

# EMERALD CITY #126

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A monthly science fiction and fantasy review magazine edited by Cheryl Morgan and available from her at [cheryl@emcit.com](mailto:cheryl@emcit.com) or online at <http://www.emcit.com>

## In This Issue

Teddy Barton and The Fate of the Unnarrated - Gary K Wolfe takes a peek at the lives we don't see in stories

The Magic of Poetry - Daniel Abraham's *A Shadow in Summer*, reviewed by Cheryl Morgan

Subscriber Draw - win a copy of Daniel Abraham's *A Shadow in Summer* or Joe Hill's *20<sup>th</sup> Century Ghosts*

The Strange Stranger - Tim Pratt's *The Strange Adventures of RANGERGIRL*, reviewed by Cheryl Morgan

White and Featureless - Trudi Canavan's *Priestess of the White*, reviewed by Cheryl Morgan

Return to Spatterjay - Neal Asher's *The Voyage of the Sable Keech*, reviewed by Cheryl Morgan

The New Doomed Prince - Tom Lloyd's *The Stormcaller*, reviewed by Cheryl Morgan

Relentless Realism Infects the Supernatural - Charlie Huston's *Already Dead*, reviewed by Juliet E. McKenna

Never Judge a Book by its Cover - Eileen's Wilks' *Mortal Danger*, reviewed by Juliet E. McKenna

Where Arts Rule the World - Brian Stableford's *The Wayward Muse*, reviewed by Mario Guslandi

Gentle Ghosts - Chaz Brenchley's *Phantoms at the Phil*, reviewed by Mario Guslandi

Conflicting Emotions - Fiona McIntosh's *Myrren's Gift*, reviewed by Karina Meerman

Fisheye View - Peter Crowther's *Postscripts #5*, reviewed by Sandy Auden

All Glitter, No Action - Kazuaki Kiriya's *Casshern*, reviewed by Stuart Carter

The Voting Dead - Joe Dante's "Homecoming", reviewed by Peter Wong

Secrets of the Loch - Tom Arden's *The Translation of Bastian Test*, reviewed by Cheryl Morgan

Present Worries - Lou Anders' *Futureshocks*, reviewed by Cheryl Morgan

Out of Synch - Previously reviewed books get a new lease of life

Miscellany - News round up

Editorial Matters - What's new in the *Emerald City*.

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## Teddy Barton and The Fate of the Unnarrated

By Gary K. Wolfe

When Cheryl generously invited me to contribute something to *Emerald City*, I'd just finished delivering a paper at an annual symposium in honor of Peter Straub, hosted by the English department of the University of Wisconsin. You can probably be grateful that this isn't that full-bore academic paper, but I thought I'd use this opportunity to revisit a question that haunted me then, and that continues to fascinate me now, partly because I'm still not sure I've got a handle on it. Put simply, the question is this: *What happens to fictional characters when their stories aren't being told?* This may sound like something of a metaphysical (or metafictional) question, but over the last several years it's one that has shown up among enough major writers and with enough variations, that it might almost be called a trend, or at least an emerging technique – and it seems to be particularly apparent in fantasy and SF. What it means, if anything, is open to question, and I'll get to that a bit later on. But let me start off by trying to clarify what I'm talking about and what I'm not talking about.

First of all, I'm not talking about the kind of mistakes and oversights that gimlet-eyed mystery readers call "holes in the plot," or the continuity mistakes that movie-fan websites love to catalog, such as when a character drives fifty miles in what appears to be zero seconds of real time. Nor I am talking about fan fiction which offers unauthorized episodes in the lives of favorite characters, nor the kind of professional fan fiction that does the same thing: when Robert Goldsborough writes a new series of Nero Wolfe adventures, or

Lin Carter or Robert Jordan or others write new Conan tales, or everybody's cousin writes a bunch of new Sherlock Holmes mysteries, the point usually isn't to explore the unnarrated bits of the original tales, but rather to recycle earlier settings and characters in putatively original stories (though there may be cases in which such tales spin off from oblique references or minor characters in the original). Nor, for that matter, am I talking about "sharecropping," in which writers are invited or commissioned to write new stories in a beloved setting created by an earlier author. It's worth noting that all these examples involve characters and settings that originally appeared in series, often with chronologies that weren't that carefully worked out in the first place. Pastiche aren't what I'm interested in, and they aren't what the writers I'm going to discuss are interested in.

