

# EMERALD CITY #118

Issue 118

June 2005

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## Introduction

Assuming you are reading this fairly soon after publication, there are now less than two weeks left in which to cast your votes for this year's Hugo Awards. Don't forget, please.

Talking of which, remember I said last issue that I was going to do something to make *Emerald City* worthy of that Best Web Site nomination? Notice anything different about the web site?

Very little of this is down to me. The whole thing was the idea of a reader, Tony Geer. He did all the work of finding the art to use and creating the masthead. And of course nothing would have happened if Steven Stalberg and Gerhard Hoerberth hadn't generously allowed us to use parts of their work. (You can click through to full versions of both artworks from the *Emerald City* masthead - please do, they are wonderful.) All I did was use the magic of Dreamweaver to update the site and then upload it. So huge thanks to Tony, Steven and Gerhard. Once Worldcon is over I promise to do some work myself and get around to improving the site's coding.

One of the really neat things about this is that the *Emerald City* team is now spread over four continents (North America, South America, Europe and Asia). Only

the Internet could make this work. Of course I'm now wondering how I could add people in Africa and Australia. I know I have readers there. And I have this ambition about Antarctica...

Talking of the *Emerald City* team, I'd like you to extend a warm welcome to Stuart Carter and Mario Guslandi who make their debut here with a look at Frank Miller's *Sin City* and Andrew Hook's *Beyond Each Blue Horizon*. Stuart and Mario have written numerous reviews for *The Alien Online* in the past so some of you may be familiar with their work. You'll be hearing more from them in the future.

Please note, however, that neither Stuart nor Mario nor Anne have the same bandwidth as me. They may be reviewing different kinds of material to that which I usually go for, but they don't have time to read eight books a month. They have lives, so please don't deluge them with review requests.

Those of you who follow the blog will also know that this is not the only issue of *Emerald City* to be published this month. The *Emerald City Guide to Glasgow* went online a few weeks back. It includes articles about Glasgow by many local residents and ex-residents, including Ken MacLeod, Gary Gibson and Hal Duncan. If you are going to Worldcon it is well worth a look.

It also includes an article by me about Glasgow's maritime history. You might notice that it is written from a date far in the future, and mentions something called Spaceport Glasgow. If you are thinking that this has something to do with the *WSFS Armadillo* that I mentioned last issue then you are dead right. I've been busy. So have Kevin, Frank Wu, Guy and Rose-Marie Lillian, and a host of writers and fan artists. Frank's cover for *Ion Trails* is now online

<http://www.frankwu.com/secc.html>. There is stuff out there if you know where to find it.

You have to do something silly when you are on a Worldcon committee, otherwise you'll go completely crazy.

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## Dangerous to Know

Lord Byron has been quoted as saying many things, a goodly number of which it might have been more diplomatic of him not to say. Yet there is one thing that he said - or rather wrote, in "Don Juan" - that is mis-quoted more often than everything else he said or wrote is quoted. For it was Byron who penned the words, "Truth is always strange, stranger than fiction." John Crowley presumably knows this, for he has been playing with the idea a lot.

This much we know to be True.

1. That Bryon was a participant in the parlor game that led to Mary Shelley writing *Frankenstein*, and began a novel of his own that night.

2. That Byron's only legitimate child was Ada, Countess Lovelace.

3. That Byron's estranged wife, Annabella, attempted to save her daughter from inheriting her father's bad ways by keeping her away from arts and poetry and instead encouraging an interest in mathematics.

4. That this led Ada into friendship with the inventor, Charles Babbage, to writing the first ever computer programme, and to developing a keen interest in codes and ciphers.

5. That following Byron's death, Annabella had much of her husband's papers, most importantly his memoirs, burned lest they cause further scandal (and presumably because they put his side of the story of their unsuccessful marriage).

6. That Ada nursed a sneaking admiration for the "mad, bad and dangerous to know" father whom she never met.

From those simple facts, much fiction can follow. "What if" – as writers of fiction are wont to say – what if Byron had finished that novel. Why then it would perhaps have been amongst his papers when he died. In which case Lady Byron might have sought to burn it. Especially, one might suspect, if it were in some way autobiographical.

What if, then, Byron's novel somehow revealed his great love for his lost daughter? Would not Ada, should she learn about it, attempt to preserve it for posterity using the scientific secrets that she knew?

Thus far we have a plot that many a writer could have conjured. But in order to bring the idea to life a number of other tasks must be undertaken. Firstly our author

much be sufficiently well versed in the details of Byron's life and 19<sup>th</sup> Century history to plot such a work. Secondly, and rather more importantly, he has to be a sufficiently competent wordsmith to write Byron's novel for him, and make it sound just like Byron himself. I'm no Byron scholar myself, but I direct the reader to a review by Ron Charles of the *Washington Post Book World* who describes Crowley's imitation of Byron's style as "miraculous" – sufficiently good, in fact, that it might be taken for the real thing. <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/06/16/AR2005061601191.html>>

Crowley, however, is not content to stop there. For sure, *Lord Byron's Novel* contains the novel, *The Evening Land*, as Crowley imagines that Byron might have written it. But it also contains much more. For a start, the novel comes complete with extensive footnotes written by Ada – or rather Crowley writing in the style of Ada – in which we follow the young woman's thoughts and feelings as she reads and transcribes her dead father's work; a work that turns out to be very much about her.

And that's not all, for the book is set in the present day. It is discovered, not by Byron scholars, but by a group of feminists researching Ada's life. You might think, of course, that feminists are absolutely the last people to take joy in discovering a lost work by a notorious rake, and yet here they are also unearthing not only the intimate thoughts of their heroine, but the truly monumental work of enciphering, by hand (or perhaps through some device of Babbage's invention), an entire novel, that it might be saved from her mother's fury.

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*From the beginning her high-minded (and vengeful, and wary) mother had kept her from*

poetry and anything that smacked of the imaginative, the self-regarding, the emotional – the Byronic. What Ada came to know – what her mother couldn't have imagined – is that science is a realm of passion and dream as great as poetry.

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And there's more. Because in order to give his characters some connection to the events unfolding back in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, and doubtless also because he just can't resist adding another layer of complexity to the plot, Crowley arranges it so that the woman who discovers the novel, Alexandra Novak, is herself estranged from her father thanks to his notorious behavior, and he is a noted Byron scholar.

Layers upon layers upon layers

Of course all of the authorial cleverness in the world is not sufficient to make a truly great novel. Crowley needs to have something to say, and say it he does. One can argue endlessly – and I'm sure that more hard line feminists than I will do so – that Byron is not exactly an ideal role model for male behavior and that Crowley is perhaps engaged in a whitewash. What I hope few people will argue with, however, is his basic contention about social diversity.

Byron and Ada lived in a time in which deviation from social norms, either through unorthodox sexual activity, through radical politics, or simply through the taking up of interests deemed unsuitable for one's gender, could result in a person being declared mad. In the straightjacket of Victorian Values the extravagantly pious, such as Lady Byron, could wield enormous powers, not only over her husband's legacy, but also over the life of his daughter. It is still the case today that parents can be legally barred

from access to their children because their behavior, whilst not illegal, is deemed socially unacceptable. Transsexuals are a case in point. Crowley simply argues that those with extreme conservative views on morality should not be allowed to determine what is good for children. I'll vote for that.

Crowley's book is, I suspect, one of the cleverest books to be written this year. It is certainly on a par with David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*, the literary tour de force of last year. I hope to see it short-listed for many literary prizes, and even winning a few. But I don't expect to see it winning genre prizes. It is science fiction of a sort, being a mild alternate history and being partly about that great geek heroine, Ada Lovelace. It is also fantasy of a sort, given that it includes a talking bear and a zombie (though the former may have been a dream and the latter is rationalized in the traditional way). Then there is the mysterious character of Rooney J. Welch who provides the lost manuscript to Alex and her friends, and who bears a striking resemblance to the Italian revolutionary from whom Ada claims to have received Byron's work in the first place, and therefore may be a being of the same species as Enoch Root.

All of this, however, will not save the book from the fact that it, or rather that part of it that comprises *The Evening Land* and Ada's notes thereon, is indeed a miraculous imitation of 19<sup>th</sup> Century style and is therefore replete with what Ron Charles kindly describes as "stylistic excesses." Whereas Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell* was merely mannered, *The Evening Land* is the real thing: extravagant prose, ghastly betrayals, absurd coincidences and all. It is a testament to Crowley's skill at writing that I, who normally detest such style,

kept with the book to the end. Other genre readers may not be so tolerant.

Those who stick with it, however, are in for a treat. John Crowley is most definitely not mad. But he is slightly bad, for even he admits that his latest opus is a "piece of impertinence." And he is most certainly dangerous to know, for he is a writer of such towering talent and intellect that he will leave your mind buzzing with ideas for months afterwards.

*Lord Byron's Novel, The Evening Land* - John Crowley - Morrow - hardcover

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## A Circus Act

Some writers produce books that are highly predictable, so that you know right from the start that the villain will come to a nasty end, and who the heroine will marry. Other writers prefer to surprise and delight the reader with new tricks. That, as you should know by now, is the sort of writer whose works I prefer to read. And one such writer is Jeffrey Ford.

