

EMERALD CITY #119

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Introduction

As always around this time of year, books are being issued to coincide with Worldcon. And this year is a little special because most of these books are by British authors, many of whom will be unknown to the American fans visiting Glasgow. Indeed, an awful lot of these books are by people who live in or near Glasgow. This issue reviews many of them.

There are big names, such as Charlie Stross and Ken MacLeod. There are well-established British names who have not yet made it across the Pond, such as Mike Cobby and Debbie Miller. And there are newer writers such as Gary Gibson and Hal Duncan. Many of these people, and a lot more besides, are showcased in the Scottish Writers anthology, *Nova Scotia*. There is a wealth of Scottish-originated fiction here for visitors to Glasgow to seek out. Enjoy!

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Girl Meets World

Learning the World is the title of the new novel from Ken MacLeod. It is also the title of a “biolog” by a fourteen year-old girl called Atomic Discourse Gale. As you might guess from her name, she’s not from around here. Indeed, she’s light years and millennia away on a generation ship called *Sunliner*, speeding towards Destiny.

Destiny is the name of the star system into which *Sunliner* is currently decelerating. It is also the destiny for Atomic and thousands more young people just like her, born and bred on the ship with the intention that they will become the inhabitants of a new world. The second planet in the Destiny system looks very much capable of supporting life. What Atomic and her fellow passengers don’t know, however, is that it already is.

Supporting life.

Meanwhile Darwin the astronomer and his physicist friend, Orro, have a mystery to solve. Darwin has discovered what appears to be a new comet, but it is behaving strangely, appearing to be slowing down as it approaches the Sun. He asks Orro for help with the orbital mathematics, but the physicist is just as puzzled. Comets do not slow down. Not unless there is something on them to make them slow down. And that, of course, is the stuff of “engineering tales”.

“Why has more not been made of this?” Orro almost shouted. “Life around the stars would

be the most significant finding of astronomy!”

Darvin thought about it, chewing on the strip. “Hmm,” he said. “I suppose because it’s all so wretched hypothetical, old chap, and so embarrassing to seem to confirm the myths of religion and the ... sensationalism of the vulgar.”

Darvin and Orro, of course, refer to themselves as “men” in their own language. But it soon becomes obvious to the reader that there is something different about them. Perhaps it is their fur-covered bodies, their leathery wings, or their habit of hanging upside down and getting drunk on fermented fruit.

Nevertheless, they are intelligent people – university professors no less. They are proud of their discovery of the mysterious comet, or whatever it is, and they publish details. Not long thereafter two agents from the Sight, the royal intelligence agency, come to call.

Learning the World is, in the fine tradition of *The Mote in God’s Eye* and *A Deepness in the Sky*, a first contact story told simultaneously from the point of view of both species: in this case the earthlings and the bat people of Ground (as they call their home world). It addresses the well-worn questions of how you deal with such a situation, and indeed what it means to discover that you are not alone in the universe. As Atomic put it:

Yesterday we were in a universe that included us and lots of cool stuff: stars, galaxies, plasmas, cometary bodies, planets, and cows and giraffes and AIs and blue-green algae and lichen and micro-organisms.

Today we are in a universe that contains us and lots of cool stuff and alien space bats.

Of course she quickly comes to the conclusion that the space bats are disgusting. Atomic is fourteen; she thinks almost everyone other than herself is disgusting. But then again, they do apparently keep slaves. They might even fight wars. They eat animals. Why the females even carry fetuses inside them and give birth. Disgusting.

What is worse, the space bats are occupying the very planet that the young people of the *Sunliner* have been raised to believe was theirs.

This being a Ken MacLeod book, there is a point to be made. MacLeod has clearly been thinking about the Prime Directive and has some argument with one of its basic assumptions. I'm not going to tell you which assumption, because that would be a massive spoiler. Read the book and you'll find out.

Along the way, *Leaning the World* is entertaining, easy to read and often funny. It does, of course, include political conflict, and it features an economic war that seems to involve just a little too much hand waving for me to be comfortable with it. Overall, however, this is a very enjoyable book, nicely thought provoking, and blessedly short. I'm sure it will do well.

Learning the World - Ken MacLeod - Orbit - hardcover

Talking Lobsters in Space

Charlie Stross is working hard on Hugo nominations. This year he became one of the very few people to achieve three

fiction nominations in the same year. Next year he will probably get a nomination in Best Novel for a fix-up, the individual parts of which have already earned him four short fiction Hugo nominations and numerous other award short list placings. He might even win, although of course to do so he'll need to overcome those mighty juggernauts called Gaiman and Bujold. Whether he wins or not, however, he is guaranteed a place in SF history, because *Accelerando* is likely to become known as the classic novel of The Singularity.

(If you don't know what The Singularity is by now then you've obviously been reading too many 20-volume fantasy trilogies. Try checking out the following review of Joel Garreau's *Radical Evolution*.)

The time is the near future. An aging dot com billionaire called Jim Bezier is suffering from an incurable illness and desperate to cheat Death. His technicians are working on a method by which they can upload his brain and personality to a computer. They try the technique out on a bunch of spiny lobsters. But having transcended into silicon, the lobsters rapidly evolve intelligence and escape the lab environment. They wind up hijacking a web server in Moscow, teach themselves to communicate with humans, and look round for someone who can help them. The obvious answer is Manfred Macx.

Manfred is a venture altruist. He spends his life having good ideas and giving them to companies that can exploit them commercially. In return, the grateful companies give him presents, such as free computers, free hotel rooms, free travel on their aircraft, free restaurant meals and so on. This allows Manfred to have a very comfortable life without ever being employed or indeed having much in the way of wealth. It is a nonsense idea, of

course. As a self-employed person myself I can assure you that if you give a client something for free what they do is mark you down as an idiot, try to wheedle more free stuff out of you as fast as they can before anyone else does, and refuse to pay your bills for months. But, it is a nice conceit, and Stross uses it very well. In particular it allows him to set up a nice conflict between Manfred and his fiancé, Pamela.

Pam is a born-again postconservative, a member of the first generation to grow up after the end of the American century. Driven by the need to fix the decaying federal system before it collapses under a mound of Medicare bills, overseas adventurism, and decaying infrastructure, she's willing to use self-denial, entrapment, predatory mercantilism, dirty tricks, and any other tool that boosts the bottom line.

In other words, Pam thinks that Manfred should use his undoubtedly exceptional brains to make money which, as his soon-to-be lawful spouse, she could then appropriate for herself. Not to mention he would have to pay taxes on it – something that Pam, an IRS auditor by trade, is rather keen on. Manfred has no intention of ever paying taxes in his life.

Meanwhile, back with the lobsters. Manfred quickly realizes that the whole idea of uploaded intelligences is going to throw a gigantic spanner into the human legal system. Today lobsters, tomorrow goodness only knows what.

"Lobsters – " Franklin shakes his head. "Lobsters, cats. You're serious, aren't you? You think they should be treated as human-equivalent?"

"It's not so much that they should be treated as human-equivalent, as that, if they aren't treated as people, it's quite possible that other uploaded beings won't be treated as people either. You're setting a legal precedent, Bob. I know of six other companies doing uploading work right now, and not one of 'em's thinking about the legal status of the uploaded. If you don't start thinking about it now, where are you going to be in three to five years' time?"

And so it begins. The Singularity starts, not with a bang, but with a lobster. Very soon things are spiraling out of control. What about AIs? What about uploaded personalities that copy themselves?

"The broader issue of how we value identity needs to be revisited, the franchise reconsidered. Do you get one vote for each warm body? Or one vote for each sapient individual? What about distributed intelligences? The proposals in the Equal Rights Act are deeply flawed, based on a cult of individuality that takes no account of the true complexity of posthumanism."

The various stories that make up *Accelerando* chart the course of the rapidly burgeoning evolution of humans and machines into something that is neither. It is a positive feedback loop. The smarter everyone gets, the more quickly they come up with new and interesting ways in which to evolve themselves. It isn't always pretty. This is no upload nirvana of "peace, happiness and prosperity for all" that Stross is describing. As ever in evolution, the weak fall by the wayside. The only thing that is constant is rapidly accelerating change.

Genius, good looks, and long life are now considered basic human rights in the developed world: even the poorest backwaters are feeling extended effects from the commoditization of intelligence.

Clearly not everyone is happy about this. Pam, for example. Which is why she quickly divorces Manfred and puts all of her energy into making sure that their daughter, Amber, grows up to be a normal, God-fearing, money-grabbing American kid. Many other people feel the same.

Billions of fleshbody humans refuse to have anything to do with the blasphemous new realities. Many of their leaders denounce the uploads and AIs as soulless machines. Many more are timid, harboring self-preservation memes that amplify a previously healthy aversion to having one's brain peeled like an onion by mind-mapping robots into an all-pervading neurosis. Sales of electrified tinfoil-lined hats are at an all-time high.

Evolution, however, is not to be tampered with. The posthuman care little for the ignorant meatbodies that they have left behind, especially if those meatbodies happen to be overly protective parents. And because this is a Singularity we are talking about, the meatbodies have neither the brain nor the technology to understand what their posthuman descendants are up to. They won't have much inkling of what is going on until the machine minds decide to break up the Earth and use it to make more hardware in which they can live. I mean, who needs Nature when you can do anything in VR? It is so inconvenient, having to have your

living environment conform to the laws of physics.