Instead, I want to explore what happens in the unnarrated bits of particular narratives – the quite literal holes in the story, that are so essential to narrative economy that they usually go unnoticed. For lack of a better term, I'm going to call this characteristic *porosity*. All narratives are to some extent porous, of course: the untold bits of the tale, the deliberate gaps in narration, what the literary theorist Gerald Prince has called the disnarrated, (with his subcategories of unnarrated or unnarratable, which I don't need to go into here). A character leaves Manhattan, say, and appears suddenly in suburban New Jersey; the journey itself is left unnarrated, since it isn't essential to the plot. Another character may disappear for years, like Magwitch in Dickens's *Great Expectations*, his story never fully filled in. In some extreme cases, like Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, even the major events of the central characters' lives may occur

in the unnarrated interstices of the novel, revealed only through discussions during their infrequent reunions. Of contemporary SF writers, Gene Wolfe has most frequently and cannily made use of such techniques, quite self-consciously in his *Soldier of the Mist* novels. In such cases as Woolf and Wolfe, a careful reader might reasonably expect to infer much of what happened during the unnarrated bits, but such cases as *Great Expectations* leave a considerable amount of room for us to construct our own backstories.

This, in turn, has given rise, increasingly in recent years, to a number of novels and stories that occupy the unnarrated spaces of other novels and stories. *Great Expectations* itself came in for this treatment with Peter Carey's 1997 novel *Jack Maggs*, and one of the pioneer works using this strategy is Jean Rhys's 1966 *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which imagines a backstory for one of the great unnarrated characters in Victorian fiction, the madwoman in the attic of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. Closer to home in fantasy and SF, we have Gregory Maguire exploring the backstories of the witches or the scarecrow in *Oz*, or Valerie Martin crafting the tale of Mary Reilly in the interstices of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, or Gregory Benford, Greg Bear, and David Brin crafting a new Foundation trilogy in the spaces left in Asimov's original, or even Orson Scott Card revisiting the untold bits of his own Ender saga. Examples could multiply endlessly, and it wouldn't surprise me to find that someone is right now totting up a bibliography of these things, probably as part of one of those ubiquitous "favorites lists" that pepper the sidebars at Amazon. It's worth noting that most of these novels are perfectly respectable in their own right, and some are brilliant, but they're

essentially new novels constructed in the spaces left by earlier novels rather than attempts to recreate or recapture the experience of those earlier novels. They're not pastiches or nostalgia trips.

Now let's take this a step further. Let's return for a moment to that character leaving Manhattan and arriving in New Jersey, a common sort of narrative ellipsis. What would we make of it if she later complains to a friend that "the whole trip back to New Jersey disappeared. I'm getting in the car, boom, I'm standing on our lawn in Hendersonia. There's no transition — East Fifty-Fifth Street, Guilderland Road, one right after the other." She says it's "like the in-between stuff never happened. Like it was just left out." As readers, we of course know that it *was* left out, that it was simply part of the unnarrated spaces that are common conventions for moving a story along. What happens to our perception of the story, though, when a character in it becomes *aware* that whole chunks of her life are "left out"? And what if, further on, she begins to realize that she's a fictional character in someone else's story?

This particular example comes from Peter Straub's *in the night room* (2004), the novel which started this whole line of questioning. *In the night room* challenges many of our notions about the nature of narrative spaces, makes ingenious use of its own porosity, and plays relentlessly with other texts both real and imaginary — from *Alice in Wonderland* and *The Wizard of Oz* to other Peter Straub novels, and even to novels written by characters within this novel. In fact, a key scene in the novel isn't actually in the novel at all, or at least not in the novel's surface narrative. In a remarkable chapter near the center of *in the night room*, we meet a teenage boy named Teddy Barton, who

lives in a small town in “a kind of generic midwestern landscape.” Teddy awakens one morning “to a world that has been altered in some subtle yet unmistakable fashion” – everything is “quieter, duller, softer, less vital.” Teddy is a boy detective, it seems, who has been investigating a mysterious truck bearing the words Moon Bird and a neighbor digging a big hole in his backyard. But now it comes to him as an epiphany that “in some sense the world around him has just died,” and that “nothing new is ever going to happen to him again. He will never figure out what Mr. Capstone was up to in his backyard, and the Moon-Bird truck will go forever unexplained. That door, and those beyond, are forever closed to him. From now on, he can go only backward, through older worlds, solving mysteries that have already been solved, and as if for the first time.”

What has happened to Teddy Barton? None of this is at all related to the main action of the novel, and our only real clue comes a couple of chapters earlier, when we learn that a character named Tom Hartland, author of a successful series of young adult mysteries featuring Teddy Barton, has been murdered while trying to help a friend escape from her husband’s henchmen. Teddy, it seems, is trapped in Hartland’s unfinished novel, in a world no longer being narrated. To complicate matters further, we learn that Hartland as well as the friend he was trying to help – the one who couldn’t remember traveling from New York to New Jersey – are both *themselves* fictional characters in a novel being written by Straub’s protagonist Tim Underhill, who of course is himself a fictional character in the narrative of Straub or his implied author (“implied author” comes from the great American scholar Wayne Booth, whose *The Rhetoric*

*of Fiction* is worth your attention; it refers not to a narrator, but to the version of the author projected through the story--another intermediate step between the fictional narrator and the actual author).

