novel. *The Atrocity Archive* is a mixed-genre story – thriller, horror, science fiction – which makes it an ideal small press publication.

MH: After agreeing to publish *The Atrocity Archive*, I then suggested to Charlie that we include an additional unpublished story to make the hardcover more attractive to his hardcore fans who may already own the *Spectrum SF* issues. Charlie had an idea for a stand-alone Bob Howard story that took place after *The*

Atrocity Archive and before the next major story line (*The Jennifer Morgue*, forthcoming in November 2006). That new story was “The Concrete Jungle,” and that’s how *The Atrocity Archives* (plural), the book, came to be.

CM: OK, let’s go back in time a little now. Gary, would you like to say a few words about your brother Jim who founded the company?

GT: I miss him still, and I certainly appreciate the job he did as editor and publisher more now than ever. I wish he could have had an opportunity to read a collection that I had edited, so he could have had the chance to razz me as I so often did him.

CM: Golden Gryphon has been going for several years now. Have you noticed a change in the status of small presses over that time?

GT: The Internet has allowed small presses to market their products to a wider audience than ever before, and the new technologies, such as desktop publishing software, POD, and local printers have allowed the number of small presses to increase. The bad side to this is that there are more books published than ever before, which makes it more difficult to decide which books to stock at the brick bookstores. I think this has made it harder for the small press to get into certain bookstore chains.

MH: There are a lot of readers and collectors (myself included) who make an overt effort to support the small presses. Golden Gryphon Press has a few supporters who purchase every one of our titles, for which we are extremely grateful. But there are only so many book dollars available, and with the ever-increasing number of small press publishers — and

quality books — those dollars get spread thinner and thinner.

CM: Your mission statement on your web site specifically mentions short story collections. That’s not a very popular format, but you seem to be doing OK with it. Is it a successful niche?

GT: It was obviously successful for *The Atrocity Archives* and for several other collections we have published, which shows that there is indeed a market for collections. I feel that short-story collections can be just as profitable as novels.

CM: Nevertheless you have published novels. Ian Watson’s *Mockymen*, for example. And Lucius Shepard’s *Louisiana Breakdown* is a stand-alone novella. And you have a new novel from Richard Bowes scheduled for this year. What is it about a book that encourages you to break the mold?

GT: It has to be a stand-alone novel (no series!) and one that I enjoyed reading. *Mockymen* came our way almost by default. It had been accepted by one or two other presses, and had even been typeset—then the presses folded. Ian Watson was working with me on his collection, *The Great Escape*, when *Mockymen* was “freed,” and offered it to me. It was the type of SF that I enjoy, so...

CM: I thought that *Mockymen* was an extraordinary book — it was one of my favorite SF novels of 2003. Ian is a well-known British writer with an excellent track record, and yet you guys picked it up first. It has now got UK publication, but only from Storm Constantine’s small press, Immanion. What goes on here?

GT: Once GGP published the book, Ian Watson was able to sell rights to the book all over Europe; I’m not even sure how

many editions are available (at least four). Go figure—it took years for the book to see the light of day, and then it’s everywhere, in several languages. You’ll have to ask Ian why it was passed over by the larger presses.

CM: Talking of extraordinary books, I was amazed at Lucius Shepard actually going out and living amongst hoboes to research *Two Trains Running*. Did you know he was going to do that when you bought the book, or had he already done it before he approached you?

MH: Lucius’s *Spin* magazine article on the Freight Train Riders of America was published in July 1998, a year before I even joined Golden Gryphon Press. So Lucius had ridden the rails long before the two fictional stories in *Two Trains Running* were even written.

CM: I have seen several of your books in chain stores in the US. Obviously you have the distribution problem cracked.

GT: We have a very hard-working distributor, Independent Publishers Group, who has a well-organized sales force. They do as good a job as anyone in getting our books in the major chain bookstores, as well as addressing the independent stores and the library market.

CM: Most of your books are described as “Archival Quality Hardcovers.” That suggests a commitment to top-quality production standards.

GT: Yes, indeed. I could probably make more money just selling softcovers, but I feel that the books we publish deserve the highest quality materials. The authors, who did the really hard work, deserve no less... So our books are hardcovers with sewn pages, on heavy alkaline paper. These books will be as good as new in fifty years, if taken reasonable care of.

CM: But you do also produce limited edition chapbooks. Is that a matter of diversification, or are they aimed at a collector’s market as well?