As for those uploaded minds, they can now travel in space with ease. They can now spawn copies of themselves when they have too much work to do. Faced with a potentially life-changing choice, they can now opt to do both and see which turns out best.

"And now, you're alive, and he's dead – and whatever made him kill himself doesn't apply to you. Think of it as natural selection among different versions of yourself. The fittest version of you survives."

Naturally, as *Accelerando* continues, the world in which its characters live becomes less and less recognizable and relevant to us mere meatbodies. At this point the story does become rather more about Manfred and his dysfunctional family than about the Singularity. However, this doesn't stop Stross from occasionally tossing in the odd provocative comment about science, economics, politics or law.

"Nobody bothers breaking the law out here these days, it's too easy to just buy a legal system off the shelf, tailor it to fit, and conform to it."

No one is ever going to praise *Accelerando* as being a great novel of the human condition, full of intense, complex and vibrant characters. But then it isn't a novel about the human condition. It is a novel about the posthuman condition. It is about people who very quickly cease to be human in most obvious ways (and a few that were never human to begin with). That they continue to display human

characteristics in their behavior can be taken either as an authorial statement of confidence that there is something essentially enduring about us hairless apes, or as a necessary authorial trick to make the latter parts of the story understandable by meatbodied readers.

What no one is likely to dispute, however, is that Stross's command of the jargon, not only of computer science, but also of politics and economics, is awesome. *Accelerando* is written in an unending stream of this Strossbabble. It is fast-paced, slick and thoroughly seductive. If you wanted to make a case for science fiction being a distinct and very different literary form, *Accelerando* is a book you would have to study. As for the rest of us, we'll just add it to that list of seminal books that anyone wanting to understand SF has to read.

And look, the book is available under a Creative Commons license as a free download from Stross's web site <<http://www.accelerando.org/>>. Manfred would doubtless approve.

Accelerando - Charles Stross - Creative Commons - RTF

The Future Is Us

"The future always comes too fast and in the wrong order."

Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock*

As I reported last week, I saw Joel Garreau speak in San Francisco as part of a tour to promote his new book, *Radical Evolution*. Garreau is a journalist specializing in social issues, but his current subject matter

is very much that which, only a decade or so ago, would have been unthinkable. He is concerned that the human race, or at least parts of it, is about to enter a period of rapid evolution, and that we, as a species, have no idea where this will lead.

As I type this, the evening news is airing yet another report describing some advance as "science fiction coming close to reality." Remember that phrase. You're going to be hearing it a lot in the coming years.

Garreau's argument is well structured. He begins with a pile of evidence for his claims about scientific advance. He then examines three different reactions to the situation, and rounds off with an examination of the Transhumanist movement. Let's go through that piece-by-piece.

The argument that Garreau is making is that there is something fundamentally different about the 21st Century. For thousands of years human beings have been waking up in the morning expecting the world to be pretty much the same as it has always been. If it changes, they become fearful. But the 21st Century will be populated by people who, on waking up in the morning, will expect news of new technological advances that will change the way that they live. After all, that's what always happens.

The icon of Garreau's book is the image of an exponential curve of technological development. It is perhaps best expressed by Moore's Law, the dictum that states that the power of information technology will double every 18 months. But it is not a new phenomenon; it has been observed in other technologies before. Those of us who studied British history at school will

probably remember the startling “before” and “after” pictures of livestock in the 18th Century. Advances in animal husbandry and understanding of selective breeding (a crude, early form of genetic engineering) caused a radical change in the size and appearance of farm animals. In the 19th Century the focus shifted to heavy engineering: shipping and railways. Garreau states that the number of railway miles doubled almost 7 times in the period between 1830 and 1840 (I think he is referring to the USA alone – more of the book is very US-centric).

The point here is that in the past these bursts of technological advancement have always run out of steam (Garreau’s pun, not mine), until now. Moore’s Law has already passed its 28th doubling, and is showing no signs of slowdown. The only warning signs on the horizon are physical limits such as Planck’s Constant, and even they may be circumvented by technology such as quantum computing.

Nor is IT the only technology that is taking off rapidly. Garreau coins a new acronym, GRIN, standing for Genetics, Robotics, Information and Nanotechnology to describe the influences that are reshaping our world. Cloning is now possible. Household robots are on sale. Internet connectivity is moving forward in leaps and bounds, and jacking in to computers, as described in *Neuromancer* and its imitators, is already proven to work (sort of) for monkeys. And the Nanotech revolution, space elevator and all, is just around the corner.

Faced with such advances, amateur philosophers around the world are predicting extremes of triumph and disaster. Naturally most of these people come from the Geek world where people are only capable of thinking in binary.

Garreau describes two possible scenarios: Heaven and Hell. Both are based on the assumption that technology will continue to advance at the same rapid rate for the foreseeable future. One group, characterized by Ray Kurzweil, thinks that this will be wonderful and we’ll all live happily ever after. The other, characterized by Bill Joy, thinks that it will all end in tears, and quite possibly in the extermination of mankind, its enslavement by intelligent computers, or the accidental destruction the planet, or, well, pick your own doomsday scenario – they are all possible.

It is easy to poke fun at both these extremes (and indeed Garreau does). Kurzweil clearly has a bad case of belief in the Rapture of the Nerds, while Joy has pretty much given up hope in humanity. Both approaches are a variant of utopian thinking – the one approach being the creation of a utopia, and the other being the prevention of a dystopia by imposing new laws. The attitude is neatly summed up in the book by Jaron Lanier:

“If your utopia is based on everybody adhering to some ideal of what is good, then what you’re say is, ‘I know what is good, and all of you will love the same goodness that I love’.”

To which Garreau pointedly adds, “Others will be good your way or be tied to a stake and surrounded by kindling.”

Nevertheless, there is some truth in both views. The standard of living in the West is absurdly higher now that it was only a century ago. We are healthier, we are living longer, we can travel faster, and we have access to enormously more goods and services. Equally, disaster is possible. Scientists in Australia managed to create a

close relative of smallpox that was 100% fatal to mice. A human variant is not impossible. And the technology to create disaster is becoming more and more accessible. What is more, it is also more tempting to use.

Nuclear weapons are easy to control compared to the GRIN technologies. Few people want nuclear war. Many people, however, want healthy, smart, athletic, beautiful, long-lived children.

Which brings us precisely to the scenario envisaged by Nancy Kress in *Beggars in Spain*. The memory pill ads that we currently laugh at on American TV will soon become believable. Designer babies are probably already been born. The pharmaceuticals industry is almost certainly winning the war against drugs in sport. And medical technology to help us to do without sleep (as whales and dolphins routinely do) is probably not far off. The question is, as Kress asked, how will the people who have access to such technology relate to the rest of the population?

[Francis Fukuyama is] terrified that The Enhanced, in time, "will look, think, act, and perhaps even feel differently from, those who were not similarly chosen, and may come to think of themselves as different kinds of creatures."

Garreau's preferred vision of the future is what he calls the Prevail scenario, which I prefer to call the SNAFU scenario. Garreau describes it as being based on a view of the essential cussedness of human nature and our ability to muddle through. But it

is also a reflection of our uncanny ability to screw up. Students of WWII will often point out that if Hitler had been a little more sane he could easily have won; but then if he had been sane he would not have headed down that path in the first place. So yes, maybe we will be in danger of being enslaved by some super-powerful computer, but in all likelihood at its very moment of triumph it will crash because of a bug in Windows and be foiled.

The Prevail scenario, then, postulates that technology will continue to improve, and that total disaster will probably not ensue, but the benefits will not come to everyone at the same rate, and for some disaster will be the outcome. The point is that this is happening now, and it will increasingly come to be the subject of political discourse.

So what does science fiction have to do with all this? Obviously quite a lot. Garreau told me that he didn't have time to read much modern SF when researching the book because there was so much real science he had to study. Nevertheless, he freely mentions the likes of Asimov, Clarke and Dick. He notes that Kurzweil was inspired to become a scientist by reading Tom Swift books as a kid. And it is no accident that the company that makes the Roomba, the house-cleaning robot, is called iRobot. Furthermore, you can't write a book of this type and not interview Vernor Vinge about The Singularity, because it was Vinge who first coined the term. Garreau does not disappoint.

The point here is that we are story-telling, myth-making animals. Garreau doesn't fail to reference Joseph Campbell and note that the myths of our forefathers are hardly appropriate for our modern world. Science fiction is the literature of now.

George Orwell and Aldous Huxley have already made major contributions to the canon of modern myth. And as far as the general public is concerned, the debate is now dominated by Michael Crichton and by Hollywood.

This is important, because the political landscape is changing. The old divisions of Left and Right will still be important, because there will still be a question of who has access to the new technology. But a more important question may well be whether we permit the technology to be developed at all. The two extremist factions that Garreau describes contain some pretty strange bedfellows. The Heaven supporters include captains of industry, Libertarians, Geeks, techno-greens and some radical feminists. The Hell supporters include social conservatives, religious fundamentalists, neo-Luddites, environmentalists and some radical feminists. The new politics (as David Brin said at the Swissnex symposium a few months back) will be between those prepared to embrace the future with hope, and those who, out of fear, seek to prevent it.