Ford's latest novel, *The Girl in the Glass*, is set in 1930's America at the height of the Depression. It features Thomas Schell, a Coney Island card sharp who has turned his sleight of hand tricks to the new and lucrative business of spiritualism. A few simple illusions are all it takes to convince the rich of New York that they have been visited by the ghosts of recently departed relatives.

Yet Schell is not quite the cold-hearted swindler he seems. He rationalizes his activities to himself on the grounds that he is bringing comfort to the bereaved, many of whom want to be conned. And at least some of his ill-gotten gains are put to

charitable causes. For example, the Indian swami who accompanies Schell at his soirees is actually Diego, an orphaned Mexican boy whom Schell is raising as his own son. Not only is he providing the boy with a home and an education; by disguising him as an Indian Schell is also protecting Diego from the draconian anti-immigrant laws that the US has introduced in the wake of the Depression.

For Schell and for Diego, who is to become the hero of our tale, the defining moment of their lives comes at a séance when a real ghost appears: the Girl of the book's title. Schell soon finds out that the girl he saw is the kidnapped daughter of a rich industrialist. Feeling that he has been given a chance to put his spiritualist act to good use, Schell determines to find out who kidnapped and killed young Charlotte Barnes and bring him to justice.

And so the book morphs seamlessly from a horror novel about fake spiritualists who find out that there is more to the supernatural than they thought, to a murder mystery story with a (fake) spiritualist detective. Before we know where we are, we have gone from séances to gangsters and the Klu Klux Klan. And before the book ends it will morph again into something with much more action and a cast of entertaining circus-performer heroes.

Aside from the way in which the book completely fooled me into thinking it was a Graham Joyce novel in the first few chapters, there are a number of other things I particularly like about *The Girl in the Glass*. The first is the by-play between Schell, Diego and their strongman assistant, "Anthony Cleopatra". Schell is quite the amateur philosopher. He keeps butterflies, which gives him a convincingly eccentric Holmesian air

during the murder mystery portions of the book. Here he talks to Diego about the choices facing the young man in his future life.

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*"I wonder if," said Schell, "when a caterpillar becomes a butterfly" here he fanned open the deck "and gains the ability to fly, it remembers what it was like to be a caterpillar?"*

*"It's probably just happy to be free," I said.*

*"Or," said Schell, closing the deck, "perhaps all of its restless movement from blossom to blossom is merely an attempt to return to and regain its caterpillar nature."*

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Anthony, of course, is the official straight man, always ready with a practical comment on the bizarre ideas that Schell and Diego cook up. Or a complaint about being required to dress up as the ghost of some dear, departed grandmother yet again.

The other really good thing about the book is that it makes very relevant points about the effects of economic depression on society. At a time when politicians are once again stirring up hatred against immigrants and using racial stereotyping as an excuse for military action, it is good to have someone remind us that we have been here before.

When you do research for a novel set in an historical period you often find out rather more about the past than you learned in school. *The Girl in the Glass* includes some interesting lessons about the USA. Here's hoping that this time the world can learn from history.

*The Girl in the Glass* - Jeffrey Ford - Morrow - publisher's proof

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## Truth in Advertising

One of the best things about science fiction is the way that writers can construct narratives in which things are very much not what they seem. In *Maul* it takes readers a very long time to work out that the supposed near-future sections of the book are actually scenes from a computer game being played out by one of the characters. Tricia Sullivan's new novel, *Double Vision*, plays a similar but less subtle trick. It is obvious from early on that some of the goings on are very strange, but it still takes quite a while to uncover the truth of the matter.

We should begin, although the book does not, with Karen "Cookie" Orbach, a young black woman with a very unusual job. Cookie is a stereotypical fannish nerd. She still hangs out with her college friends and plays D&D at weekends. She's heavily into comfort reading, especially Anne McCaffrey. And she is even more heavily into comfort eating.

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*I'm sure that my fat is just me paying the price for being a Flier. It's like this: I'll be sitting around reading an Anne McCaffrey novel and she'll refer to Master Robinton spreading cheese on a piece of bread and I'm off to the Frigidaire with the book still in my hand. The first chapter of *The Hobbit* is responsible for at least 3,000 calories every time I read it.*

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So what is this about being a Flier? Well, Cookie works at a company called Dataplex. Her job is to act as "pilot" of a native flying creature called Gossamer on an alien planet where she serves as a scout for the human soldiers attempting to

establish a beachhead on this far-off world. The system works because Cookie is a psychic. She is able to link her mind across space to the alien world. And what a world it is:

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*Yet, by daylight when you have flown in close like Gossamer has, then the hairs and tendrils of the Grid become apparent. Its essential seediness asserts itself as you realize you are flying through a delicate life-pod like those blown from dandelions on Earth, only far more complex. You perceive that the identity codes of the Grid are sticking to you and Gossamer like motes of pollen, looking for a fertile place to replicate themselves and ultimately, by their persuasive powers, make you into something for the well.*

*Something like lunch.*

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This planet, then, is inhabited by one vast, interconnected lifeform. Everything is part of the Grid. All life comes from the well, and all life can be returned to the well to be reconfigured. Including invading humans. In the Grid dead soldiers don't stay dead for long. If the well gets hold of them then they come back as enemies. Nine of them for every one corpse.

But wait, all of the background cultural references for Cookie's story suggest that it is taking place in New Jersey in the late 1980s. Where does all this high-tech stuff about wars on alien worlds come from? Is Cookie really working for a secret government department that is hidden behind the facade of a simple market research software company, or is someone taking advantage of her, ahem, fertile imagination?

There's a lot going on here. To start with the story of the war against the grid is a really good SF story. Sullivan's evocation

of a planet-wide life form is excellent. And the story told about the soldiers is fascinating. A small squad has been sent deep into the Grid to rescue one Major Arla Gonzalez whose position has been overrun by the enemy. She may still be in possession of valuable artifacts looted from the planet that can help the boffins back home devise new weapons. But Captain Bonny Serge and her team are not exactly a well-functioning unit. At one extreme is Serge herself, a sort of female John Wayne determined to complete her mission or have everyone die trying. At the other is Lieutenant Joanne Klaski who never wanted to be a soldier and who believes idiotic things such as, "Nobody with any reason would choose war in place of mutual understanding." In a military environment, Klaski is a disaster waiting to happen.

Spotted something? Yes, the soldiers are all female. And this is Tricia Sullivan we are talking about here. This is the author who gave us *Maul*. Sullivan is one of the best (and the angriest) writers of feminist SF around today. (And if anyone from the Secret Feminist Cabal is reading this, it is time she was made a GoH at Wiscon.) So there's going to be some of that "women's issues" stuff in the book, isn't there? Too damn right there is.

I won't tell you how it works into the soldiers' tale, because that should remain a surprise, but Cookie herself is a fine subject for feminist study. She's black, she's overweight, and she's female. She'd be a natural victim even if she wasn't fannish as well. Having said that, she is trying to do something about it. She's trying to learn karate, both to help her lose weight and for self-defense. Except that the karate teacher doesn't think much of women students. He's called John Norman. Ouch!

Somehow or other all of this has to come together. Captain Serge has to find out what happened to Major Gonzalez. Cookie has to make a life for herself. And we need to find out what the Grid really means. What use has Dataplex really found for a young woman who sees things on the television that aren't really there?

Or are they?

*Double Vision* - Tricia Sullivan - Orbit - manuscript

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## Make Room! Make Room!

*"History is not linear, I'm afraid, but cyclic, for sustainability has never guided human affairs. And in banishing death, we simply condemn ourselves to observe the cycle from within. To live, as it were, in the filth we've excreted, with the sound of falling towers all around."*

Wenders Rodenbeck

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Thus spoke the Poet Laureate of the Queendom of Sol, and in doing so he neatly encapsulated much of the philosophy of Wil McCarthy's Queendom series. In *The Collapsium* McCarthy showed how the brilliant Bruno de Towaji created a paradise through the appliance of science, but things have been mostly downhill since then. In *Lost in Transmission* McCarthy showed how even the best science in the galaxy cannot necessarily defeat the cold hand of Economics. In his latest book, *To Crush the Moon*, he takes on the interface between science, politics and human stupidity.

We know from the prologue and epilogue to *Lost in Transmission* that Conrad Mursk

did indeed make it back safely to the Queendom from the failed Barnard colony. We also know that at some point after that the Queendom suffered economic and political collapse, and that the moon was collapsed in an entirely different way. *To Crush the Moon* tells how those events happened, and moves the plot forward from there.

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*"No one volunteers to die anymore. To make a bit of space."*

Bruno de Towaji

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When Conrad finally returns to the Queendom the logic of that society's own success has finally caught up with it. Blessed by immoridity, the inability to sicken and grow old, and by the ability to back themselves up in "fax" machines that can print new copies of themselves should they suffer accidents, the citizens of the Queendom have to be very careless indeed to actually succeed in dying. The inevitable result is a population explosion coupled with massive unemployment. With the colonies in other solar systems having mostly failed, and Bruno being as far as ever from inventing faster-than-light travel, only vast public works aimed at creating new living space can relieve the situation. Fortunately Bruno has a plan, and Conrad the Architect is just the person to carry it through.