MH: My rationale for the limited edition chapbooks was to publish great stories by “hot” authors in a fairly short lead-time. There is also a limited market for novellas, so this was my way of opening up a new outlet for longer stories. Because these chapbooks are perfect bound with full color wraparound cover art, we’re forced to charge a cover price of \$15.95. So to give the buyer a little something extra for their purchasing dollars, each book is numbered and signed by the author. So that opens up the chapbook to the collectors’ market as well.

MH: I thought I would be inundated with novella submissions once these chapbooks entered the marketplace, but that hasn’t been the case. I’m always looking for a great new novella from established authors, particularly a story set in the author’s existing “universe.” So far we’ve published four chapbooks: a “future history” story by Alastair Reynolds, a “Company” story by Kage Baker, a “Marrow” story by Robert Reed, and one of Howard Waldrop’s inestimable alternate history stories. These chapbooks also showcase some of the best cover art that Bob Eggleton, Nick Jainschigg, and J. K. Potter have done in recent years.

CM: Talking of the chapbooks, how did you come to be publishing *Mere*, which was a prequel to a novel that Robert Reed had sold to Tor?

MH: I had also asked Bob Reed about submitting a novella for our chapbook series (we discussed this during our initial conversations regarding his next short story collection, *The Cuckoo’s Boys*, due out in November). Bob suggested “*Mere*”

because both *Asimov's* and *F&SF* had passed on the story due to its length. Not only was the story a favorite of Bob's, but the character Mere also plays a pivotal role in *The Well of Stars*, Bob's new "Marrow" novel. This excellent story encompasses a great sweep of time, recounting Mere's immortal life up to her arrival on the Great Ship – just the type of story that makes for a great chapbook.

CM: A small number of your books have been reprinted in trade paperback format. What prompts you to do that, and does it suggest that Kage Baker's *Black Projects*, *White Knights* has been selling really fast?

GT: We reprint as trade paperbacks only if we feel there is a market for them. I hadn't planned on doing any softcover reprints, but people and bookstores kept requesting them, so we've offered softcovers on our "bestsellers." Who knows, perhaps the day will come when we automatically offer both. In a sense, I can understand the attraction for a book that costs \$15.95 instead of \$25.95. For most of my life, all I could afford were the inexpensive paperbacks and softcovers.

CM: You have a number of interesting looking books scheduled for the remainder of 2005. Is there anything you specifically want to tell us about them?

GT: A diverse group, no? Nolan, Effinger, Frost, Bowes, Dann, and Reed. If someone who likes science fiction and fantasy short stories can't find *one* of these books to enjoy, I'd like to know what they do read. We always post reviews at our web site (www.goldengryphon.com), so anyone who wishes can visit our site and see what has been said. Of course, we do tend to "overlook" certain reviews, when the reviewer was obviously having a bad day.
<g>

CM: Looking further ahead, you have a sequel to *The Atrocity Archives* scheduled for 2006. Charlie is busy writing it now. We know this from his LiveJournal. How valuable is that sort of intensive trailing of a book to the publisher and author?

GT: By our standards, this is almost rushing a book. We drive authors insane with our long lead times, but there is method to our madness. Our distributor, Independent Publishers Group, requires catalog material (including cover art) roughly one year ahead of publication, in order to produce a slick catalog and send their legions out to sell. Also, we spend an inordinate amount of time proofing a book. By the time it hits the bookstore, it has been "read" by GGP seven to ten times. (You can see why we really, really must like a book in order to publish it! Who would want to read a book that many times that didn't?)

CM: Also in 2006 you've got a new collection by Jeffrey Ford. He is one my favorite short fiction writers. Aside from "The Empire of Ice Cream," will there be other famous reprints, or is there a lot of new work in it?

MH: In addition to the title story, Jeff's new collection will include "The Weight of Words," a World Fantasy Award-nominated story; "A Night in the Tropics," on *Locus* magazine's Best of the Best list in its 2004 Year in Review; and "The Annals of Eelin-Ok," which you yourself selected as *the* best story of the year for 2004. So, yes, there are quite a few well-known Ford stories in this collection. There are also a number of excellent but hard-to-find stories that were published since 2003 in anthologies and small press zines. Of course, Jeff also plans to write a new story exclusive to the collection. In a recent email I received from Jeff, he

mentioned that he had an idea for an off-world SF story, and if it's anything in quality like "Exo-Skeleton Town" or "The Far Oasis" from his first collection, we're in for a real treat! (No pressure, Jeff, should you read this! Honest!)