Furthermore, Underhill is a character familiar to Straub readers from a number of earlier novels, thus linking this text with a complex series of other stories centered around the fictional city of Millhaven and its murderous history. With its interpenetration of textual worlds, its deliberate use of narrative porosity as a plot element, and its manipulation of genre markers drawn from story types as diverse as young adult mysteries, supernatural horror, portal fantasies, and serial-killer thrillers, *in the night room* makes effective use of a wide range of the resources and techniques of what I’ve come to think of as postgenre fiction.

Though he may be unusual in descending a full four levels into his nested-doll narrative, Straub is not alone in playing with unnarrated spaces. Some other recent examples of characters becoming aware of their own textuality range from the whimsical (David D. Levine’s story “Charlie the Purple Giraffe Was Acting Strangely”) to the profoundly ambitious (Paul Park’s *A Princess of Roumania* – which effectively thrusts even the *reader* into a role much like Teddy Barton’s – and, classically, John Crowley’s *Little, Big*). There’s even a discussion thread on The Valve.Org concerning characters who become aware that they are inhabiting a tale, or at least a genre ([http://www.thevalve.org/go/valve/article/if\\_we\\_must\\_have\\_fish](http://www.thevalve.org/go/valve/article/if_we_must_have_fish)) And of course, we can find earlier examples in such arenas as magic realism, such as Julio Cortazar’s famous 1956 Escher-like story “The Continuity of Parks,” in which a man reading a murder story becomes the

victim within the story. Even young adult fiction has its examples: the protagonists of Roderick Townley's *The Great Good Thing* are aware that they are characters in a beloved children's book, and while they try to survive in the dreams of a reader after the book itself is burned, they find their world disintegrating until they are rescued by being written into a new novel. And I haven't even mentioned Jasper Fforde.

So now we've got two ways in which writers take advantage of narrative porosity: writing stories in the spaces left by earlier stories, or elevating the spaces in their own stories to the level of plot elements. And, as a kind of corollary of the latter technique, we have an increasing number of characters in stories who — partly by noticing these gaps — become aware that they're characters in stories. The obvious next questions are: is this a gimmick, or a technique? And why does it seem to be emerging so visibly these days? And why particularly in areas like fantasy and SF?

It's hard to think of it as a gimmick when you read novels as deeply formed as *in the night room* or *A Princess of Roumania*, both of which can be positively dizzying as their implications become apparent. There's more to it than that, so I started thinking about what readerly effects all these stories have in common, and what I came up with was a phrase which has unfortunately become so hackneyed that by now it's routinely used by lawyers and university administrators: "the shock of recognition." The phrase originally gained wide currency, however, after the publication of Edmund Wilson's 1943 book of that title, a defining anthology of American literature in which he set out to show how American writers came to

discover that they had developed their own voices, traditions, even mythologies.

I think something like that may be going on here. I think fantasy and SF, and perhaps horror, have evolved to the point where they need no longer be ashamed of their own literariness, or their own "story-ness." Much of the satisfaction of a novel like Maguire's *Wicked* derives not simply from recognizing how it slots into the Baum story and Hollywood movie, but also from recognizing that it alludes to a broader pop fantasy tradition. It's fundamentally a story about other stories, and validates our love of those other stories, much as (in a different but related technique) stories like Geoff Ryman's *Was* or Philip Jose Farmer's "After King Kong Fell" re-imagine beloved fantasies as though they were realities. Both the Straub and the Park novels also contain stories about other stories, and both also allude to a variety of fantasy and SF traditions, even though they may not always be keyed to specific texts. In a key sense, all these novels are celebrations of Story, and in particular of the playfulness of Story. (By playfulness, I should emphasize, I do not mean Whimsy; Whimsy is something else, with far too many carbohydrates).

And here's my guess as to why this sort of thing is important: without recognizing this sort of playfulness, genres can easily ossify, becoming stale parodies of themselves, providing easy reads for easy readers. The exploration of the unnarrated is only one of a number of techniques characteristic of postgenre fiction — genre-bending is another, more familiar one — by which stories come to recognize that they're stories, by which genres and genre materials can be recombined and reinvented to make something startlingly new out of the familiar. They are, in a sense, genre defibrillators.