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*In a crazy-ambitious kind of way, Conrad could see it made sense: the moon was too small and light to retain an atmosphere of its own. But the moon's gravitational attraction – like that of any object – dropped off with the square of the distance from its center, so that compressing the surface down to forty percent of its current elevation would sextuple*



*gravity's pull there. Yielding an Earth-normal gravity of 1.00 gee, and ensuring that the atmosphere was truly stable, even over geological spans of time. Talk about terraforming!*

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Because this is a Wil McCarthy novel, we not only have fantastical ideas like this tossed about, we also get an explanation as to how it can be done. McCarthy, after all, is the person who thought it would be cool to use miniature black holes as building materials (that's what collapsium is).

As we already know, Conrad succeeds in crushing the moon and making a new, inhabitable world from it. But time, economics and politics are against him. Vast numbers of refugees are arriving from the failed colonies. Some of them are not very civilized. They have strong religious beliefs and speak with a Southern US accent. They are not prepared to be reasonable about having living space allocated to them. Conrad is therefore required to turn his new world over to the people before he is sure that it is safe to do so, and even then it may be too late to avert disaster. It is the age-old battle between the engineering department, who don't want the product issued before it is ready, and the sales department who desperately need to get it out there to meet demand. Bruno knows the situation only too well.

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*"Has no engineer before you surrendered his treasures to a witless society? I do know the feeling, lad. How many deaths linger on my conscience, do you suppose, from the discovery of collapsium alone? When I finally get these wormholes working, do you think I expect there to be no accidents? No malice? All*

*systems are subject to failure, but the mere possibility should not shackle our striving."*

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And yet, sometimes through no fault of the engineers, things can go catastrophically wrong. And so the second part of the book returns to the post-collapse world of Lune. The murdered planets of Earth, Mars and Venus hang balefully in the sky, spitting light around the event horizons of the black holes that ate them. To the people of Lune, historical figures like Queen Tara, King Toji and Radmer the architect are all but mythical. Yet they live in a world full of marvels, the origins of which they cannot understand. Their pitiful attempts at technology seem unbelievably primitive to god-like immorbid survivors of the Queendom such as Conrad and Bruno.

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*The sword is not an air foil. In fact, it's not a real sword by any reasonable standard. It's made of opaque forged steel, for one thing, without so much as a diamond coating to stiffen it and hold its edge. And it doesn't vibrate or glow white-hot or anything, so if he's to cut anything with it he'll need to swing very hard indeed.*

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This being a Wil McCarthy novel, it contains equal measure of highly advanced science (all of which is expertly justified), wry humor, and considered philosophizing. The first educates us about the cutting edge science that McCarthy does for real. The second entertains us. But it is the third that has real relevance, especially in a time of apparent run-away technological progress. Miracles are possible. Disaster too. In fact, over a sufficient period of

time, both are inevitable. Looking back on it all, Bruno knows this to be true.

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*"I suppose, when you get right down to it, we were only as powerful as our tools. These were exceedingly complex, and when too many of them broke down all at once, we were hard-pressed to repair them. Until that time we'd always seen civilization as an upward climb; it didn't occur to us there was a down as well."*

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It hasn't occurred to many people in our world that civilization may be on the verge of taking a downturn either. Yet to most of those to whom it has occurred, the inevitable prediction is one of doom, disaster, and an end to all life on Earth (or at least the end of humanity, to be replaced by some more deserving species). Wil McCarthy, however, is both realistic about the dangers of technological progress, and optimistic about the essential cussedness and inventiveness of the human species. It may take centuries (after the fall of Rome it did) but we can haul ourselves back up again. I hope he's right.

*To Crush the Moon - Wil McCarthy - Bantam - mass market paperback*

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## The Miller's Tale - Of Booze, Broads and Bullets

By Stuart Carter

*Sin City* is a Quentin Tarantino film for people with Attention Deficit Disorder. You can see why he wanted to direct one of the scenes, as *Sin City* is a distillation of many of the elements of his films. If you thought *Kill Bill* 1 and 2 contained far too

much girlie 'talking about feelings' and not enough mayhem (not, perhaps, a completely unreasonable charge), then this is your film. Even if you didn't think that, this breathtaking film is still a treat.

In the beginning comics writer Frank Miller produced a number of ultra-violent noir comics based around the gritty and unpleasant Basin City. With the name shortened to Sin City because... well, because it's such a grim place; these stories followed insane criminals, crazed politicians, uncontrolled cops and beautiful, doomed prostitutes down a swirling drain of corruption, misery and death. Miller, having had his fingers burnt by the movie business already over *Robocop 2*, was understandably wary about letting anyone make a *Sin City* movie, until maverick auteur Robert Rodriguez showed him a demonstration of how he would make it, using CGI and green screen technology to produce a near frame-by-frame copy of Miller's books. Miller was hooked and Rodriguez has actually credited him as a co-director (along with 'guest director' Quentin Tarantino) simply because so many of the scenes in *Sin City* follow the look of the comics so precisely.

The film is split into roughly three and a half sections, following four of the graphic novels; *The Customer Is Always Right* is the first, a very short pre-credits prologue. The film then begins with events from *That Yellow Bastard*, where we catch up with Hartigan (Bruce Willis), that most doomed of all movie cop figures, the good cop about to retire. Following up one last case, that of a kidnapped 11-year-old girl at the mercy of the demented and sadistic son of a US Senator, Hartigan steps into a whole world of pain when he manages to stop the kidnapper but is then betrayed...

The film then segues into events from *The Hard Goodbye*. Marv (Mickey Rourke, under some heavy latex make-up) is a preposterously grizzled sociopathic ex-con who spends a night of passion with a beautiful dame – ahem, sorry – woman, Goldie. Marv is so profoundly affected by this that when he wakes to find her still next to him, but dead, and with the cops on their way he feels morally bound to track down whoever killed her and framed him, and does so in his own uniquely physical style.

Whereupon we shift viewpoints once again to follow icy wanted-murderer Dwight (Clive Owen) in *The Big Fat Kill*. Dwight is in the apartment of a girl, Shellie, who's trying to get rid of her drunk and unpleasant former boyfriend, Jackie Boy, who's at the door with his cronies. After humiliating Jackie and forcing him to leave, Dwight follows him into Old Town. Once there, Jackie begins to harass a young prostitute; but no-one – *no-one* – messes with any member of the fiercely protective sisterhood of Old Town... Cue violence, death, bodies and Quentin Tarantino's relatively restrained directorial bout. Oh, and the IRA, too. Honest.

We then return to wrap up events from *That Yellow Bastard* and *The Hard Goodbye*, and finish with a short vignette starring the character from *The Customer Is Always Right* (recently issued as part of the graphic novel, *Booze, Broads & Bullets*).

Stylistically, as every reviewer has said, *Sin City* is quite a remarkable piece of work, displaying its comic book roots at every turn with a very stark, surreal look, almost entirely drained of color and with the CGI backgrounds giving things just the right sense of unreality. It's always night, it's usually raining or snowing, and

colors appear only to illustrate a particular point – such as Goldie's beauty or the lines of a fast car. Otherwise the palette is dominated by black and white, just like the film's morality. The only time this doesn't quite work is when large amounts of blood are spilled: the blood is painted pure white, and tends to look more like an unfortunate spillage of two liters of white emulsion than someone's life ebbing away.

*Sin City's* plotting, such as it is, is very old-fashioned – I'm almost tempted to call it mythical – in that there's precious little characterization: Marv and Hartigan, certainly, are almost archetypal in their drives and stubbornness. They exist only to illustrate a quality or a group of qualities, rather than to become rounded human beings; their stories are deliberately uncomplicated, serving only to make a fairly narrow point. This timeless, myth-like quality is further enhanced by the mixture of period styles seen in the cars, the guns and the clothing; even the morality feels adrift in time: characters talk about 'not hitting dames' and some seem to have a sort of old-fashioned code of honor, and yet the level and form of violence on display here is anything but old-fashioned. It's not quite as viscerally disturbing as it could have been; there are many gross-out moments and a high body-count, but nothing quite like, say, *Seven*, or *Audition*. What makes *Sin City* different from these movies is the frequent cartoonish nature of the violence. Whilst the gore may seem all too real, many of the characters are essentially superheroic in ability, although they're presented as 'normal'. It's the kind of 'hyperviolence' seen in, for example, *Roadrunner* or *Bugs Bunny* cartoons, where characters are ridiculously strong and tough. For example Marv, who bounces

around like a rag doll, seemingly never feels pain, but appears with a veritable constellation of spotless sticking plasters as testament to his flesh and blood nature. I was also reminded, oddly, of John Waters' films, in that many of his films have the same loopy surreal sensibility as *Sin City* (although without the hacked-off limbs and the gore).