This is where the SF of the future will be judged. Michael Crichton is firmly in the Hell camp. His books, very predictably, present one disaster scenario after another and show how brave people, by the skin of their teeth, manage to prevent the disasters that scientists, in their foolishness, arrogance or wickedness, are about to cause.

Possibly this is a good thing. Maybe in order for humanity to Prevail in this time of trial we need myths that warn us about the dangers of technology. Pandora has not outlived her usefulness. Yet take that line too far and you push society into the arms of the fundamentalists. The same

people who, in earlier times, were happy to ban books because they spread dangerous ideas, and to torture Galileo until he agreed to renounce what he knew to be true, would today be only too happy to ban any scientific work that does not conform to their view of how the world should be.

We've come a long way from a genre intended to give a sense of community and education to lonely nerds, to a literature on the cutting edge of world politics. That's a rapidly changing world for you. It will be an interesting ride.

Garreau is, of course, first and foremost a popular journalist, and therefore his book is primarily about people rather than about science or politics. But it is a fascinating survey of the field nonetheless. And the SF authors amongst you will doubtless want it for the extensive list of recommended reading at the back. There are plot ideas aplenty, probably many of which the Mundane SF crowd have already dismissed as too implausible.

Radical Evolution – Joel Garreau – Doubleday - hardcover

The Life of Lanark

No survey of genre literature in Scotland can be complete without mention of Alisdair Gray's *Lanark*. Iain Banks has described it as "the best Scottish literature in the twentieth century," and while readers of formula fantasy would not recognize it as part of their genre it is most certainly highly fantastical in places. It is, also, very much about Glasgow.

As the subtitle, *A Life in Four Books*, suggests, *Lanark* is a fictional biography,

but it is by no means a typical example of that genre either. It begins, somewhat unconventionally, with Book Three, in which we meet the lead character, Lanark, who is recently arrived in a strange city that, much later, we discover is called Unthank. (Now there's a good name for a fantasy city if ever I saw one.)

Right from the beginning it seems that Unthank is not part of the real world. It never seems to get sunshine, most people seem to live on Social Security (welfare), and what work does get done seems utterly pointless. Lanark himself is presented with a pretty stark choice:

"I'm afraid you'll have to take up art. Art is the only work open to people who can't get along with others and still want to be special."

As Book Three progresses, things get more and more strange. Lanark escapes the city, only to find himself in a mysterious place called the Institute from which some distinctly suspicious scientists, allied to highly dubious industrial concerns, appear to run the world, Unthank included.

And then suddenly we are in Books One and Two. These are set in Glasgow in the middle of the 20th Century. They tell the life of one Duncan Thaw, a young lad who in some way manages to grow up to be Lanark. Or at least in some way fantasizes that he does. Only once we understand who Thaw is can we return to Lanark in Book Four and watch him try to make Unthank and its environs a better world.

Left on their own, Books One and Two would quickly be categorized as Literature. They have many of the obvious tropes: unhappy childhood, unhappy

adolescence, sexual obsession, personal failure of the hero at just about everything he tries to do. The only things that mark them out as different are that Lanark is a failed art student rather than a university literature professor who has an affair, and that he lives in Glasgow rather than Hampstead or New York.

Look a little closer, however, and you can see Unthank peeking through the veneer of Glasgow ordinariness. It becomes clear that the two cities are the same place, and that Unthank is simply a fantastical extension of all Gray thinks is bad about Glasgow. In particular Thaw, and presumably the author, is horrified by the machine-like nature of 20th century life.

He thought with awe of the energy needed to keep up a civilization, of the implacable routines which started drawing it from the factory worker daily at eight, from the clerk and shopkeeper at nine. Why didn't everyone decide to stay in bed one morning? It would mean the end of civilization, but in spite of two world wars the end of civilization was still an idea, while bed was a warm immediate fact.

At the same time Thaw and some of his more intelligent friends realize that there is something magnificent about their home city, it is just that everyone is too deeply locked into the machine to recognize it. Where Unthank has no sunshine, Glasgow never gets the spotlight.

"Glasgow is a magnificent city," said McAlpin. "Why do we hardly ever notice that?" "Because nobody imagines living here," said Thaw.

The problem with the middle part of the book is that it takes way too long. Thaw is a nerdy little boy with fabulous artistic and literary talent that no one recognizes. He reads philosophy and art criticism at an age at which his friends are reading Biggles. Naturally his teachers try to beat this out of him and force him to be ordinary and learn useful things like math instead. This is an accurate representation of how British schools treated bright children at the time, but not terribly interesting reading.

As for Thaw's fumbling adolescence and ongoing disastrous attempts to find a girlfriend, yes, it gives us an insight into his character, but did we really need quite so many examples? Let's face it, a kid who writes this:

From under loose sweaters and tight blouses their breasts threaten my independence like the nosecones of atomic missiles.

...is not going to get a girl, no matter how desperate he becomes.

Indeed the entire book is infused with a sense of fear, and resulting hatred, of women, a species that appears to be utterly alien to Thaw/Lanark. The book has the classic division of women into two distinct categories: mothers (who are loving and nurturing) and flirts (who are vain, selfish, manipulative and utterly random in their behavior). This comment sums up the attitude:

"Women have notions and feelings like us but they've got tides too, tides that keep floating the bits of a human being together inside them and washing it apart again. They're governed by lunar gravity; you can read that in Newton.

How can they follow ordinary notions of decency when they're driven by the moon?"

If it were not for the fact that the supporting material in the book tells us that Gray is happily married I'd be very worried about him.

Once we get into Book Four and return to Unthank the connection between the real and fantasy versions of Glasgow becomes clearer. This is particularly the case when Lanark gets a job in Social Security (now called the Job Centre).

"As I already indicated, there are many whom we cannot help through lack of funds. A lot of these are still strong and vigorous, and it is a dangerous thing to suddenly deprive a man of hope – he can turn violent. It is important to kill hope slowly, so that the loser has time to adjust unconsciously to the loss."

Having finished the book I was left with the impression that it is less a Great Novel of Glasgow than a Great Novel of the Failure of Post-War Socialist Britain. It is about the end of a world in which everything is planned and everyone has their place and is expected to fit into it. *Lanark* is about as far away from *Accelerando* as it is possible to get, and that promise of a bright, if terrifying, post-human future is quite inconceivable to Gray. The message of *Lanark* is probably of greater relevance in the Celtic fringes of the UK where hard-line Protestantism took a firmer hold on the popular imagination, and is probably most relevant in Scotland. We Welsh seem to have avoided the excesses of the Wee Free and their fellow travelers, and have acquired a more romantic spirit as a result.

Janice Galloway's introduction makes the point very clearly.

To a reader in a country where resignation is a national pastime, a country where the standard childhood training lists "showing off" as the worst sin of all, a country whose church, family and education systems once used to ring with the hurled accusation "Who do you think you are – someone special?" this encouragement to strive nonetheless was powerful stuff.

The book probably also reflects the strict dividing line between Arts and Sciences that was (and quite possibly still is) such a feature of Britain's academia and education system. Scotland is a country famous for engineers, and I can quite imagine how badly a talent for art and creative writing will have gone down at a Scottish school. Gray shows some of that attitude in a quite remarkable chapter called Epilogue in which Lanark encounters Nastler, a character who claims to be the author of the book in which Lanark lives, though that same chapter is also full of sarcastic footnotes in which someone (presumably Gray) pours scorn on most of what Nastler says. Here's what happens when Lanark compares Nastler's proposed ending of the book to apocalyptic SF:

He began speaking in a shrill whisper which swelled to a bellow; "I am not writing science fiction! Science-fiction stories have no real people in them, and all my characters are real, real, real people! I may astound my public by a dazzling deployment of dramatic metaphors designed to compress and accelerate the action, but that is not science, it is magic! Magic!"

Thankfully, as I hope this issue of *Emerald City* will make plain, the world of Unthank is fast disappearing. Scotland is not only producing works of profound imagination, but also science fiction novels filled with real people. I only wish that Alisdair Gray would come to Interaction and see all of this in progress.

Lanark: A Life in Four Books - Alisdair Gray - Cannongate

War in Heaven

When the assembled fans go home from Glasgow they will doubtless be talking about many books. They will, of course, be talking about Stross and MacLeod, but then they would anyway no matter where Worldcon was. If they are taking home a book by an "unknown" British writer (actually an American living in England) it may well be *Double Vision* by Tricia Sullivan. But the book that the writers and editors will all be talking about is a debut novel by a Glasgow-based writer: *Vellum*, by Hal Duncan.

So what is Vellum?

Vellum is the parchment on which the Word of God is written. Imagine a language so precise that simply uttering a word can make something so. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was written on Vellum. In *The Book of All Hours*, all creation is defined.

Vellum is the substrate of the Multiverse. It is the body of the dragon, Tiamat, from whom Marduk made the world. It is the quantum foam of chaos in which mortals float and which gods seek to bend to their will.