To get back to poor Teddy Barton and his unsolved mysteries, look again at Straub's description of his non-future, in which he is doomed to "go only backward, through older worlds, solving mysteries that have already been solved, and as if for the first time." Doesn't that sound like what happens to stories that don't know they're stories, or to genres that don't come out to play?

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## The Magic of Poetry

By Cheryl Morgan

Scarcely a week goes by these days without some publisher sending me a book whose author is claimed to be the "new George R.R. Martin," or words to that effect. (I've yet to see, "Comparable to George R.R. Martin at his best," but I'm sure it will come.) It is a refreshing surprise, therefore, to receive a new fantasy that is not compared to Martin, but recommended by him. *A Shadow in Summer*, by debut novelist Daniel Abraham, is a very different type of book to the Song of Ice and Fire series, but Martin has a good eye for quality and I can see why he likes Abraham's work.

Of course being a fantasy book, it is only part of a series, the Long Price Quartet, but at a little over 300 pages long *A Shadow in Summer* is around a third of the length of one of Martin's volumes, much to the relief of reviewers everywhere. When he gets to the end, however, Abraham may find readers clamoring for more.

The world of The Long Price appears to be an amalgam of oriental cultures that works fairly well though I'm a little unhappy about the names. I'm not sure

that Abraham has a consistent linguistic system, but I don't know enough about China and Japan to say for sure. That, however, is a minor issue. What matters is that the story takes place in a relatively prosperous merchant culture threatened by outside civilizations. The people of the Khaiem survive thanks to the *andat* which are, well...

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*"You know, don't you, that andat are only ideas. Concepts translated into a form that includes volition. The work of the poet is to include all those features which the idea itself doesn't carry."*

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Now there's a fantasy idea for you. The people of Khaiem have working sorcerers. They work because their job is to fashion *andat* out of ideas, and use those *andat* for the benefit of trade. For example, the *andat* of Saraykhet is called Removing-The-Part-That-Continues (Seedless for short). His power is very simple – he can magically remove cotton seed from harvested cotton. This means that the cotton doesn't need to be manually combed before it can be spun. Thus Saraykhet is a major center for weavers, dyers and tailors. Thus merchants from all over send their cotton to Saraykhet to be processed. And thus the Khai, the city's ruler, is a very rich man, as long as the *andat* continues to do his job.

Good grief, a fantasy world in which the author has thought about the economic uses of magic! There are not too many of those around.

Yet, as I said, it is not all easy for Saraykhet. As I explained, the *andat* are created, or rather captured, by poets. It is the job of the poet to think of an idea and, by incantations, render it into living form.

There is, of course, a great deal of difference between an idea and a person. People have thoughts of their own, and so do andat. And occasionally those thoughts will turn into ideas. Ideas such as "slavery" and "hatred". So if a Khai wishes to retain his wealth and power, he needs a good poet, not just to create his andat, but also to keep him under control.

Obviously being a poet is a difficult job, demanding rigorous training. The book actually begins at the poets' academy, which we find to have a brutal regime designed to teach the young students discipline and sort the weak from the strong. Our hero, Otah Machi, doesn't think much of this, and suspects the regime breeds a taste for power and cruelty. This is bad, because whatever traits a poet might have are likely to be transferred to the andat he creates.

We don't see Otah again for a long time, but we do see a great deal of political intrigue in Saraykhet. The Galts, a neighboring warlike people, have identified Saraykhet's andat as a potential weakness. You see Seedless's powers are not limited to cotton. He can remove other seeds too. Thus his services are in demand by women, or by those who own women. There are possibilities here for creating a scandal, and political currents shift accordingly. Threats are made to people in no position to refuse, even though they know what they are asked to do is wrong.

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*"Puppets. Puppets and the puppets of puppets. You should have more sympathy for me, Wilsin-cha. I'm what I am because of someone else, just the way you are. How could either of us ever be responsible for anything?"*

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And this is where Abraham really starts to stretch his wings. *A Shadow in Summer* has a cast of wonderful characters, all of whom are trapped into a developing plot. There's Marchat Wilsin, the Galt merchant blackmailed into becoming a spy. There's Amat Kyaan, his senior overseer, torn between her master and her city. And Liat Chokavi, her pretty and ambitious apprentice, chosen for a major role by Wilsin because she's too dim to realize what is going on. There's Heshai the poet, driven to drink by the constant antagonism of his andat, and Maati, his naïve young student, targeted as a tool by Seedless. All of these people are beautifully drawn, and all of them suffer terribly for one reason or another as the story progresses.

There are no wars (yet) in Abraham's book. No kings are overthrown, no sorcerous race threatens to overrun the land, and the book does not end in the mass slaughter of major characters. But there is a lot more to a George Martin novel than the obvious fantasy trappings. Martin writes great characters who stay with you long after you have finished the book. So does Abraham. Which I suspect means that his books will do very well.