We have to address the N-word eventually, I suppose - noir - because if *Sin City* is to be labeled as a genre it might best be 'cartoon-noir' (noirtoon, anybody?). If Raymond Chandler was alive and writing today then he might well be doing something similar to *Sin City*, although I suspect he'd make a slightly better job of the dialogue. Not that it's ever bad, but it never quite rises to the heights I suspect Miller imagines it to. And it isn't helped by Clive Owen's acting either. Willis and Rourke, and just about everybody else, turn in perfectly acceptable performances, but Clive... well, perhaps it's his Englishness, but despite his giving a better visual performance than anybody else in the movie, he's badly let down by his voice, failing dismally in his bid to sound like a hard-boiled American killer.

*Sin City* is an assured tour de force: we don't learn anything, there is no grand denouement, and almost none of the characters come out of the film better off - if they're lucky then a certain kind of sacrificial justice may be achieved. All the bad guys just are Evil, with no redeeming qualities or rationale. But that's not the point - you're not invited to think, but rather to feel, to react to events onscreen. *Sin City* works as a piece of entertainment on a deeper level. Unlike most Hollywood action movies, where a threat to the status quo is met and overcome, in *Sin City* the main characters generally are the threat to

the status quo, a status quo that is itself thoroughly rotten. So there is no good guy - bad guy dichotomy, you have to simply choose the least-bad guy. And, hell, even Dirty Harry looks like a pussy compared to the least-bad guys in *Sin City*.

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*Sin City* (the movie)

Directed by Robert Rodriguez, Frank Miller and Quentin Tarantino

Written by Frank Miller, Robert Rodriguez

Starring: Bruce Willis, Jessica Alba, Mickey Rourke, Clive Owen, Powers Boothe, Rutger Hauer, Elijah Wood, Rosario Dawson, Benicio Del Toro, Jaime King, Devon Aoki, Brittany Murphy, Michael Madsen, et al.

Produced by Robert Rodriguez, Elizabeth Avellan and Frank Miller

Runtime: 126 min.

DVD - Dimension Home Video (Aug 16 release)

*Sin City* (graphic novels)

*The Hard Goodbye; The Big Fat Kill; That Yellow Bastard; Booze, Broads & Bullets* - Frank Miller - Dark Horse - paperback

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## Hugo Nominees: Best Short Story

By Anne KG Murphy

### Decisions

In "Decisions," by Michael Burstein, we find a man representing the whole human race as a group of incredibly powerful aliens who watch over things decide whether or not we'll be given access to the rest of the universe. This has been done before, but I tried to keep my mind open

to some new insight. Eventually we find out that mature aliens prefer not to have a young new species snidely threaten to conquer them all. Who knew? Though more engaging than Burstein's novella nominee "Time Ablaze," "Decisions" was still a disappointment.

"Decisions" by Michael A. Burstein (*Analog* 01-02/04)

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### Princess Imperfect

What does John Carter's journey to Barsoom really represent to the reader on Earth? Hope in the possibility that one's lover might survive earthly death, suggests Mike Resnick in "A Princess of Earth". In this stoic-voiced yet sentimental story, the narrator is visited by a seeming madman — a naked wanderer who comes in from the blizzard and claims to be the famed character John Carter. The narrator and his guest get into deep philosophical discussions, spurred by the recent loss of the host's beloved wife, and Carter asserts that since his own transcendent journeys always left behind a dead body on earth, other deaths might be beginnings rather than endings.

*"A realist would say, my princess is dead. A madman would say, John Carter found a way to overcome death, so why shouldn't she?"*

How, asks Carter, could someone as perfect as your princess not transcend those limitations? Which leads to the question of how to follow and find your princess. Naked in a blizzard, I guess, with great conviction. I may be disappointed in the reality of death, but I was also disappointed in Resnick's failure to carry me with him on this overly romantic supposition.

"A Princess of Earth" by Mike Resnick (*Asimov's* 12/04)

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### Shed Tolerance

Lately I have trouble reading things by Robert J. Sawyer because I have trouble accepting his premises, especially regarding things supposedly good people will do to each other, or even to themselves. In "Shed Skin", we are supposed to believe, some portion of society has agreed that with the transfer of a person to a robotic body, even though nothing has detectably changed about the biological person, or "skin", left behind in the transaction, the legal status of personhood may be transferred to the new robotic person and the shed skin will become a legal non-person, with no human rights, no freedom, and no property except that which is left to them by themselves before the transfer. In this story we watch the reaction of a shed skin to being stripped of his name and trapped in a sort of retirement community (called Paradise Valley, of course, where the food is plentiful and delicious, mostly of the people are very old, and you can't ever leave). Over time the skin gets quite upset about his situation, and this is somehow surprising to his new robotic self, who believes that his soul transferred to his new body so he *is* his self, not merely a copy of himself. Unexpected and dramatic things happen, and the robotic person supposedly demonstrates his humanity by his reaction to them. I guess you can probably tell by now that I felt completely let down by this story, right from the get-go. Unfortunately it didn't get better and I was all the more disappointed by the end.

"Shed Skin" by Robert J. Sawyer (*Analog* 01-02/04)

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## Best Christmas; Best Story

Oddly enough, for a story largely populated by vat-bred artificial intelligences that can transform their physical shape and size, "The Best Christmas Ever" by James Patrick Kelly manages to incorporate more believable moments of human interaction and emotion than any of the other stories on the nominee slate. I'm guessing at the artificial intelligences part — some of the back-story is only hinted at — but Kelly creates an interesting and bizarre landscape of authentic and misconstrued Americana maintained by creatures of varying complexity and intelligence who for their own reasons have become the keepers of the last man and woman on earth. How do you stay sane when the "people" around you can take the shape of anyone you ever knew or saw on TV, including Rudolph the red-nose reindeer? On the other hand, how do you adapt to keep an emotional and unpredictable museum piece alive when one of its primary needs is social interaction? These questions are deftly explored in what I found to be a slightly uneven but generally excellent story.

"The Best Christmas Ever" by James Patrick Kelly (*Sci Fiction*, scifi.com 5/04)

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## Further Travels with Resnick

Mike Resnick contemplated life after death in both of his short stories on the Hugo slate this year. In "Travels with My Cats" a relatively unknown author achieves an uncertain and unexplained sort of immortality through a reader (and fan) of her book by the same title. I liked this fantasy tale better than "A Princess of

Earth" but I felt it was a long lyrical lead-up to a rather frustrating ending. Resnick seems to build good lessons into his story, and then his protagonist discards them out of love and longing. If you are going to love someone, you ought to listen to them, even if you want something more.

"Travels with My Cats" by Mike Resnick (*Asimov's* 02/04)

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## Far Horizon

By Mario Guslandi

Andrew Hook's second collection of short fiction, *Beyond Each Blue Horizon*, (the first one, *The Virtual Menagerie*, was short-listed for the 2003 BFS awards) confirms the author's excellent qualities as a writer while offering a mixed bag of exciting fictional material and of minor, unimpressive stuff. For instance the opening story "Pardon Me, Boys" — genre-wise, as often with Hook's fiction, a totally unclassifiable piece — is a compelling, fascinating portrait of life's weirdness.

Another standout is the melancholy, captivating "Only The Lonely" where a lonesome husband ("*funny how being married makes one lonely*") gets in contact with the ghosts of lonely, suicidal girls.

Much less exciting are "Runaround" an inconsequential tale about an intriguing girl and a man's fascination for her, and "Kiosk B", a surrealistic piece, rather difficult to follow, where a man covers the city in search of a lost little girl, accompanied by an elusive young woman.

Sometimes Hook's stories take an enigmatic, almost hermetic turn as in "The

Honey Ward”, an offbeat tale featuring the unusual harem of a rich criminal, and in “50 Fountain Street”, where a woman lives her twin sister’s labor while trying to locate an abductor of newborn babies.

Some stories, like “Wake Jake” are real funny and quite entertaining – here we have two policemen at work, displaying their private idiosyncrasies – others are downright boring, such as “The Luxury of Sleep”, too full of neurological technicalities about the sleeping process. Both the title story “Beyond Each Blue Horizon” and “Unchained Melody” failed to elicit my interest. I’m not qualified to comment upon a couple of SF pieces (“Fen Shui” and “One Day All This Will Be Fields”).

Fortunately most of the remaining stories are very good indeed. “Amarillo Dreams” is a superb tale where a man’s trip to the hometown of a victim of a space tragedy ends up revealing the true nature of a love relationship.

“Dead Skin Cells”, the impeccable narrative of a burglary, shows Hook in wonderful control of his prose, endowed with a magnificent writing style. “The Pregnant Sky” is another winner, a wonderfully reticent tale with an undercurrent of sadness and desperation. “Vole Mountain”, which I already admired when it appeared, anonymously, in *Nemonymous 4*, is a little gem full of lyricism and “Alsiso” (from the notorious anthology of the same name) is a charming little noir making the reader longing for more. Finally “A Day in the Life of Victor Petroski” is a short piece displaying the ambiguity of a theatrical play by Luigi Pirandello with its representation of the mystery of a multiple existence.