Vellum is the battleground between Law and Chaos, where the archetypal forces of the universe take physical form to carry out their age-old conflict. There is Thomas Messenger, who is Tammuz or Dumuzi, the beautiful shepherd-boy doomed to die. There is his sister, Phreedom, who sometimes calls herself Anna to spite her Hippy parents, who is Inanna, Queen of Heaven, better known to us as Ishtar. There is Seamus Finnan, the Fenian revolutionary, who is Shamash, Lord of the Sun, who is Prometheus, bringer of Fire to mankind, who is the Light Bearer, Lucifer. There is Jack Carter, who is Jerry Cornelius, who is Jumping Jack Flash, the flame itself.

In *Vellum*, Hal Duncan plays fast and loose with mythology.

The Greek word *Angelos*, by the way, translates as “messenger”.

It's places like this that you can't tell where the world ends and the Vellum begins, she thinks. For all its asphalt artifice, for all the wooden mileage signposts scattered along its way, for all that you can look down into the valleys and still see the houses and churches, schools and factories of small towns cradled in the folds, up here reality, like the air, is thinner. The road is just a scratch on the skin of a god; if you came off it, she thinks, if you smashed straight through one of the low wooden fences and shot out into the air, you might crash right out of this world and into another, into a world empty of human life or filled with animal ghosts.

There is, you may be interested to know, a plot of sorts, but it is not plot as we know it. The focus chops back and fore between scenes that may involve the same characters in different universes, or

different incarnations of the same characters at different times in the same universe. *Vellum* does not do linear. Time in the Vellum is not like that.

There are aspects of *Vellum* that are most definitely New Weird. The book is, at core, a fantasy novel, because it is carved of the stuff of myth. And yet vast swathes of it take place in a world in which the war between the angels is fought out with nanotech weapons and AIs. Is there a difference between VR and the Vellum? Any sufficiently advanced magic is indistinguishable from technology.

Yet if you are looking for more like China Miéville, look again. While there are rich, descriptive passages aplenty, you won't find much in the way of baroque prose here. Nor will you find the driving genre sensibility that makes Miéville so unputdownable. Instead you will find a literary sensibility, a desire to take the very foundations of genre literature and re-shape them in geometries so alien that most fans will go mad if they look at them too closely. *Vellum* is the most audaciously ambitious book that I have read in a long time.

Madam Iris drops the veil back down over her face but by now her accent is abandoned and her words sound genuine.

- I am the part of you that feeds on dust and ashes in the darkness, that died, that is dead, and that will always be dead.

- Good, says Phreedom. Then you'll help me.

The question that the reviewer now has to ask herself is, “does it work?” Goodness only knows. *Vellum* is too complex a book to judge on one reading, and certainly on one reading at the sort of speed I have to

maintain to get through books. I think that your average genre reader will quickly lose patience with the constant shifts of focus, the complex structure and non-linear narrative. A little patience and concentration, however, should be rewarded, and there are certainly enough gems of subtle humor scattered around the text to keep the well-informed reader smiling in admiration.

I can't see *Vellum* winning any popular vote awards. I do, however, think it is a strong contender for next year's Crawford Award, and it may well find its way onto the short-lists of judged awards. And I'm pleased to see it is being published as Pan Macmillan rather than as Tor UK. I'll be fascinated to see what the mainstream literary world makes of it.

But perhaps most importantly, Hal Duncan is a writer I very much want to see more of. And the good news is...

Vellum is only the first half of the story.

Vellum - Hal Duncan - Pan Macmillan - publisher's proof

The God of Small Things

It began the day Kendrick Gallmon's heart stopped beating forever.

Which is as good an opening line to an SF thriller as I've read in a long time. Experienced SF readers will, of course, immediately realize that Gallmon's body is infused with medical nanotech that is keeping him alive, despite his malfunctioning heart. And of course there is a lot more technology to come yet.

There will, I think, soon be a new sub-genre of catastrophe SF. In addition to the traditional "mad scientists cause end of world" scenario we will increasingly see examples of the "mad fundamentalist US President causes end of world" stories. And as Brits are so good at writing catastrophe SF and worrying about the end of empires, who better to tackle this new genre? Enter Gary Gibson with his new novel, *Against Gravity*.

Through liberal and slick use of flashbacks, Gibson tells how poor Kendrick Gallmon got to be the way he is. It all began with Los Angeles going *pouf!* in a giant mushroom cloud. Naturally new security measures were required, and this gave President Wilber the excuse he needed to round up every traitorous commie pinko leftist fag his military could lay their paws upon, and torture them until they confessed their complicity in this outrage. Thus far, of course, this is no more than what the less stable inhabitants of Berkeley will assure you is happening in the US today.

But *Against Gravity* is a science fiction thriller, which means we need rather more than political fantasies. We need mad scientists with a secret base in the South American jungle. So Gallmon and his fellow internees get shipped off to The Maze (interesting name for a prison, that...) where the lucky ones get executed and the unlucky ones get experimented upon.

"It's shit like you makes me sick," Grady shouted after him. "You and all the niggers and Jews and the rest of the scum. You should all be dead, now we got the White House. Instead they keep you bastards alive so they can play games with needles."

The supposed purpose of these experiments is to produce a super soldier (no mention of Steve Rogers by name, but the myth still rings loud and clear). And yet, something else is clearly going on, especially in Ward 17, where Gallmon is being held. Some of this nanotechnology nonsense might actually work instead of just killing the experimental subjects. And it seems that someone else is taking an interest in the inmates of Ward 17.

Meanwhile, another of President Wilber's fruitcake ideas is being put into action. Billionaire inventor and mad scientist par excellence, Max Draeger, wants the USA to build a space station. The purpose of the *Archimedes* will be to provide a home for a self-evolving network of AIs. Up there they'll be safely contained, right? And they might come up with something interesting.

"Your beloved President wanted to find God. He interpreted my theories in such a way that he believed I could help him in that. The heart of the Archimedes consists of self-learning, self-motivating artificial-intelligence routines embedded in nanite machinery designed to function in cooperative colonies. Hardwired to specific tasks such as decoding the structure of space" – Draeger smiled more broadly – "or finding God."

"You're crazy."

"Quite possibly, yes, but my definition of God is not quite the same as Wilber's was. If there is a God, Mr Smeby, he's not Jehovah or any other of an endless pantheon of crude tribal deities that are still worshipped even today. God is ... intelligence seeking to sustain itself. If that intelligence exists it would leave traces, in the structure of our universe itself. The cooperative intelligences on board the

Archimedes were designed to find those traces, the evidence."

"And have they?"

"Oh no, Mr Smeby, they've done much, much more than that."

Eventually, of course, the US collapses into civil war. Gallmon and his fellow detainees are freed, and those that do not die soon after try to build a life for themselves in a world in which most governments think that the only safe place for them is in a secure medical facility inside a very secure prison, or in an incinerator. Meanwhile their augmentations are turning rogue. Which is where we came in.

Far above their heads on the *Archimedes*, life is evolving. And somehow that life has a connection with the former inmates of Ward 17. God, it seems, is offering Gallmon and his friends a safe haven. But Draeger doesn't want to lose the results of his experiment. The rag tag remnants of the US army, known as Los Muertos, who still cling to Wilber's ideals, don't want anyone to find God but themselves. And to be honest, would you believe a bunch of nanite intelligences who claim that they have found God and that they can take you to heaven?

So, as with all of the best thrillers, various heavily armed and morally suspect forces converge upon a titanic climax somewhere exotic. As thrillers go, it is pretty damn good. There are a few points in the plot that don't make a lot of sense to me, but most of it is fine, and the action rips along at a frenetic pace that keeps you glued to the book. Oh, and the ending is superb. As far as I know, Gary Gibson does not yet have a US publishing contract, so this is

another one that visitors to Glasgow should be taking home with them.

Against Gravity - Gary Gibson - Tor UK - manuscript

Shadow's End

Part two of Michael Cobley's Shadowkings trilogy, *Shadowgod*, broke with classic fantasy structures by providing a resolution to the Shadowking War and allowing many of the characters (even some of the ones we thought were dead) to live happily ever after. What, then, was he going to do for part three?

Much to my surprise, *Shadowmasque* opens up 300 years after the events of *Shadowgod*. As we might expect, mankind has forgotten much of the horror of those distant times and has become lax in its vigilance. But of course the power of the Lord of Twilight, while profoundly broken, is not totally removed from the world. And some poor fool will always think that he can advance himself by signing up as a loyal minion of Evil.

There are a few, however, who remember. One is Coireg Mazaret. Still infected with the Wellsource, he is unable to die, but quite mad much of the time. The other is Byrnak, the former mercenary captain who became the first of the Shadowkings. Long since released from his possession, he still retains much power and remains vigilant. If there is one person in the world who knows the true horror of being controlled by the Lord of Twilight then it is Byrnak. In his current disguise (for 300 year old men are a curiosity) of the playwright, Beltran Calabos, he has gathered around him a community of

magicians and adventurers known as The Watchers who are tasked to keep an eye open for returning Evil. Naturally the civil authorities regard them with great suspicion.

There are other good things that Cobley has done with his 300-year gap. In particular the Mogaun have now been living in the Khatrimantine Empire for many generations and there are characters in the story who are half-Mogaun, and naturally despised by pure-bloods on both sides. Cobley could have made much more of this, but he was rather too busy doing traditional fantasy stuff.