*A Shadow in Summer* - Daniel Abraham - Tor - publisher's proof

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## Subscriber Draw

*Emerald City* is a non-profit venture supported by the kind donations of our subscribers. For information on supporting the magazine please see: <http://www.emcit.com/subscribe.shtml>.

This month's subscriber draw has four books available. Firstly we have three copies of Daniel Abraham's *A Shadow in Summer*, kindly donated by Tor.

In addition, we have a hardback slipcase copy of Joe Hill's fabulous collection, *20th Century Ghosts*, kindly donated by PS Publishing.

Huge thanks to both publishers for their support. The draw will take place on March 19th. Rules for the draw are available on the *Emerald City* web site at: <http://www.emcit.com/draw.php>.

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## The Strange Stranger

By Cheryl Morgan

Elsewhere in this issue, Gary K. Wolfe talks about how some authors play with the structure of their novels, creating stories within stories and worlds within worlds. An excellent example of this sort of thing is Tim Pratt's debut novel. It is appropriately entitled *The Strange Adventures of Rangergirl*, for strange this story most certainly is.

By night, Marzi McCarty is the mild-mannered deputy manager of a coffee shop in Santa Cruz, a charming little seaside town just down the coast from San Francisco. The place is a hang out for hippies, art students, and of course my good friend Rick Kleffel. It is a lovely town, and just the sort of place that might have a cool coffee shop whose walls are decorated with murals by a famous painter.

By day, however, Marzi (that's short for Marzipan, by the way) is the artist and scriptwriter of *The Strange Adventures of*

*Rangergirl*, a genre-and-gender-bending comic that mixes Western and Fantasy themes and has a girl gunslinger in the title role. Rangergirl's archenemy, The Outlaw, is more of an evil sorcerer than a bank robber, though he does always appear as a dark and menacing stranger.

Now, Santa Cruz being Santa Cruz, coffee shops are not immune from weirdoes. Pratt's book soon takes on elements of a Tim Powers novel as we meet those traditional Californian folks who spend far too much time talking to themselves about their eccentric religious and political ideas. Beej, one of Marzi's regular customers, has started sleeping rough and claims he has become an acolyte of the earthquake god. Then Jane, another art student, comes in covered in mud, claiming to have been chosen by the earth goddess. Even for Santa Cruz, this is a little out of the ordinary.

And so it proves, for both of them are actually in the thrall of an elemental spirit native to California, one who expresses himself through earthquakes, mudslides and wildfires.

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*"This is amazing," Beej said. He looked at Denis and smiled, tentatively – Beej always looked like a dog that was hoping for a pat on the head but expecting a kick. "To be in the company of something so powerful, to be of service... we're extraordinarily lucky."*

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In order to counteract this menace, and save her town from destruction, Marzi has to become Rangergirl, journey into the West Beyond The West, and run the bad guy out of town.

Just why is this so? Because the bad guy, whatever this spirit might be, is malleable



in the hands of a strong imagination. Marzi's influence makes him behave like The Outlaw, but Jane's belief in an earth goddess is sufficiently strong that she always sees him as female.

So here we have a book about a comic creator whose imagination has helped fashion a menace to the real world and who must become a comic character in order to fight her creation. And who is going to fight him using the power of her art. Got that? I told you it was strange.

But does it work? Pratt's problem is that he has to convince his readers that this is all real, which when you are dealing with comics characters can be a little challenging. It is relatively easy, say, for Elizabeth Hand in *Mortal Love* to write about modern day people being touched by Faerie. You expect that sort of thing to happen in England, and Hand does a splendid job of keeping the whole magical aspect of the book at arm's length. Pratt, on the other hand, is asking us to believe that modern day Californian arts students are being touched by a native spirit who dresses like a bad guy from a Clint Eastwood Western, and far from keeping the magic at arm's length, he throws it in your face. I can understand why some reviewers have had difficulty with this.

Fortunately Pratt has created some great characters to keep the story moving. In addition to Marzi, Beej and Jane we have Lindsay, Marzi's cheerful and flirtatious pal, and Denis, Jane's boyfriend, who is pathologically tidy and terribly prissy about art. This enables Pratt to have the occasional laugh at what he is doing.

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*The man came into the light completely, and when Denis saw his face, he screamed, something he never would have imagined*

*himself doing – screaming in shock was so pulp-fiction, so hackneyed and inauthentic.*

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Interestingly there is one character who didn't work at all for me. That is Jonathan, Marzi's love interest. Supposedly he's this cool art student from out East with a shady background from having hung out with drug dealers when he was a kid. But he has very little personality at all, and his main function in the book seems to be to get captured by The Outlaw and rescued by Marzi/Rangergirl. If Pratt has done this deliberately as an ironic comment on the usual role taken by female love interest characters in adventure stories then I'm very impressed. And if he didn't I'm sure he's just suddenly remembered that he did. Or at least that's what he'll say at Wiscon.