Not everything is flawless in this collection, but you’ll find many reasons for eagerly awaiting Hook’s next book.

*Beyond Each Blue Horizon* - Andrew Hook -  
Crowswing Books - hardcover

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## Ever Onwards

When Tolkien wrote “the road goes ever on” I don’t suppose he had in mind the interminable deluge of fat fantasy novels that followed in his wake, but they do seem to go on for ever, and sometimes quite pointlessly. A classic example of this is the final volume of Cecilia Dart-Thornton’s Bitterbynde trilogy, *The Battle of Evernight*.

As fantasy writers go, Dart-Thornton is right up there with the best of them. She has a fine command of language and can tell a good tale when she wants to. Except a lot of the time she doesn’t seem to want to. Once of the best parts of the earlier books of the series was her evocation of Faerie. She seemed to be able to do with words what Brian Froud does with paint. She has an excellent touch for describing weird boggles and sprites, and an encyclopedic knowledge of British folklore. Here’s an example:

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*When the evenings drew in, humpbacked, small, boggle-like manikins with beady eyes and snouty, wicked faces would cavort among the flower stems, hurling abuse in high-pitched voices. They turned somersaults, rolling themselves into balls, and as they rolled along they were no longer manikins but hedgehogs which uncurled before snuffling out of sight.*

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This is all very well, except that *The Battle of Evernight* is full of this stuff. Pages and pages of it. For a good 150 pages at the start of the novel nothing happens at all except that our heroines wander through the wilderness having encounters with one sort of goblin or another. Doubtless all of these encounters are based on actual folk tales of one sort or another. But does any of this advance the plot, or help with character development? Not in the slightest. It is a sort of fantasy writer's equivalent of the SF writer who feels compelled to reproduce all of his research in the novel.

Further more, because much of this material is based on Celtic folklore, many of the faerie creatures speak in supposed Scots and Irish dialect. I have no idea whether it is accurate or not, but it reminds me horribly of the "Mummerset" dialect spoken by rustic English people in novels written by city folk. Even Dart-Thornton has trouble taking it seriously. At one point in the book she appears to get fed up with it and expresses her frustration through one of her characters.

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*"Oh, fither," snapped Viviana, recidivating into broken slingua. "Now we must content with yet another uncouthant half-beat that minces its vowels and otherwise butchers the Common Tongue."*

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Not that the upper class characters are any better. They pepper their speech with "thee" and "thou" and "fie" and "gramercie" and countless other supposedly cute words dredged from the dictionaries of days of yore. Thankfully they don't do it all the time, and lapse into fairly contemporary English on occasions. Indeed the book is very much a mixture,

and has oddly jarring features such as the use of modern military titles for soldiers in a medieval army. But mostly the modern stuff is a welcome relief from passages like this:

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*Two Faêran lords stood on either side of a door. Lofty was this portal, Winter-white, hinged and studded with lustrous metal. Indeed, it soared thrice the height of the Faêran knights.*

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Forsooth! I am much amazed. But quickly tired of such verbal gymnastics. Where, I ask, is the story?

Oh! You mean there is supposed to be a story? I'm sorry, no one told me. Wait, hang on, here, only some 200 pages in, the plot does actually advance a little!

And so it does, briefly. Although this is a sad and sorry plot compared to the previous two books in the series. In previous volumes, our heroine, who has been called Imrhien and Rohain but now goes by either Tahquil or Ashalind depending on where in the timeline we are, has done quite well for herself. She starts off as an ugly, mute drudge working in a castle's kitchens, and works her way up to being a beautiful noblewoman who wins the love of the King-Emperor. Eventually she finds out that she is the heroine of a thousand years old tale still in the unfolding and is the sworn enemy of an immortal prince of Faerie. *The Battle of Evernight* is supposedly the climax of that tale. And what does Imrhein/Rohain/Tahquil/Ashalind do?

Well, let's see. She wanders aimlessly around the wilderness with her two maids. She gets rescued lots from various unseelie nasties, usually by more friendly, slightly less unseelie wights. She gets



captured by the Dark Lord and imprisoned and threatened with rape and torture. And she spends an awful lot of time worrying that her royal paramour doesn't really love her after all and it was all a trick played with her poor, delicate heart, and that she will pine away with sorrow for evermore. In short, she spends around 360 pages being a victim.

And then there is a fight, and the Good Prince beats the Bad Prince and rescues the Fair Maiden. And then we have about 70 pages of telling how they do indeed get to live happily ever after.

There is so much flab in this book that you would think it had been existing on a diet of super-sized Big Macs for the last 20 years (presumably Ye Olde Venison and Gruel flavored Big Macs with genuine free plastic replica Disney medieval maids, knights and boggles). And the sad thing is that this is from someone who is a darn good writer. And also, of course, that people buy it.

I'm sorry, even the occasionally jokey asides, such as the references to the mysteriously alluring faerie food called Chocoluatl, are not enough to save this book. It is monumentally dull, and a very sad end to a series that started with so much promise.

*The Battle of Evernight* - Cecilia Dart-Thornton  
- Tor UK - trade paperback

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## Weaving the World

The reason why I haven't given up completely on fantasy trilogies is because there are people out there who believe in the genre and continue to put out interesting books rather than following the

formula. Sean Williams is one of those people. US readers will just have been introduced to his future noir work through *The Resurrected Man*, new out from Pyr. They may also know his space opera series, *Evergence*, co-written with Shame Dix. But these days Williams is writing fantasy. I've not seen his latest novel, but I have just concluded part three of his Book of the Change series, *The Storm Weaver and the Sand*.

The series follows the traditional fantasy trilogy structure. Book one, *The Stone Mage and the Sea*, introduces us to Williams' fantasy world. It is a far-future Australia divided into two rival cultures, one based inland in the desert and one based along the coast. Book two, *The Sky Warden and the Sun*, moves the characters along, tells us more about the weird remnants of a high-tech society that haunt the setting, and sets up a final encounter. And so to book three and – hallelujah – the world is not saved.

In fact, one of the best things about the entire series is that the world does not need saving. There is, in fact, no Dark Lord at all. That doesn't mean to say that there are no bad guys, but Williams has a much more subtle approach to evil than most fantasy writers. Sure, Sal, the young hero of the books, gets pursued by the Sky Wardens who are eager to harness his magical talents. And indeed Sal knows that the Sky Wardens were responsible for the deaths of his mother and stepfather. But as we find out in *The Storm Weaver and the Sand*, not everyone is as dastardly as they might seem, and even the nastiest of characters have good reasons for their actions.

Furthermore, while Sal does have awesome magical powers, he is not a Lost Prince. He's just a young boy with a lot to

learn about the world. In many ways if there is a Dark Lord in the series it is Sal himself. He is the one who can conjure deadly magical storms. And because he is young and inexperienced he is easily manipulated by those who would use his powers for their own ends. The Sky Wardens have a point when they say he is a menace who can't be left to wander the world on his own without proper training.

Ultimately the story of *The Book of the Change* is not about the battle between Good and Evil, it is about the battle between stability and change. Stability brings peace and prosperity, and of course safety. Change drives invention and evolution. Sal, if you like, is a forest fire that threatens to sweep unchecked through Williams' future Australian landscape. And quite possibly the spooky remnants of high tech cities with their ghostly and vengeful inhabitants are supposed to act as an example of a world that changed too rapidly.

Cleverly, Williams contrasts his wider sociological message with the much more personal one of adolescence. His heroes are teenagers, filled with boundless passion and confidence. Their enemies are older people – mainly family – who seek to rein them in and teach them a little wisdom, but who are heavy-handed and insensitive in the process.

The final element of this jigsaw is the Hidden Guiding Hand. For Sal, at a personal level, this is Fate. His young friend Tom has dreams that seem to foretell the future. Sal, being a teenager, wants to rebel against this, and his "wild talent" allows him to do so. As for the wider, sociological story, the guiding is not done by Adam Smith, but by a secret, Rosicrucian-like group called The Weavers. Or at least it might be. Both the

Stone Mages of the desert and the Sky Wardens of the coast fear that the Weavers are interfering in their societies and manipulating them. But no one will actually confess to knowing a Weaver. The one character who claims to be working for them is probably a dupe and has never met his supposed masters. Do the Weavers exist? If they do, are they some mysterious power hidden in the haunted cities? We don't get to find this out until the final chapters, and the answer is pleasingly vague up until that point.

I still think I prefer Williams as an SF writer than as a fantasist. His books have more atmosphere in that genre. He doesn't feel quite at home writing fantasy, or at least hasn't quite worked out the prose tricks to get the feel that he wants. On the other hand, because he's possessed of plenty of initiative and imagination he's still producing much better fantasy than a lot of the competition. I hope Pyr picks this series up at some point.

*The Storm Weaver and the Sand* – Sean Williams  
– Voyager – trade paperback

This book is not available from Amazon but may be purchased online from Dymocks: [http://www.dymocks.com.au/ContentDynamic/Full\\_Details.asp?ISBN=0732269997](http://www.dymocks.com.au/ContentDynamic/Full_Details.asp?ISBN=0732269997)

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## City Lights

One of the nice things about running *Emerald City* is that I get to find out about all sorts of interesting new books. Rather too many in some cases. I have a pile of books I would love to read stacked up beside my desk making me feel guilty. But some of them I do get round to, and one of those is *Grief* by Ed Lark.