As with *Shadowgod*, *Shadowmasque* lacks much of the bleakness that made *Shadowkings* so different. Even the Daemonkind, now that they have become good guys, lack much of their interesting character. Furthermore, the book continues to have characters pushed around like playing pieces by the gods rather than finding their own way in the world and, because this is the last volume in the trilogy, the ending is thoroughly predictable. There is also a definite feel that Cobley is not taking things very seriously. Otherwise he wouldn't have characters, even villainous pirate captains, say things like this:

"Sorcery," he said. "The black sorcery of the dead – with it, I shall raise an armada from the bottom of Sickle Bay and hurl it against the defenses of Sejeend. After that, uncountable riches will be mine – and yours if you join me."

Yes, you guessed it. The pirates all end up far more dead than rich.

Despite my reservations, and in some cases precisely because Cobley can't resist

poking fun at his own work, this is an entertaining book. It hums along nicely from one deadly crisis to another until the Bad Guy is finally dealt with. What is more, it does have an interesting point to make, which is that to completely vanquish Evil you need help from someone who knows that Evil inside out and has good cause to hate it utterly.

From what I have seen of Cobley's work so far, it does try to be different and it is by no means vacuous, as so much modern fantasy is. However, I think Cobley needs to decide whether to be unremittably grim (as per Steven Erikson and *Shadowkings*) or to write something more lighthearted. He'll confuse his audience if he tries to do both.

Shadowmasque - Michael Cobley - Simon & Schuster - trade paperback

A Swarm of Wings

The name Deborah Miller may not be familiar to you, but UK fantasy fans will doubtless recognize Miller Lau. Well, she's changed publisher, and the new folks seem to have been not very keen on the pseudonym, so she's now writing under her real name. As far as I know, this is not a name-change re-launch, just a change of policy. Her first novel under the new name is *Swarmthief's Dance*.

So, what have we got here? Well, it is fantasy. But thankfully it is not entirely set in generic Fantasyland (or on the planet of Phantasie-Clichay). But despite my riffing off an M. John Harrison title, neither is it startlingly original. While the setting is mediaeval, it has something of a Japanese setting. There are tengu demons, and

there's much talk about meditation and fighting with two swords. The society appears to be feudal, but ruled by a stern theocracy that controls the military power. The pinnacle of their instruments of oppression is the elite corps of Bakkujasi, the swarm riders.

What exactly is a swarm? Well, what it says, a large collection of winged insects. Except that through some magical means these swarms somehow coalesce to form a single, giant dragonfly: big enough to carry a mage-warrior and even several passengers.

The book begins with a swarm laying an egg. This is, of course, absurd. A swarm is a collective entity. It can no more lay an egg than can a herd of sheep. The individual insects that make up a swarm have bodily functions, but not a swarm itself. Even suggesting that a swarm might lay an egg is deemed heresy. Which makes it doubly embarrassing when it actually happens.

The meaning of all this is not clear for a long time. It isn't obvious until about half way through the book that what is going on is that the world of mortals has accidentally been caught up in a war between gods. And even then it is only obvious to us, the readers, and to the few gods involved. The mortals carry on their messy lives as they always do.

Given that this is a fantasy book, and therefore aimed primarily at a female audience, this inevitably means lots of tortured relationships. There is falling in love, not being able to tell the one you love how you feel, saying the wrong thing and spoiling everything, and all the usual trappings of a romance novel. Yawn.

I was particularly unimpressed with the lead female. She starts off a determined

and ambitious swordswoman, and by the end of the book she has fallen in love with a gay man (whom she rescues from a relationship with a fanatical priest and appears to “cure” of being gay) and she’s decided that she’d rather be a healer than a fighter.

I’ve read many much worse fantasy novels than this. Miller can write, and can sustain a reasonably sensible plot given the inherent silliness of formula fantasy. She’s also not afraid to kill off leading characters (though I have a nasty suspicion that several of them are going to come back to life in later volumes.) But at the same time I couldn’t find anything much in this book to care about. I quite liked the idea of a sin eater, who absolves dying mortals of their sins by “eating” the wickedness in their souls, and can then attack bad guys by throwing sin at them. But the only character who had any attraction or style was Rann, the death god. Most Evil Overlords are, of course, hopelessly ambitious, but when you are already God of Death there isn’t anything much you can aspire to. So Rann does bad things because he can, and because he finds it amusing.

The book is, of course, the first part of a trilogy. I think I can work out much of what is going to happen in later volumes. But then I gather that is what formula fantasy readers like.

Swarmthief’s Dance – Deborah Miller – Pan Macmillan - manuscript

Scotland the New

Regular readers will know that if there is one review prospect that really worries me

it is an anthology by writers many of whom I don’t know. And yet, what better way to celebrate a Scottish Worldcon than to produce an anthology of Scottish genre literature? Besides, the editors of this fine project, Neil Williamson and Andrew Wilson, have been very helpful to me in promoting Interaction, particularly with the *Guide to Glasgow* and *Ion Trails*. So I had to review their book. Thankfully it was well worth it.

The book is called *Nova Scotia* and fittingly is published by a small Scottish company called Mercat Press. (No, Mr. Vandermeer, I said Mercat, not Meercat!) It runs to just over 300 pages and features contributions from 22 writers and an introduction from no less a luminary than David Pringle. One of the contributors is Edwin Morgan, “Scotland’s Greatest Poet”. There’s no Banks story, but many other fine Scottish (and Scottish-resident) authors are there.

Pringle’s introduction muses on the question as to why there is not, or at least has not been, a distinctive style of Scottish SF. I certainly don’t want to get into any movement discussions, but I think he has a point that many Scots who might have produced SF did so (or their descendants did so) from the safety of America. I suspect that Alisdair Gray would argue that writing SF and the like has been discouraged in Scotland until recently. All that, however, has changed.

Scotland is now not only a place that produces genre fiction, but a place where people go to produce it. Look at Charlie Stross, for example, a Yorkshire lad made good in Edinburgh. Or Jane Yolen, an American fantasist spending much of her life in St. Andrews. And, perhaps most importantly, the highly talented Hannu Rajaniemi, a Finnish student who might one day to prove one of the biggest

discoveries of the Edinburgh writing group.

As gods go, I wasn't one of the holier-than-thou, dying-for-your-sins variety. I was a full-blown transhuman deity with a liquid metal body, an external brain, clouds of self-replicating utility fog to do my bidding and a recursively self-improving AI slaved to my volition. I could do anything I wanted. I wasn't Jesus, I was Superman: an evil Bizarro Superman.

I was damn lucky. I survived.

From "Deus ex Homine," by Hannu Rajaniemi

Take that, Mr. Stross. A charming little tale of life in post-Singularity Scotland where the remains of humanity, holed up behind Hadrian's Firewall, wage war against the Uploads. And set in Pittenweem, bless him.

Not that the home-grown talent is at all lacking. Ken MacLeod produces a classic SF short story, "A Case of Consilience," in which a Church of Scotland minister tries to covert aliens to Christianity despite the fact that the scientists haven't managed to communicate with them yet. Hal Duncan's "The Last Shift" is a lovely little elegy for Glasgow's lost industrial past set in an industrialized Fairyland where things are not quite as glorious as they were in Queen Titania's day. And Mike Cobley produces "The Intrigue of the Battered Box," a thrilling alternate history adventure story from the casebook of Consulting Detective, Sheldrake Ormiston, the sharpest mind in Edinburgh, and probably the whole Scottish Empire.

For the visiting American (or Canadian or Australian or Finn or Japanese or

whatever) there will be a few parts of the book that are difficult to follow. Many characters speak in Scottish dialect, and Scottish words are fairly common. Then there is Matthew Fitt's story, "Criggie," which is written entirely in Scots. (No, I said Scots, not Gaelic.)

The Senator's hauns jine automatically forenent his face. He canna stap his body tensin intae a foetal baw. There is suddenly swite on his tap lip. He gawks at the hauf-daurk room he finns himsel in but sees nothin throu the anonymous gloam that can reconnect him tae the world as he left it lest nicht.

From "Criggie" by Matthew Fitt

Don't worry, the English (and Welsh and Irish) will be just as confused as you are.

And there's more, much more. Sampling 22 single malt whiskies in one go might not do you much good. But sampling 22 Scottish writers in one anthology will likely do you a power of good. Go on, give it a go.

Nova Scotia - Neil Williamson & Andrew J. Wilson (eds.) - The Mercat Press - manuscript

Endangered Species

Back on the subject of UK books that are hard to get hold of in the US, one group of works that Americans visiting Glasgow should look out for is the products of PS Publishing. (In fact, because they come from a small press, they are very hard to find even within the UK.) They come quite expensive, because they are aimed at a collector's market, but they are also very good. One of the latest additions to the PS

stable is a novella by the very excellent Jeffrey Ford.

Writing a story about talking animals is perhaps not the best step career-wise, but then Ford has no need to further establish himself in the top ranks of fantasy writers. He just has to keep on doing things that are wonderfully strange, and *The Cosmology of the Wider World* fits the bill perfectly. It tells the tale of Belius the minotaur, who was born – no one knows how or why – to a human couple in our world, and who finds his way to a very different place, *The Wider World*, inhabited only by talking animals.