Anyway, *The Strange Adventures of Rangergirl* is indeed a very strange book. It would be strange simply because it features a bunch of eccentric Californians, but the playing with the nature of the story that Pratt achieves is sufficient to throw many readers a curve ball, and the level of suspension of disbelief he requires will bamboozle quite a few more. If you can get past all that, or if you simply find the likes of Lindsay and Denis sufficiently interesting to keep reading, then you'll start being impressed at Pratt's ambition. For a first novel this is a very brave book indeed.

*The Strange Adventures of Rangergirl* – Tim Pratt  
– Bantam – trade paperback

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## White and Featureless

By Cheryl Morgan

Earlier this month Farah Mendlesohn invited me to come and talk to the students in her science fiction class. One of the subjects we got onto is the nature of genre. I don't have my copy of *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction* to hand, but the gist of Mendlesohn's argument in her Introduction is that science fiction is not a genre because it doesn't have standard plotlines. Pick up a mystery, a romance, even a western, and you'll have a good idea of the general nature of the story. Not so in SF. Anything can happen. I happen to like that, but genres are not necessarily bad things. For many readers the primary selling point of genre novels is their comfortable predictability.

Which brings us to the new series by Trudi Canavan. Having done very well with her Black Magician series, Canavan could have gone one of two ways. She could have produced a new series that was more interesting and challenging and made me happy, or she could have gone for something more in the formula fantasy mould and become very rich. Probably wisely, she chose the latter. *Priestess of the White*, the first book in the Age of the Five series, is already a massive best-seller in the UK – up in Terry Pratchett territory. It is not, however, a book I'd recommend to most *Emerald City* readers.

The world is a collection of fairly standard fantasy tropes. There are gods, there are magician-priests, there are bat-people and fish-people. There are, inevitably, excessively cute furry creatures (possibly possums) that talk. There's a young man who is laughed at by his peers because he's clever. There are bad guys who have

dark skins and whose symbol is a five-pointed star. And the heroine is a young woman plucked from obscurity to become the most powerful sorceress in the world.

The two significant features of the book are the Dreamweavers and the fact that the gods are disturbingly real. I'll come back to the latter point later, but the Dreamweavers are there to show that the supposed good guys are not all good (except our heroine, of course). Dreamweavers also do magic, but don't worship the gods, so they are persecuted. This is very convenient, because it allows our heroine, Auraya, to have a doomed love affair with one.

Not that the book is entirely dumb. Canavan is well aware of what she is doing. Indeed, at one point she has a minor character point out that Auraya's life is starting to resemble one of those tragic romance novels that noblewomen are so fond of reading. Canavan also tries to describe some of the complexity of Auraya's life as one of the leaders of her people. Political negotiations do take place, albeit in a very safe and cartoon-like manner. But if a character makes a loaded statement Canavan is always quick to have someone else think, "ah, he said that because he wanted them to think..." just to make sure that the reader can follow what is going on. If you are writing for a very wide audience that sort of thing can help. But to me it felt rather like the stabilizer wheels they put on kids' bikes so they'll have confidence that they can't fall off.

The plot, such as it is, boils down to, "the bad guys do evil things, but when the situation gets desperate Auraya discovers that she's a much more powerful sorceress than anyone, including herself, thought." This confused me for a little while, but

then I realized that it too is an essential part of the escapist formula. In escapist fiction the reader doesn't want the heroine to have to work hard for success. That would take away the fairytale, dream-come-true, lottery-winning charm of the story. No, the reader wants the heroine to be successful because, as a L'Oreal ad might say, she deserves it.

The one area where the book could have been very interesting is in the matter of religion. The story actually depicts a religious war – the gods of the bad guys tell their followers to go and wipe out the unbelievers. Both sides insist that their gods are real and the others are just faking it. Given that religious conflict is very much in the news these days, this could become a very powerful piece of writing. Except that Canavan's gods **are** real. They are, in fact, powerful magicians from ages past who are masquerading as gods, although for unexplained reasons only the Dreamweavers are smart enough to spot this, even though "ages past" appears to be only a hundred years ago. Consequently Canavan has produced a religion (in fact two opposing religions) whose only theology is, "the gods are real so we must do whatever they tell us." That, I submit, does not allow for a very searching examination of real-world religious conflict.

But what am I saying? If Canavan did produce such a book she'd offend all sorts of potential readers and only sell a fraction of the number of books she's going to shift with this series. Canavan has chosen her market, and she'll do very well in it. Good luck to her.