I first heard of the book from British author, Steve Redwood, who has a book out from the same publisher. Reverb is a new British small press with a very interesting style and a passion for doing interesting books. They are not a genre publisher, and *Grief* could easily find its way onto mainstream shelves in bookstores. But it also fits very nicely into the sort of surrealist fantasy category championed by the likes of Jeff Vandermeer, Robert Freeman Wexler and K.J. Bishop.

In essence, *Grief* is a parable about the soul-destroying nature of modern city living. It is not so much a political argument as simply an expression of how well paid city folk can lose touch with the world.

The central character, Juan, has left his home to seek his fortune in The City. Although he arrives at Waterloo station, it is clear that the city is a pan-European amalgam of urban environments. On arrival, Juan is invited to join the Crystal Realm – he becomes a yuppie. Naturally he gets a job as a commodity trader:

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*"We asked ourselves what was left in abundance that hadn't been colonized. We came up with three latent niches, all woefully under-marketed: unemployment, schizophrenia and impotence. And we've just opened up some innovative flanks in the incontinence market. We deal in stalkverts a lot too, but mainly we pass things around and time things."*

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As Juan rises up through city hierarchy he finds that his fellow Crystals seem more and more shallow and self-obsessed. They change their clothes several times a day to keep up with fashion, they have frequent

plastic surgery, and they are incapable of understanding the lives of ordinary people (whom they call "Extras" because they are only there to provide scenery).

Cut with Juan's story are chapters about a group of Harlequins who are traveling through a desert towards The City to try to rescue him. There are four in total. The leader, Alberto, and his girlfriend, Sansu, are relatively normal, but Louis the philosopher and Gargantua the giant are great fun.

Louis is an archetypal left wing thinker. In an earlier age he would have been a hard line Protestant, but in our times his conception of Evil is bound up with capital and oppression of the workers. He is forever lecturing the others on the wickedness of the world, and getting depressed at how little progress is being made towards Revolution. Gargantua, on the other hand, firmly believes in making the world a better place by having fun:

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*"No, I put it to you that the world is splendid and full of joy. People eat, they make love, babies are born. There is kissing and music. People drink and they piss. It is simple. We have our bodies, they are made for pleasure. To each is available happiness; all seek and sin and learn. That is the condition of the world, my stupid, morbid friend."*

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The friendly rivalry between Louis and Gargantua is one of the highlights of the book.

Of course what happens in the book is fairly predictable, and there are times when the parable seems a little forced, but *Grief* is an enjoyable if slightly strange work. It is also blessedly short, barely over the 40,000-word limit that awards use to define a novel. In his Acknowledgments

Lark lists Primo Levi, Rabelais and Voltaire amongst his influences. The book reminded me a lot of Angela Carter. I have no idea whether Lark wants to be recognised as part of the SF&F community, but I'd be very happy to see more of his work.

Grief - Ed Lark - Reverb - publisher's proof

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## The World Made New

When I cross the Atlantic, in either direction, there is always a large pile of books waiting for me. What to read first? This time there was no question: the nice people at Prime had sent me *Yume No Hon: The Book of Dreams*, the new novel by Catherynne M. Valente.

If you have read *The Labyrinth*, you'll know pretty much what to expect. *The Book of Dreams* is in a similar style: gorgeous, liquid prose in very short chapters, fabulous mythic imagery. For the most part you read Valente for the way that the words are put together, not for the story. But then again, as you read, a story emerges.

We are in medieval Japan. Bandits attack a village. A young girl called Ayako manages to hide from them and, when they have gone, flees into the mountains. She finds an old, abandoned pagoda and makes it her home. Decades later, when the village is re-settled, children are sent once a year to make offerings to the ghost of the mountain. But after so long alone, Ayako is quite mad. She has spent her life talking to imaginary people, and no longer knows what is real and what is not. And in her dreaming she has somehow made contact with the universe, and perhaps

become more real than the villagers who fear and revere her.

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*She is embodied and unbodied, the Saturnine sliver of me that haunts the corners of my elbows, eyelids, and sits fecund in her smoke-lodge creating universes from pine needles. That swallows the world whole like a golden-bellied snake and excretes mythos like sweat from her crystal-scaled skin.*

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The dreams that live in Ayako's mind (and which frequently despise her ancient and decrepit state) are the stuff of myth from what Karen Armstrong might describe as the Time of Discovery of Agriculture. The dreams have names like Sphinx and Isis and Pele and Tiamat, though Ayako knows none of those names. They are obsessed with the endless cycle of death, eating and rebirth. They are, of course, Woman, because only Woman is part of that cycle. Man, though he may have the strength and endurance of the Mountain, is but a tool along the way. Osiris, bless him, does not have a happy end.

All of which is revealed, with a little quantum physics thrown in because it happens to suit the philosophy, as Ayako grows old and dies, and the cycle begins anew.

It took me a while to get into this one, but that may have been because I was fogged with jet lag. Valente does require concentration to read. And of course much of what I have said above is inferred from the imagery (and my own reading in comparative mythology) and may not be obvious to a reader of the book. But as with *The Labyrinth*, the book works. It is short, it is intense, and when you get to the end you are left with the strange

feeling that you have somehow read something that is True.

*Yume No Hon: The Book of Dreams* – Catherynne M. Valente – Wildside – publisher’s proof

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## A Load of Bull

You don’t often see chapbook anthologies reviewed here, but when offered a bunch of stories centered around Greek myth and including authors such as Rhys Hughes and Catherynne M. Valente I find it hard to say no. In any case, it is in a good case. *The Minotaur in Pamplona*, Books I and II, are being sold in aid of ADDA, a Spanish charity that campaigns against bullfighting. I don’t agree with all of Neil Ayes editorial in Book I, but bullfighting is certainly something that is worth campaigning against.

The title story is a tale of the Minotaur that links his labyrinth to the notorious “bull run” through the narrow streets of Pamplona. The story has been online for some time, so you can go read it for free and treat it as a taster for the rest of the material.<

[http://www.ookami.co.uk/html/the\\_minotaur\\_in\\_pamplona.html](http://www.ookami.co.uk/html/the_minotaur_in_pamplona.html)>

My favorite story of the set is “Ascent is Not Allowed” by Catherynne M. Valente. This is a long, angry rant issued by the Furies (all three of them) against their hated enemy, Athena. You can see their point. She is a virgin goddess, born of Zeus rather than woman, though only because the greedy old rake ate her mother when little Athena was still in the womb. The Furies are genuine, blood-spattered goddesses of a type that we Celts instantly recognize (there are three

of them, after all), who have been exiled and dishonored by cool, rational Athens. The Furies don’t think much of Euripides either. Or Aeschylus for that matter. You can see why, if you know their plays.

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*But this, of course, is the logic of Olympus: what is little Iphigenia worth, what is the worth of the mole on her cheek, the way her toes curved into the pad of her foot, next to the smell of freshly killed Trojans? Did she not have arms as white as Helen’s? And what is black-eyed Clytemnestra worth next to the alpha-cock of Agamemnon?*

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You tell ‘em, ladies! (And they do. It is, after all, their job.)

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*All we had was revenge. [...] Zeus raped the Greek girls like they were going extinct, and left each one with a bellyful of haloed godhead they couldn’t feed. They were ours, those poor cow-wives, they were our city to defend, a wide Assembly of the raped, beaten, loathed, abandoned, murdered.*

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But don’t think that these chapbooks are nothing but a couple of my favorite writers. There is, for example, a poem by Brian Aldiss. There is a lovely little tale about the Phoenix by Andrew Hook. Steve Redwood contributes a tale than continues the feud between Circe and Scylla down to the present day. And there are several other fine stories too. And some nice illustrations. I’ve read whole anthologies with fewer good stories in than these two little chapbooks.

*The Minotaur in Pamplona Books I & II* – Neil Ayres (ed.) – D-Press – chapbooks

These books are not available from Amazon but may be purchased online from Project Pulp:

[http://projectpulp.com/search\\_results.asp?searchstring=Minotaur%20in%20Pamplona,%20The](http://projectpulp.com/search_results.asp?searchstring=Minotaur%20in%20Pamplona,%20The)

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## Mirror, Mirror...

...on the wall, who is the faeriest of them all?

Marketing is a fascinating subject. Why, you might ask, would anyone want to publish the complete script of a movie long before it is first screened? Surely once people know the story they don't need to see the film? But then again, if that were true, why do people go to see a film again and again, even when they know all of the dialog by heart? Besides, this is not just any movie we are talking about: this is *Mirrormask*. Which means we are not talking just a script, we are talking about an entire Dave McKean storyboard. Hundreds of sketches. And of course a smattering of color prints to leave the reader gasping with delight and desperate to catch that film as soon as it hits the cinemas.