Belius is an intellectual, and easily makes friends with the likes of Pezimote the tortoise and Vashti the owl. He is also, however, a great romantic, and therefore not close to Shebeb the ape, who is of altogether too scientific a bent. The minotaur, being all alone in the world save for his non-minotaur friends, spends much of his time writing. He is working on a *Cosmology*, a vast philosophical document intended to describe all there is to know about his new home. But too much thought can be bad for you, and he falls into a deep depression. Shebeb thinks that he can produce a medical cure, but wise Vashti knows otherwise. What Belius really needs, she suggests, is a female companion of his own species, and she enlists the clever mole, Siftus, to make one.

Meanwhile, through flashbacks, we learn more of Belius's tragic life in our world, and how he came to flee it. Humans, of course, are not good at dealing with intelligent beings of other species, even if they are half-human. They also have some pretty strange ideas when it comes to helping their friends.

More than that I really can't say, except that this is a really lovely story and it

works very well, talking animals and all. It is also the sort of thing that might never get published if companies like PS Publishing did not exist. Which is why you should be looking for their books at Interaction.

The Cosmology of the Wider World – Jeffrey Ford
– PS Publishing - manuscript

Comic Debuts

I haven't bought any comics in ages, but my trip to the convention in Bristol, and regular reading of Joe Gordon's FPI blog, have alerted me to two series that I really should watch. The first is Vertigo's adaptation of *Neverwhere*. Neil Gaiman has no day-to-day part in this, but then he doesn't really need to. Writer Mike Carey already has two versions of the novel and a TV script to work from, and he seems to be keeping fairly close to the original. Let's face it, Gaiman fans would be all over him if he didn't. And Neil is listed as a "consultant", so is presumably keeping an eye on things now and then.

Why a *Neverwhere* comic? Well to start with anything with Gaiman's name on it is going to sell in vast quantities, even if he's not closely involved. That, I am sure, is why Vertigo is publishing it. But a comic book also gives us a chance to see the story as it was intended. Let's face it: there were things in the BBC version that were just awful. A comic doesn't have the same restrictions on budget for producing spectacular visuals. So it is now down to artist Glenn Fabry to deliver the *Neverwhere* that appears in the readers' minds when they read Gaiman's book. So far he seems to have done a good job. I have a few doubts about his anatomy at

times, especially when we see people walking, but in general his evocation of the atmosphere of the story seems spot on. I'm looking forward to the rest of the series, and to finally getting a real giant boar.

I took a look at the ashcan edition of *Albion #1* a couple of months back. I'm delighted to say that the real thing does not disappoint. It does, of course, have more pages. This allows us to see a little more of the plot develop, and some of the storyline has become clear. For example, we see recorded interviews with comics creators (who I am sure will be instantly recognizable to anyone who knows the UK comics scene well) talking about how they had to sign the Official Secrets Act when doing their work because the public could not be allowed to know that the super heroes were real people. It is also clear that most of the heroes are now in a very special prison, and poor old Archie the Robot is an exhibit in an SF museum in Manchester. Bad Penny seems to have plans for them. It all sounds very promising.

A word of praise is due here for the Wildstorm creative team who did the coloring. It is nothing like what I expected from seeing the black and white ashcan, and really very striking. Praise also to for them not coloring the Janus Stark story, which of course should not be colored.

About the only bad thing I can think of to say about *Albion #1* is that it says on the cover, "#1 of 6". Only six? Waah!

Neverwhere #1 - Mike Carey & Glenn Fabry - Vertigo - comic

Albion #1 - Alan Moore et al - Wildstorm - comic

Horrors of War

By Mario Guslandi

They say readers of horror fiction are people who like to be scared without taking any chances, who love to feel shivers along their spines while comfortably sitting in an armchair, knowing all the time that nothing is real. Reality is another matter entirely; life is full of true horrors and war is one of life's most horrific aspects. This is probably the reason why war is not a frequent setting for horror stories: its authentic horrors being already too scary to get on well with the artifices of dark fiction. So Chris Teague's idea to put together four of Paul Finch's stories connected with the theme of war and conflict, plus a previously unpublished tale of the same kind, appears to be a stroke of genius, not only because it provides a collection dealing with an unusual subject, but because Finch is one of the very few horror writers who can effectively add fictional horror to war's loathsome nature.

In the title story "The Extremist", a Burma veteran has to face the threatening invasion of his home and ends up defending his own territory with the same determination and strength he had to use when fighting in the jungle.

"We Who Fight Monsters" is an offbeat, cruel tale depicting the activities of a special militia patrolling the city in order to ruthlessly destroy the deformed and the handicapped.

In "My Day Dying" a severely wounded soldier remembers the events of his young life while helplessly waiting for either rescue or death.

“Ordeals Inc.” tells about a man who wants to experience his grandfather’s adventures during WWI and finds a mysterious organization all too happy to oblige...

“The She-Wolf Shimmered” is an extremely disturbing piece of dark fiction where the cruelty of the human heart and the horrors of a brutal war tragically merge.

Finch’s narrative talent has already gained him a British Fantasy Award for his previous collection, *After Shocks*. A successful writer, both in print and for TV and movies, Finch keeps delighting horror fiction fans with his imaginative, distinctive stories and his powerful, vivid writing style.

This small, excellent volume is a perfect example of the author’s top quality production.

I urge anyone to read it: you won’t be disappointed.

The Extremist – Paul Finch – Pendragon Press - paperback

Interview – Chris Teague of Pendragon Press

Pendragon Press is a British small press based in Maesteg. For those of you who don’t know (which I suspect is almost everyone), that is a small town in South Wales about half way between Cardiff and Swansea (or Caerdydd and Abertawe as they are known to Welsh-speakers). Maesteg is just north of Porthcawl, which has some fabulous beaches I remember well from my childhood. But that doesn’t have much to do with books. So I talked to

Chris Teague, Pendragon’s founder and sole employee, to find out more.

Cheryl: How long has Pendragon been in business, and why did you decide to start a small press?

Chris: In 1996 I discovered Chris Reed’s *BBR* <<http://www.bbr-online.com/backbrainrecluse/index.shtml>> and his small press catalogue, though for the life of me I cannot remember how... I read a few magazines, and then in 1997-98 I found the seminal UK horror ‘zine, *Nasty Piece of Work*. Since all my attempts at writing failed to impress its editor, David Green, I thought to myself, I’ll have a go. I placed a message on another now defunct UK horror magazine’s message board – *Peeping Tom* – and to say the shit hit the fan is an understatement, especially when I had a message from Paula Guran asking if she could place the guidelines in her *Scavengers Newsletter*.

Chris: In 1999, under the MT banner (a business partnership with a good mate of mine, that came to nothing except him getting married and now having a lovely baby boy) *Nasty Snips* was unleashed.

Chris: With MT folding, I was torn between two other names – Delusional and Pendragon Press. I obviously plumped for Pendragon, and published the SF collection, *Shenanigans*, by Noel K Hannan in 2000: 13 stories, superbly illustrated and accompanied with a rather fantastic introduction from Ian Watson.

Cheryl: How have things gone since then?

Chris: Despite the poor sales of both *Nasty Snips* and *Shenanigans*, I was reading for my second anthology, *Tourniquet Heart*, but later in 2000 I decided to take a hiatus. Neither book was selling – at the time I was rather laissez-faire when it came to

marketing — and I couldn't really afford to publish *Tourniquet Heart*.

Chris: That hiatus, though, was a blessing — I still read stories for *Tourniquet Heart*, and handled sales that came in, but I began to learn about the book trade; becoming quite prominent on Internet message boards and so forth. My name was spreading.

Cheryl: I sense a big break coming.

Chris: In late 2001, on the DF Lewis newsletter, I happened to mention *Tourniquet Heart* to Garry Nurrish (then editor at Prime Books). He asked Sean Wallace about it and Sean said yes. Before I knew what had hit me, *Tourniquet Heart* was coming out in 2002, at the World Horror Convention in Chicago.

Chris: I met Sean at the con, and it was there that he extolled the virtues of digital print to me. I also met Matt Schwartz of Shocklines, who had purchased many copies of *Nasty Snips*, and has continued to purchase books from me. But it took another year or so of umming and ahing before I decided to publish Steve Lockley & Paul Lewis's novella *The Ice Maiden*, which was launched at FantasyCon '03... well, supposed to be launched! Paul Finch's collection *The Extremist* did come out at FantasyCon '04, and another novella — Stuart Young's debut *The Mask Behind the Face* — later that year.

Cheryl: And presumably the business is now growing?

Chris: This year has seen a comic fantasy novel, *Double Negative* by Robin Gilbert, just released. There's a horror novel, *In the Rain with the Dead* by Mark West, due out in October at FantasyCon. I'm also publishing an SF novella, *An Occupation of Angels*, by rising star Lavie Tidhar.

Cheryl: Is the schedule starting to fill up in advance?

Chris: 2006? Well, there is definitely a major anthology, but apart from that no definite schedule.

Chris: So long as the dealers buy the books, along with the individual customers, then I'll continue to publish: there is such a wealth of "unknown" talent out there, it would be shame not to allow it to flourish...

Cheryl: What sort of material do you generally publish?

Chris: At first, horror, but my tastes have broadened. Basically, whatever I like to read I'll publish, which includes crime, dark fantasy, SF, etc. My taste is quite eclectic, though I'm not a fan of the doorstep fantasy series in seven parts. With orcs. And elves.