*Priestess of the White* - Trudi Canavan - Orbit - hardcover

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## Return to Spatterjay

By Cheryl Morgan

Way back in 2002 (was ConJosé really that long ago?) I reviewed Neal Asher's novel, *The Skinner*. I loved it. The book had a fascinating combination of a really over-the-top alien world and a very human story of mass murders, love and redemption. I had a lot of hope for Asher's future as a fascinating writer. However, since that time Asher appears to have taken the (probably sensible) decision that his commercial viability lies more with the over-the-top violence aspect of his work than the interesting plots and characters. I was very disappointed with *The Line of Polity*, which contained very little except increasingly violent combat. Now Asher has produced a sequel to *The Skinner*. He's also got a nomination for this year's Philip K. Dick award for *Cowl*, a book I haven't read. So I decided to take a look and see what he was up to these days.

The new book, *The Voyage of the Sable Keech*, springs directly from events at the end of *The Skinner* where the policeman, Sable Keech, who has had himself reanimated as a "reification" or living corpse so he can continue to hunt down Jay Hoop, is returned to mortality in part thanks to the bizarre virus that grants near immortality to the denizens of the planet that bears Hoop's nickname.

Ten years have passed on Spatterjay, and the Old Captains still roam the planet's seas, harvesting the deadly creatures that live there and seeking for reasons to carry on their indestructible lives. Meanwhile, other interests still chase after "sprine," the one chemical capable of killing these tough old men. Into this world comes the Cult of Anubis Arisen, led on pilgrimage by one Taylor Bloc to the site of Keech's

resurrection. Given that Spatterjay has little land, and the local authorities don't allow transport more powerful than sailing ships, Bloc and his followers build a giant ship, which they name after their inspiration, hence the title of the book.

Those of you who have read *The Skinner* will want to know what has happened to favorite characters. Sniper, the war drone, has been acting Warden for the planet for most of this time, but has finally saved up enough money for a new and heavily armed shell and has gone back to being a lone and dangerous freelancer. Windcheater, the intelligent Sail, is now the effective ruler of the planet and is doing his best to encourage education amongst his fellow indigenous creatures. Olian Tay has founded a bank based on sprine, about the only thing on Spatterjay that has any value. And beneath the sea, Vrell the Prador lies dying in his father's spacecraft. On Spatterjay, however, nothing stays dead for very long. The virus soon begins to work its magic on the invalid Prador. By the time the new books starts, Vrell has become something that is no longer Prador, and not a Skinner, but probably more dangerous than either.

To a large extent the book is a re-hash of themes from *The Skinner*. We get the same chapter headings detailing the bizarre life forms of the planet. Janer Anders is back with his masters, the hornet hive mind. Vrell is his usual psychopathic but sympathetic self. Old Captains such as Ambel, Ron and Drum all put in an appearance. Erlin is once again struggling to come to terms with her longevity. There's a lot of good stuff here, and if you haven't read *The Skinner* you'll probably be quite impressed with the book.

On the other hand, if you have read *The Skinner* you'll probably see *Voyage* as more

of the same, but less so. The plot is much less involved. There's far less moral ambiguity about the characters. We learn almost nothing new about Spatterjay and its life forms. Even Peck, Captain Ambel's mate, is far less amusing than he was in the earlier book (although in his defense he's a lot more sane by this time). The only new character of any great interest is a giant whelk (and on Spatterjay giant whelks are very serious creatures indeed), and sadly she doesn't come out of the story nearly as well as Windcheater came out of the earlier book.

It is probably very unfair of me to compare all of an author's works to one brilliant book. And of course Asher is entirely within his rights to write the sort of books he wants to write. I suspect there is a much bigger market for the type of over-the-top violence that he specializes in than the sort of book I like to read. But part of my job here is to be consistent about my tastes and therefore I have to say that, for me at least, while this was an entertaining book, Asher can do better.

*The Voyage of the Sable Keech* - Neal Asher - Pan Macmillan - trade paperback

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## The New Doomed Prince

By Cheryl Morgan

There is a sense in which most fantasy novels descend in some way from either Tolkien on Moorcock. Not that Tolkien is much to blame for this; but books that claim to be following in his tradition have become more and more innocuous and anodyne, whereas those following Moorcock have become more gritty and doom-laden. Tom Lloyd manages a

certain amount of both in his debut novel, *The Stormcaller*, in that he starts off with a young man plucked from poverty and obscurity to be made heir to his country's ruler, the enigmatic and brutal Lord Bahl. Yet it is soon clear that young Isak is much more like the Prince of Melniboné than like Aragorn.