This is, I think, a book mainly for hard core fans. It is a beautiful artifact, all glossy pages, coffee table sized with a dust jacket you'll want to frame and put on your wall. At \$35 it is not exactly cheap, but it is considerably larger and better produced than novels you would pay \$25 for, so we shouldn't complain.

The story is predictably Gaimanesque. It has a teenage girl whose family runs a circus. It has good faeries and bad faeries. And our heroine has to do brave things in order to defeat the baddies, help her

family, and learn a little about life. It will doubtless tug at the heartstrings the way *Coraline* did, though I haven't read the script itself that closely because I do want to be surprised by the movie.

Yet while the book will doubtless sell in large numbers to Gaiman's many fans, it is the art that sets it apart. The storyboard, of course, is all rough sketches. But the color plates, ah! Many of them are stills from the shooting of the movie, showing a few actors lounging around. But a few show some of the special effects, and the more spectacular costumes. If the rest of the movie is this beautiful then I'm going to be very keen to see it. And from the look of the trailers available at <http://www.sonypictures.com/movies/mirrormask/> it really is all going to be that good. And the music is fabulous too.

Finally the book gives some insight into the production of the movie, from an appendix containing early exchanges between Gaiman and McKean, to an introduction by Gaiman which says everything that needs to be said about modern movie-making. Gaiman is explaining how McKean had to coach him in the art of making movies on a budget:

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*"I want to do a scene in Helena's school," I'd say.*

*"Can't do it," Dave would explain. "Too expensive. We'd need the class, and a teacher and kids as extras," and then, seeing my face fall, he'd add, "but we can make the world crumple up like a piece of paper, if you want. That won't cost anything."*

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Now that's what I call movie magic.

*Mirrormask: the illustrated film script* – Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean – Morrow – hardcover

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## Interview: Paul Lenz of Reverb

Reverb is a relatively new British small press whose first four titles were launched in May 2005. The company has a slogan of “getting writers read” and promises to publish “the best of contemporary literary fiction.” *Grief*, by Ed Lark, reviewed elsewhere in this issue, is one of their titles. The company was founded by Paul Lenz and Andrew Chapman. Here Paul gives some insight into Reverb’s activities.

**Cheryl:** What made you decide to launch yourself into the wild and wonderful world of publishing?

**Paul:** Essentially frustration – over the last 10 or 15 years there has been increasing homogenization in publishing, with independents being engulfed by multinational conglomerates. As a result it seems that the majority of books that get published – and get promoted – are chosen more on their ability to fit a marketing plan rather than the originality or quality of the writing. We had been looking at starting a publishing related business for many years but had trouble deciding on an approach to the market. Then it struck us; as readers we wanted to go into bookshops and see more than just a sea of *Da Vinci Code* clones – so why not publish genuinely creative literary fiction, books that we would want to read?

**Cheryl:** Your web site <<http://www.readreverb.com/>> has a very dynamic and stylish feel to it: almost

publishing as performance art rather than as a business. And you talk about wanting to be seen as analogous to an independent record label. What particularly attracts you about the music business as a model?

**Paul:** In a word, passion – we long to see some books treated in the media with the same enthusiasm and vitality that music is. Readers are often very passionate about books – and whilst this strength of feeling is increasingly expressed online, the offline portrayal of books and reading is still very dry. We want people to evangelise about new authors in the same way that they evangelize about new bands – exchange sample chapters in the same way that they would exchange MP3s. In a similar vein, I know people who will buy albums by bands they have never heard of because they come from a label they like – for instance 4AD. Our aim is that people consider books from Reverb in the same way – that having read a couple and liked them they trust the publisher enough to try something else.

**Cheryl:** You are clearly not a “genre” publisher, but your submission guidelines say that you want books that are “aware of contemporary popular culture”. I’d argue that means you must publish some books with science-fictional themes because rapidly developing technology is so much part of our lives. Would you agree?

**Paul:** Absolutely, indeed two of our first four books – *Who Needs Cleopatra?* by Steve Redwood and *Grief*, by Ed Lark could both be categorized as SF books, and we’re certainly receptive to books that contain these themes. One thing that we don’t do is explicitly describe the books as being SF however. To our minds there is something of a categorization fascism in some bookshops, and that if you pitch a

book as being SF rather than mainstream it is less likely to be taken seriously and deemed to be not 'proper' fiction – and so ignored (though we do pitch the books as SF to specialist book shops). To be honest, it gets our goat a bit that an author like Margaret Atwood can have a totally SF book like *Oryx and Crake* classed as 'literary' fiction and entered for the Booker whereas, say, Philip K Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* is found buried in the SF section (if found at all!).

**Cheryl:** I see you already have distributors lined up. How difficult was it, as a new company, persuading someone to take your books?

**Paul:** Using POD means that you automatically get listed with the wholesalers – and through them Amazon – so this part was fairly straightforward. The biggest challenge is getting the shops to stock our books, and this is the stage we are at now – pitching to stores and trying to create media interest around the books and authors. The immediate reaction of some of the chains was 'we don't deal with POD' on the grounds that there was no system for returns – this was something we were prepared for and we have a system in place for receiving returns so we overcame the objections – however it does mean that we take more of a financial risk.

**Cheryl:** How has using Print-on-Demand affected your business strategy?

**Paul:** POD is something of a double-edged sword – it gives you an easy distribution system without a massive initial investment in stock, however the margins for the publisher are wafer thin – indeed our margin per book (from which we have to fund all of our title set-up, marketing and business expenses) is on average less than the author royalty.

Strategically it means that we only publish titles that we are evangelical about – books that we believe not only could be very popular, but books that we believe **should** be very popular – books that deserve to be read.

**Cheryl:** I see that you are deliberately courting independent booksellers, who are very much a dying breed these days. In the SF field we rely heavily on independents for their specialist knowledge of the genre. What do they bring to a literary fiction publisher?

**Paul:** My introduction to the book trade was through working in an independent bookshop in the late eighties and early nineties – and like many others at that time, it went bust. The very best independents offer a breadth of choice and knowledge about books that the chains simply can't compete with. Alas all too many seem to focus heavily on bestsellers – and are out-competed on price by the chains and supermarkets. Hopefully we will see increasing specialization and focus in the near future.

**Cheryl:** Your web site talks about viewing writers as, "talent to be nurtured rather than a commodity to be exploited." Can you elaborate on some of the ways you intend to support your writers?

**Paul:** A number of ways – we try and offer constructive criticism on all of the manuscripts that we receive whether we are interested in pursuing things further or not. We offer (fairly opinionated!) pragmatic advice to writers on our site based on our experience of editing, working with authors and receiving submissions. In the longer term we will be running free workshops for writers and developing the writer's resource side of the site.



**Cheryl:** Are you really going to respond to all submissions within seven days?

**Paul:** That's certainly our aim – and if we find ourselves slipping then we'll keep the authors updated and tweak the text on the site – we've had three submissions in last week and we've responded to them all already.

**Cheryl:** Of course you do have some interesting submission guidelines. I rather like the idea of requiring writers to tell their story in exactly 100 words. What does that exercise tell you about a writer?

**Paul:** Firstly it is an exercise in style – we are very much hoping for a real summary of the story in 'mini saga' vein – if a writer can rise to this challenge creatively it bodes well. It also tells us how eager the writer is to work for publication – no manuscript we receive is perfect, and some that we are interested in publishing require dozens or even hundreds of hours of additional work on them as part of the editing process. We are looking for writers who are willing to work and prepared to put the time in. If, as many people haven't, they aren't prepared to spend an evening putting together the summary then we have to wonder how hard they will work on any re-writing required.

**Cheryl:** Your newsletter promises to cover all writers, not just the ones that you publish. What sort of articles can readers expect to see?

**Paul:** In our first issue we have a feature on Neal Stephenson – which you can see here:

<http://www.readreverb.com/index.php?s=content&p=stephenson>.

**Paul:** And also a regular column by one of our authors, Ed Lark – which you can see here:

<http://www.readreverb.com/index.php?s=content&p=lark1>.

**Paul:** Every issue will have a comprehensive author review plus individual book reviews across all genera.

**Cheryl:** You have three other titles out besides *Grief*. Would you like to say a little about each of them?

**Paul:** *Light* by Craig Taylor is a poignant story of love and loss – we think of it as an English *Great Gatsby*; *The Group* by Ravinder Chahal is a tale of media manipulation that is best described as *Fight Club* meets Dave Gorman and Steve Redwood's *Who Needs Cleopatra?* does for history what Jasper Fforde did for literature – though with more sex and violence.

**Cheryl:** Yours is the first publisher web site I have seen that actually knows what an RSS feed is and how to use one. Is the Internet going to form an important part of your marketing strategy?

**Paul:** The Internet is very important to our marketing strategy and we have a lot of experience in viral marketing. In the run up to the general election we launched the [whoshouldyouvote.com](http://whoshouldyouvote.com) site which was visited by more than 875,000 people in three weeks – spreading almost completely virally, initially through the blogosphere. We're keen to work in a similar way to promote reverb and we've got some projects underway that we hope to tell you about more soon! All of our first chapters are available on line, and we are building an archive of our reviews and articles to build an online resource for readers.