Cheryl: Do you get a lot of people mistakenly assuming that you publish Arthurian fantasy?

Chris: Going back to my remark about choosing between two names, the Arthurian link with Pendragon was only recently brought to my attention. I knew about Uther and the Knights, etc, but it never occurred to me that I could be mistakenly seen as publishing that style of fiction. I am at a point now — six years into my "venture", of possibly changing the name... or I could just change the logo.

Cheryl: I know the feeling. It never occurred to me when I started *Emerald City* that it would be mistaken for a *Wizard of Oz* fanzine. I've regretted that a lot since.

Cheryl: You seem to specialize in short fiction: collections, novellas and so on. Is that a matter of personal preference, a business plan, or both?

Chris: I don't shy away from novels – well, I'm publishing two this year – but it does take me an extraordinary amount of time to read one, hence the reason why I prefer novellas and short stories.

Cheryl: Does being out in the middle of Glamorgan provide any problems for business, or does the magic of the Internet mean that it doesn't matter where you are based?

Chris: The magic of the interworldnetweb. What annoys me, though – well, not really annoys since I'm very grateful – is that I am much more successful in selling my books in the US than the UK. There seem to be more independent US stockists, who are more open to new fiction, whereas the UK's independent sector is strangled by the big retailer, Waterstones.

Cheryl: So you have trouble getting books into shops?

Chris: My sales are mainly via online dealers, but there are several bricks 'n' mortar shops that stock my titles. Of course, my books can be ordered at shops in the UK by quoting the ISBN.

Cheryl: What printing technology do you use, and why?

Chris: *Nasty Snips* and *Shenanigans* were litho-printed. For a small publisher with no distribution setup that was a big mistake. The economies of scale are great, but if you can't shift the books... Since *The Ice Maiden* I have used digital printing. These days the quality is comparable to litho. I don't get the economies of scale, but there's no real risk: if I print a 100 books at a time, I know I can sell them fairly quickly.

Chris: Digital did have a bad press, being equated with shoddy vanity presses, but it has matured well, and for small publishers

it is a Godsend. I would like to go back to litho, but only if I receive a pretty sizeable pre-order...

Cheryl: You appear to be a regular at FantasyCon, the British Fantasy Society's annual event, and you have booked a dealer table at Worldcon. Do you find conventions a useful marketing venue?

Chris: FantasyCon is great. This year will be my fourth. At my first FantasyCon I sold a few books; at the second, a few more. At the last one, I sold out – which was great! What I've learned is the more books I have on a table, the more that seem to be sold – it's as if the book-loving public equates quality by the number of books on the table (he says hoping he doesn't eat his words at Worldcon!) Interaction will be my first Worldcon, so be gentle on me!

Cheryl: Any chance of your coming to San Francisco for World Horror next year?

Chris: That is most definitely a possibility – World Horror in Chicago was a blast, and was deeply annoyed at missing New York.

Cheryl: Do you have anything new for Worldcon?

Chris: Nothing specific – *Double Negative* was released last month, but I've still got a few of the signed/numbered edition left... I'll also be talking reserve orders for the next two books, and of course selling the back catalogue.

Cheryl: Are there any of your books that you would particularly like to highlight?

Chris: Well, *Double Negative* obviously – it being my latest. Since *Emerald City* is mostly SF, Lavie Tidhar's novella would be of interest to your readers. It is a fantastic read, though to describe it is a bit of a mouthful: an Alternate Reality Cold

War SF-spy thriller. Le Carre meets Tim Powers. And Noel's *Shenanigans* deserves to be read by more people.

Cheryl: What have I forgotten to ask you that you wanted to talk about?

Chris: Hmm... no, just quite honored to be interviewed really - I am quite a reserved individual. All together now, awwwww.

Extensible Hugos

For several years now WSFS has had a policy of extending the eligibility of works for the Hugos so that they become eligible in the year in which they are available to the majority of voters. Eligibility extension is enshrined in the Constitution for foreign language works. The year in which a non-English book is first published in English it gets an extra year of eligibility automatically. But it remains true that no matter where Worldcon is held, most of the members tend to be American (Yokohama may become the first Worldcon in decades to break this trend). Therefore, for some years now the WSFS Business Meeting has passed a one-off motion granting an extra year of eligibility to a work when it is first published in the USA. A small number of works have been nominated under this rule (Ken MacLeod springs to mind as a beneficiary).

The reason that this rule is renewed each year is that those responsible for monitoring the effectiveness of the rule (of whom I happen to be one) believe that changes in the industry will soon render it obsolete. It is already the case that most new books published in the USA can easily be bought through Amazon.co.uk and through Amazon.ca. Equally most

new British books are available through Amazon.ca. But the number of British books available on Amazon.com tends to be a lot lower, and Australia is still something of a world of its own.

The existence of a British Worldcon has caused a number of people to question the wisdom of the extension for next year. They point to the all-British short list for Best Novel, and the fact that all members of Interaction will be eligible to nominate (but not vote) in LA (this is normal WSFS practice) and conclude that these supposed "thousands" of British voters will somehow swamp the Hugo voting next year, and that consequently British books should not be given any additional ability to get nominated.

This view is based on a fundamental misunderstanding, firstly of the nature of the Hugo nominating process, and secondly of the way that the Eligibility Extension works.

To start with, let's look at the idea that the all-British novel short-list is evidence of the action of a sudden influx of British voters. At the time this year's Hugo nominations closed Interaction had around 500 British members. In contrast, every member of Noreascon 4 was eligible to nominate. All 5500+ of them. Of those, only a hundred or so are likely to have been British, and that group will have had a very strong overlap with the membership of Interaction. There could have been as many as 10 times as many American fans eligible to nominate for Interaction's Hugos as Brits. So if the Best Novel short-list this year is all-British then American fans have only themselves to blame.

Besides which, if these nominations are the work of rabidly patriotic British voters,

how come most of the short fiction nominees are still American?

We should also note that while two of the Hugo-nominated novels are not yet available in the US, two of them were published simultaneously on both sides of the Atlantic (The Susanna Clarke to a massive publicity fanfare) and one (the Charlie Stross) was not published in the UK until after nominations closed. The five writers might be all British, but to class all five as "British books" is patently silly.

What I suspect is happening here is less a case of the British being overly patriotic than of the Americans being overly sentimental. It is the same effect that led to Robert Sawyer winning in Toronto. Books by British authors are getting nominated this year because American fans think it would be nice to have a British winner in Glasgow. That won't happen next year.

Nor will British voters dominate the nominations process next year. Interaction currently has just over 1200 British members. L.A.Con IV will probably have at least 2000 American members by the close of nominations, if not more.

Now we come to the Eligibility Extension itself. To qualify for an extra year's eligibility in 2006 under the Extension a work must:

1. Have been published in English outside the USA prior to 2005;
2. Have been published in the USA in 2005;
3. Have not been nominated for Hugo during a prior period of eligibility.

The number of works qualifying under this rule is fairly small. I had a look through the Locus Forthcoming Books List and could find only 30. Of those, only 11

were first published in the UK in 2004 and can be said to have benefited by the existence of a UK Worldcon. And of those I think only 6 were written by British authors and might therefore be assumed to be targets for voting by patriotic British fans.

The remaining books are either British books that were published prior to 2004, and which therefore cannot have benefited from any "Interaction Effect", or books which were published in Australia, Canada and New Zealand in years prior to 2005. Here's the full list:

All stories in *Black Juice*, Margo Lanagan, Eos (originally published in Australia, 2004); *The Resurrected Man*, Sean Williams, Pyr (originally published in Australia, 1999); *Changer of Days*, Alma Alexander, Eos (originally published in New Zealand, 2001); *The Hidden Queen*, Alma Alexander, Eos (originally published in New Zealand, 2002); *Effendi*, Jon Courtenay Grimwood, Bantam (originally published in the UK, 2003); *The Year of Our War*, Steph Swainston, Eos (originally published in the UK, 2004); *Nylon Angel*, Marriane De Pierres, Roc (originally published in Australia/UK, 2004); *Deadhouse Gates*, Steven Erikson, Tor (originally published in the UK, 2001); *Southern Fire*, Juliet McKenna, Tor (originally published in the UK, 2003); Stories in *Trujilo*, Lucius Shepard, Night Shade (originally published in the UK, 2004); *The Affinity Trap*, Martin Sketchley, Pyr (originally published in the UK, 2004); *Nobody True*, James Herbert, Tor (originally published in the UK, 2004); *Bold as Love*, Gwyneth Jones, Night Shade (originally published in the UK, 2002); *Silver Screen*, Justina Robson, Pyr (originally published in the UK, 2000); *Memories of Ice*, Steven Erikson, Tor (originally published in the UK, 2002); *The Warrior Prophet*, R. Scott Bakker,

Overlook (originally published in Canada, 2004); *The Wounded Hawk*, Sara Douglass, Tor (originally published in Australia/UK, 2002); *Natural History*, Justina Robson, Bantam (originally published in the UK, 2003); "Diamond Dogs", Al Reynolds, Ace (originally published in the UK, 2002); *The Meq*, Steve Cash, Del Rey (originally published in the UK, 2004); *The Autumn Castle*, Kim Wilkins, Warner Aspect (originally published in the Australia, 2004); *Pashazade*, Jon Courtenay Grimwood, Bantam (originally published in the UK, 2003); *Empire's Daughter*, Simon Brown, DAW (originally published in Australia, 2004); *Myrren's Gift*, Fiona McIntosh, Eos (originally published in the Australia, 2003); *Paradox*, John Meaney, Pyr (originally published in the UK, 2000); *Wish You Were Here: The Official Biography of Douglas Adams*, Nick Webb (originally published in the UK, 2004); *Cowl*, Neal Asher, Tor (originally published in the UK, 2004); *1610: A Sundial in a Grave*, Mary Gentle, HarperCollins (originally published in the UK, 2004); *Dusk*, Susan Gates, Putman (originally published in the UK, 2004); *Stravaganza*, Mary Hoffman, Bloomsbury (originally published in the UK, 2004).