CM: You even have books scheduled for 2007. I guess that means you are not open to submissions...

GT: Not really, especially since I have a pile of submissions now. It's quite flattering and in a certain sense humbling, but we must receive two to four inquiries each week — and we only publish six books a year.

CM: Where do you see Golden Gryphon going in the future?

GT: One of these days I'd like to expand the number of titles that we publish; I guess increased sales would allow GGP to do so (hint, hint!).

CM: Is there anything else you'd like to talk about that I haven't given you an opening for?

GT: We see feedback from reviewers; what I wish is that more readers would email us and let us know what they liked, what they didn't like, what authors they would like to see, etc. It's the people that buy the books that keep us in business, and I feel somewhat disconnected from them. Of course, we could add a message board on our website, but public comments are not the same as private comments.

MH: I'd like to take this opportunity to mention our "anniversary" books. In 2002 we published our 25th book, *The Silver Gryphon*, an anthology of original stories from those authors whose work we showcased in books one through twenty-four. We're now beginning work on book

#50 — *The Golden Gryphon* (cool name, don't you think?) — all new stories from our authors who comprise books twenty-six through forty-nine. Charlie Stross has already submitted his story, a new Bob Howard adventure entitled "Pimpf." (Charlie tells me it's pronounced just the way it looks.)

MH: Other contributing authors include Nancy Kress, Robert Reed, Pamela Sargent, and Ian Watson; and both Jeffrey Ford and Jeff VanderMeer have promised new stories as well. All your favorite authors, I believe. We did a limited edition of *The Silver Gryphon* signed by all twenty-three contributors, including cover artist Thomas Canty (Do you know how rare a Canty autograph is?), and if all goes well, we hope to do a limited edition of *The Golden Gryphon*, too. For the collectors, we're willing to match numbers on the limited editions should they purchase both volumes. Of course, information on these and all of our other books can be found by visiting our web site at www.goldengryphon.com.

Out of Synch

Top of my list of US editions of previously-reviewed UK books for this issue is Mary Gentle's *1610: A Sundial in a Grave*. How can you go wrong with a book that has King James I in drag?

Also receiving US release just a few months after the UK edition is Ian R. MacLeod's follow-up to the hugely successful *The Light Ages*, *The House of Storms*.

And both of them with settings in Somerset too. There's a strange coincidence.

Finally I should not forget a UK re-issue. *Anima* from Gollancz collects together two fine M. John Harrison novels: *The Course of the Heart* and *Signs of Life*. (Kudos to our friends at Night Shade here who seem to have made re-issuing Harrison works a fashion.)

1610: A Sundial in a Grave - Mary Gentle - Perennial - paperback

The House of Storms - Ian R. MacLeod - Ace - hardcover

Anima - M. John Harrison - Gollancz - trade paperback

Miscellany

Heinlein Award

Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle are this year's recipients of the Robert A. Heinlein Award for excellence in hard science fiction. And very well deserved too.

The Heinlein dinner won't be at Worldcon this year, it is going to be at the NASFiC instead. It occurs to me that one of the main benefits of having a NASFiC is to have another big convention at which awards can get given out.

The Myths are Coming

Every so often mainstream publishing does something quite radical and potentially very interesting. One such event is due to start in October. Canongate Books, an Edinburgh-based publisher, has signed up a bunch of big name novelists to

produce a series entitled *The Myths*. The idea is that each author should re-tell a favorite mythological story in their own way. In other words, it is a series of fantasy stories. One hundred books are planned, with simultaneous publication in many countries (27 at the last count and growing).

The interesting question, of course, is whether what we actually get are a bunch of top quality fantasy novels, or whether the people recruited to write the books decide to make their stories "realistic" by taking out all of the mythological elements. Given that the first novel in the series will be by Margaret Atwood, I guess we won't get any talking squid in space. But Canongate does seem to have the right idea. As a trailer for the series they have asked Karen Armstrong to write a book about mythology. I've read it, and it is great. It explains just what a good myth should do. And if the novelists follow Armstrong's advice then we'll get a very interesting series of books indeed.

Footnote

I have finally got my photos of Corlu, Potlatch and ICFA on the web site, and there are pictures of Eastercon too.

In the next issue we have novels by Dan Simmons, Gwyneth Jones, Charlie Stross and Steve Aylett, amongst others. Anne will take a look at the Hugo nominated novelettes. And if I get time to do any touring I might write a bit about my business trip to India.

Ciao,

Love 'n' hugs, Cheryl