**Cheryl:** You say that you intend to publish 50 volumes in your first five years. What else do you hope Reverb to have achieved by that time?

**Paul:** I hope that it will have helped some new writers find genuine success – even if it is through other publishers with their later books – and it would be nice if it was profitable!

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## Out of Synch

Good grief, July's issue lists don't contain any books that I've already reviewed, with the exception of *Olympos* which just sneaks into the column because the US release is a month after the UK one.

*Olympos* – Dan Simmons – Eos – hardcover

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## Miscellany

### Ditmar Winners

We have some winners reported from the Australian NatCon in Hobart:

**Best Novel:** *The Crooked Letter*, Sean Williams (HarperCollins Australia);

**Best Collected Work:** *Black Juice*, Margo Lanagan (Allen & Unwin Australia);

**Best Novella/Novelette:** "The Last Days of Kali Yuga", Paul Haines (*NFG Magazine*, August 2004);

**Best Short Story:** "Singing My Sister Down", Margo Lanagan (*Black Juice*);

**Best Professional Artwork:** Kerri Valkova for the cover to *The Black Crusade* (Chimaera Publications);

**Best Professional Achievement:** Clarion South committee;

**Fan Achievement:** Conflux convention committee;

**Fan Artist:** Sarah Xu;

**Fanzine:** *The Bullshead*, ed Edwina Harvey & Ted Scribner;

**Fan Writer:** Bruce Gillespie;

**Best New Talent:** Paul Haines.

The organizers also presented two further awards, not Ditmars, at the ceremony.

**William Atheling Jnr Award for Criticism or Review:** (tie) Robert Hood, for his review of *Weight of Water* at HoodReviews; and Jason Nahrung for "Why are Publishers Afraid of Horror" (BAM, Courier Mail, 20 March 2004).

**The Peter McNamara Achievement Award:** Jonathan Strahan

Lots of good stuff there. Particular congratulations to Kerri who I haven't seen in ages.

I note also that Margo Lanagan's *Black Juice*, which has now won an Aurealis Award and two Ditmars, was published in the US by Eos earlier this year. I haven't read it, but lots of people whose opinions I respect are very enthusiastic about it.

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### Sunburst Nominees

The nominees for this year's Sunburst Award (a judged award for books by Canadians) are as follows:

*The Last Light of the Sun*, Guy Gavriel Kay (Viking); *The Memory Artists*, Jeffrey Moore (Viking); *Airborn*, Kenneth Oppel (HarperCollins); *Air*, Geoff Ryman (St. Martin's); *The Logogryph*, Thomas Wharton (Gasperau Press).

There are two books on that list that I have been enthusing about mightily for months.

Either would make a very worthy winner. But there are also three books I have not even heard of. Guess I'd better go look for them.

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### **Aldiss Honored**

Brian Aldiss has been made an OBE in the latest Queen's Birthday Honours List.

Brian will be 80 a few days after Worldcon. Doubtless something special will be planned.

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### **Politics goes Posthuman**

I spent much of yesterday at a meeting in San Francisco sponsored by the Cato Institute and *The Economist*. I am, of course, familiar with the Cato Institute from my "real" job as an energy economist. They are the loony extremist wing of the free market movement and generally argue that no market should have any regulation, ever. It was interesting to actually meet a bunch of Cato Institute supporters. As I suspected, they tended to be very rich, deeply conservative, and strongly interested in protecting what they see to be important American freedoms, such as the freedom to take what you want, the freedom to exploit and oppress others, and the freedom to kill anyone who gets in your way. There are people like that, even in San Francisco. A lot of them seemed to be in real estate.

Thankfully the speakers at the meeting were rather more interesting. Gene Burns, regardless of his politics, is very smart and a great speaker. And, just like Greenpeace, the Cato Institute does have its place in the world. I was greatly heartened to learn that Jim Harper, Cato's

Director of IT Policy Studies, is on the Homeland Security data privacy committee. No one else is likely to oppose what Homeland Security is trying to do quite so vociferously.

But the person I went to listen to was a journalist, Joel Garreau of the *Washington Post*. Some of you may already be familiar with Garreau's earlier book, *The Nine Nations of North America*. I know Kevin is a big fan of that book. Garreau's latest book, *Radical Evolution*, takes the interesting stance that we now have the necessary technology to become posthuman, and that the issues that raises, for so long only the provenance of science fiction novels, should now enter the political sphere.

Like other journalists, Garreau tends to be a little sloppy with his terminology. There is a real difference between jacking into a computer and using the Internet to cause action at a distance, and actual telepathy. On the other hand, he is quite right that scientists at DARPA have successfully trained a monkey to play computer games using a direct neural interface. The world of *Neuromancer* is a reality. So is cloning. The ability of have our kids genetically modified to make them more beautiful and cleverer is not far away. And Garreau, like many others, has seen the exponential curve of technological development and taken in the lessons.

The conclusion of all this is exactly the same point that David Brin made at the Swissnex symposium: the politics of the future will not be between Left and Right, between Christian and Muslim, or any other of our existing distinctions. They will be between those who are willing to embrace technology and let it change what it means to be human, and those who, like Prince Charles, wish to prevent such developments.

I spoke to Garreau afterwards and he confessed that he'd not read a lot of SF as research for the book. He concentrated on finding out what is actually feasible now. Nevertheless, he can quote Arthur C. Clarke with the best of us. And we agreed on the point that if the pro-technology movement is to succeed then we cannot allow the debate to be dominated by people like Michael Crichton who specialize in taking extremely pessimistic views of developments and have their heroes save the world from evil science.

Look out for a review of *Radical Evolution* in the July issue of *Emerald City*.

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### Indian SF Update

I get a lot of people writing to me about new SF books, but it isn't very often that such a message comes from India. The book in question is *Tales of the Future*, a collection of short stories by Professor Jayant Narlikar. Publisher Arun Sinha of Witness Books <[www.witnessbooks.in](http://www.witnessbooks.in)> has this to say:

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*Narlikar is India's greatest scientist-writer. This is the first anthology of his science fiction stories to appear in English. SF is an emerging genre in India, and there are but a few books in English. Narlikar relates his work to the great Indian epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata, which he feels used concepts such as time dilatation, spatial contraction, transmission at great speed, which are used by today's SF. He also writes SF with a social purpose - that is he uses it to campaign against astrology and miracle makers.*

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There is an interview with Professor Narlikar, conducted by Shital Chauhan of The Hindu, on the Witness web site

<<http://www.witnessbooks.in/readingroom/narlikarinterview.html>>. It reveals that Narlikar was a student and friend of the British astrophysicist and SF writer, Sir Fred Hoyle. The interview throws some additional light on Narlikar's views on astrology and the like. I suspect he'd be quite disappointed at how superstitious people in the West really are. There is also some background on the history of SF in India and the interesting revelation that Satyajit Ray has written SF.

Witness Books are looking for ways to make Narlikar's work better known in the West. If there are booksellers reading this who are interested in stocking the book, or small presses who might want to negotiate a reprint deal, let me know and I'll put you in touch with Mr. Sinha.

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### International Horror Guild Awards

The nominees for the 11th Annual International Horror Guild Awards have been announced. The finalists for Novel are:

Ramsey Campbell - *The Overnight* (PS Publishing, UK); Elizabeth Hand - *Mortal Love* (William Morrow); James Hynes - *The Kings of Infinite Space* (St. Martin's Press); Lucius Shepard - *A Handbook Of American Prayer* (Thunder's Mouth Press); Peter Straub - *in the night room* (Random House, US; Harper Collins, UK).

Other *Emerald City* reviewed works include:

- Susanna Clarke nominated in First Novel for *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell*  
- Leena Krohn (*Tainaron*) and Lucius Shepard (*Viator*) nominated in Long Fiction  
- Holly Phillips ("In the Palace of Repose") nominated in Short Fiction

- Alan Clark (*The Paint in my Blood*) and D.M. Mitchell (*A Serious Life*) in Non-Fiction

- Andy Cox (*The Third Alternative*) in Periodical.

Jeff Vandermeer has the full lists <<http://vanderworld.blogspot.com/2005/06/international-horror-guild-award.html>>. The winners will be announced at World Fantasy Con.

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## DUFF Report

I received a postcard from Joe Siclari who is obviously enjoying his time in Australia. Good to see the Fan Fund system working.

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## Footnote

Phew! Given the amount of work Kevin and I are being expected to get through for Worldcon, not to mention the extra stuff poor Kevin has to do on Westercon and NASFiC, I'm amazed we got this issue out. Next month should be less frantic as it will be too late to do most Worldcon type things. But we still have the pre-Worldcon issue of *Emerald City* to produce, which will be full of books from Scottish-resident persons. We will have Ken MacLeod, Charles Stross, Hal Duncan, Gary Gibson, Debbie Miller Andrew Wilson, Mike Cobley and Alasdair Gray. Also a Welsh small press interview, and hopefully a few of the books I was supposed to review this issue and didn't have time for.

Ciao,

Love 'n' hugs,

Cheryl