Obviously that list isn't exhaustive. It doesn't include magazine published work or dramatic presentations, and I might have missed some works, but I think it gives a fair idea of what the Business Meeting is likely to be voting over.

There are some good books in there. I could be tempted to vote for *Effendi* myself (I did in 2003). But I suspect that the only UK-published 2004 book that would stand any chance of getting on the short-list because of the Extension is Steph Swainston's *The Year of Our War*, and with all due respect to Steph, if British fans didn't vote for her this year then next year

they'll either be voting for her new book, or they'll be voting for other 2005 works. I mean, why on earth would British fans vote for less popular works from 2004 when they could be voting for the 2005 released by the likes of Neil Gaiman, Ken MacLeod and Charlie Stross? Or indeed of Lois McMaster Bujold or Dan Simmons who are firm favorites everywhere.

It is also worth noting that Margo Lanagan's short story collection is attracting a huge amount of critical attention. There is already an independent motion before the business meeting proposing an individual extension for one of the stories in the book. If the blanket extension passes then all of the stories will be freshly eligible.

I now come to my final point. Those opposing the extension seem to think that if they allow any less popular book from 2004 a second chance then it will somehow magically turn up on the ballot. In other words, they don't trust the voters. A blanket measure such as the Extension is bound to include far more books than are ever likely to get nominated. The whole point is that it is a catch-all, saving the Business Meeting from having to consider each work individually. But so what if a few less good books get a second chance? You only worry about such things if you don't trust the voters. Or rather if you think that the voters might behave in a manner of which you disapprove. I happen to believe that the whole point of having a popular award is that you trust people to generally use their votes wisely, and I see no particular danger if allowing the above 30 books an extra year's eligibility. On the other hand, I see a very great danger in saying "we must make it more difficult for British books to get nominated when Worldcon is in the UK." Nobody ever says, "we should make it

more difficult for American books to get nominated when Worldcon is in America because American voters might swamp the ballot," do they?

Editorial Postscript

While we are on the subject of potentially contentious Business Meeting motions, word has reached me that there is a proposal to replace the Best Professional Editor category with Best Professional Magazine Editor and Best Professional Book Editor. The interesting thing about it is that it specifies a Book Editor must have edited four books in the year, which means you can't win it just for editing *Year's Best Science Fiction* (or *Year's Best Fantasy & Horror*).

Of course the BM is likely to throw it out because it would result in a rise in the number of Hugo categories.

Out of Synch

Well, I knew this would happen one day. There isn't a single book being issued in August that I have already reviewed because of prior publication elsewhere. But there are more coming in the next few months, so this column will be back to work again soon.

Miscellany

Locus Awards

This year's Locus Awards were announced at Westercon. The winners are:

Best SF Novel: *The Baroque Cycle* (*The Confusion* and *The System of the World*), Neal Stephenson (Morrow);

Best Fantasy Novel: *Iron Council*, China Miéville (Del Rey);

Best First Novel: *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell*, Susanna Clarke (Bloomsbury);

Best YA Book: *A Hat Full of Sky*, Terry Pratchett (Doubleday, HarperCollins);

Best Novella: "Golden City Far", Gene Wolfe (*Flights*);

Best Novelette (tie): "Reports of Certain Events in London", China Miéville (*McSweeney's Enchanted Chamber of Astonishing Stories*) & "The Faery Handbag", Kelly Link (*The Faery Reel*);

Best Short Story: "Forbidden Brides of the Faceless Slaves in the Nameless house of the Night of Dread Desire", Neil Gaiman (*Gothic!*);

Best Anthology: *The Year's Best Science Fiction: Twenty-First Annual Collection*, Gardner Dozois (ed.) (St. Martins);

Best Collection: *The John Varley Reader*, John Varley (Ace);

Best Non-Fiction Book: *The Wave in the Mind*, Ursula K. Le Guin (Shambhala);

Best Art Book: *Spectrum 11: The Best in Contemporary Fantastic Art*, Cathy & Arnie Fenner (eds.) (Underwood);

Best Artist: Michael Whelan;

Best Editor: Ellan Datlow;

Best Magazine: *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*

Best Publisher: Tor

Locus published quite a bit of detail on the voting figures, which is worth looking at. To start with I want to think about the novels and their relationship to the Hugos. Neal Stephenson romped away with Best SF Novel, which is rather surprising seeing as he didn't feature in the Hugos at all. But the other Hugo-nominated books did very well. In Best SF Novel *Iron Sunrise* was 2nd; *The Algebraist* 5th and *River of Gods* 9th. *Iron Council* won Best Fantasy Novel, and *Strange & Norrell* won Best First Novel. I'm seeing a lot of nonsense at the moment from old-time US fans who claim that the all-British Hugo novel short-list is solely a result of the ballot being swamped by hordes of jingoistic British fans, and that the eligibility extension has to be stopped this year to prevent next year's Hugos being dominated by "bad" British books (see the article on the Hugos above). Hopefully the *Locus* Poll results will put an end to such idiocy.

It is also worth noting that *Iron Council* finished above *Strange & Norrell* in Best Fantasy Novel, which I think affects the odds on the Hugo.

The short fiction results seem to make much more sense than the Hugo short-lists. The tie for Novelette is astounding given the complexity of the voting process. I haven't read Neil Gaiman's short story, but I'm sure it is way better than most of what got onto the Hugo ballot.

As for Best Magazine, *Emerald City* finished 8th again this year. Above it were a bunch of professional magazines, the very impressive *Strange Horizons*, and

Interzone. We were the only fanzine listed in the final results, and we finished ahead of three of the five Hugo nominees for semiprozine. (And indeed ahead of a number of professionally published magazines.) I'm delighted. Thank you, everyone who voted for us.

Westercon Site Selection

Michael Siladi's bid for San Jose has won the right to host the 2007 Westercon. This is no great surprise as he was unopposed, but it will be good to see Westercon back in the Bay Area after so long. And the writer Guest of Honor is Tad Williams! What a very fine choice.

Torcon 3 Refunds Mail

Torcon 3 has apparently mailed refunds to some staff and programme participants. This is very good news. But if you didn't get anything, or you got less than you thought you were due, don't be surprised. To start with T3 has a rule about you not getting a full refund unless you did at least 4 panels. In addition they seem to have some problems with their records. We think that either Kevin got more than he expected, or that T3 has sent my refund to him as well as his own.

Ah well, at least they have paid something out, which is rather more than many people expected.

Footnote

As those of you who follow the blog know, a bunch of annoying personal

issues are going to prevent me from attending Interaction. As you can imagine, I'm not best pleased about this, and I shall very much miss being able to catch up with a bunch of friends whom I haven't seen in a long time. Sorry folks. Maybe some other time.

Still, every cloud — at least it means I don't have to attend any more committee meetings, and that means no more being lectured about how I'm letting down the convention and really must work harder. My stress levels have gone down considerably. And I now understand why so many British fans who worked on Intersection have refused to have anything to do with Worldcon this time around. (Hint: it has very little to do with Worldcons being too difficult to run, and rather a lot to do with them not being Eastercons.)

And of course no Worldcon these days is complete without a bevy of online commentary. There will be blogs and LJs galore (even at the ruinous rates UK people charge for Internet access). I'll be following them with interest. Furthermore, the indefatigable Chris Garcia has decided to produce a fanzine about the convention, written entirely by people who are not attending, which might just include me. It will be part of his *Drink Tank Presents* series of fanzines (not to mention part of his plans to dominate the world, etc.). If you want to see how this turns out, keep an eye on the *Emerald City* blog during the convention, or check out eFanzines.com afterwards.

Also I have one important announcement to make. This is the sort of announcement you can only make at certain times of the year because otherwise you get accused of either trying to influence the Hugo ballot or of some sort of negative reaction to the

results. Anyway, regardless of what gets announced in Glasgow, I hereby declare that *Emerald City* is now a semiprozine, not a fanzine. There will be more about this next issue when I've had more time to think through the implications and talk to people about where we go from here, but the bottom line is that either this magazine becomes self-supporting or it folds, and it cannot do the former and remain a fanzine.

Of course there is the small matter of an August issue to produce. It won't have a Worldcon report because I won't be there, but it will have books by Neil Gaiman, China Miéville, Kim Stanley Robinson and Paul McAuley, amongst others. See you then.

Ciao,

Love 'n' hugs.

Cheryl