To start with Isak is what an SF novel might call a mutant. Certainly he isn't human. He is a "white-eye" a variant of humanity noted for being big, strong, short-tempered and ruthless in battle. White-eyes are born of normal women, but are so large even as babies that their mothers invariably die in childbirth. The less intelligent of them end up as elite soldiers, and the more intelligent, like Lord Bahl, become rulers.

There you have an Elrik connection straight away, for Isak has already killed his mother and, should he take a lover, there's a good chance he'd be condemning her to death if he got her pregnant. Like most white-eyes, however, Isak is less interested in girls than he is in swords. A few chapters into the book three men are already dead. Isak killed them all. This is not comfort reading. And just to make the point Lloyd provides Isak with a pretty, noble-born maid who, while initially attracted to the impressive young man, is soon alternately terrified and revolted by the cold-hearted killer she's commanded to serve.

Of course there is no drinking of souls involved. But then Isak has more prosaic matters to worry about. You see one of the best aspects of *The Stormcaller* is that Lloyd doesn't assume that being a long lost prince dragged from obscurity to wealth and power is easy. Firstly Isak knows nothing about how to behave in polite society: how to be diplomatic, how to

inspire loyalty, how to dispense justice and so on. Furthermore, any young man thrown into such a situation is likely to be immediately surrounded by eager "friends". Isak soon finds himself the target of ambitious nobles and mad prophets; even gods try to attach themselves to his banner. And an equally large collection of people, both natural and supernatural, is seeking to kill him before he learns to use his powers. Before long Isak realizes that, as a prominent political figure, he is going to have to ask his real friends to do things they may end up hating him for. That is perhaps the reality for which Elric's soul drinking is merely a metaphor

More generally, the world that Lloyd has created seems much more real than that of most fantasy books. He doesn't have the superb characterization and plotting of George R.R. Martin, nor the stark contrast of bleakness and humor that characterizes Steven Erikson, but he has created a fantasy world that has believable politics and is inhabited by large numbers of ordinary people as well as the major characters. Both Martin and Erikson often give the impression that if ordinary people do exist in their world they are probably all dead by now because of the awful things that have happened in the stories.

This is not to say that Lloyd's world is devoid of the supernatural. For example, he has a dragon:

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*Now a head appeared from the shadows, dipping down the slope with a deliberate lack of speed. It was fully two yards long, with a frill of bone sweeping back from the top of its head, which in turn was flanked by two huge horns that twisted back and up, another two yards long themselves. A wide snout held rows of glittering teeth; the protrusion of nostrils broke*

*its smooth curve, and a pair of tusk-like horns pointed forward from behind the frill of bone, almost as far as the very tip of the snout. Behind that lay two huge eyes, glimmers of deepest red in the underground night.*

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And he has elves (at least temporarily):

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*Now it was always the enemy when the soldiers spoke, not the elves: the enemy was a faceless creature, one to destroy. It needed no name.*

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And yes, both of them seem rather more real than they do in most fantasy books.

If there is an area where I think the book falls down it is probably on plot. There is clearly lots going on. Lloyd has got into the whole thing of portentous and mysterious events that happened in the past that need to be investigated, and there is a fair amount of political intrigue, but it is rather difficult to follow what is going on because of all the unfamiliar names. Hopefully the final version will include a dramatis personae (I've been reading a proof). Also I get the impression that the book was actually written to be two volumes. There is a fairly obvious natural break half way through, with the first half ending in Isak's first battle. The feel of the second half is very different. Some of the characters seem a lot more grown up. The narrative drops into a long, expository section where Isak meets mysterious people who know more about him than he does himself, before exploding into action again.

On the other hand, things come together fairly nicely at the end, and there is clearly a lot more to come. There are also some traces of real magic, as opposed to the

mainly role-playing game style magic that the book had featured up to that point. Lloyd manages the important task of providing a satisfying ending while leaving his readers wondering what will happen next. I think he'll do rather well.

*The Stormcaller* - Tom Lloyd - Orion - publisher's proof

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## **Relentless Realism Infects the Supernatural**

By Juliet E. McKenna

In recent years the crime genre has drawn ever closer to the themes and images of horror fiction. As serial killers have become the vogue, thriller writers have walked an increasingly fine line between exploration and exploitation in depicting such atrocities. Latterly the supernatural tale has ventured down mean streets where vampires must solve the crimes of their own kind before they're all dragged into the light of day. *Already Dead*, by Charlie Huston, is set squarely at the crossroads where crime and horror meet, drawing on the background and the strengths of both genres.

Joe's already dead. That gives him an edge when he sees newly infected zombies luring hapless students into a derelict building. He follows, not to save the students, but to deal with the zombies. Not that that's his job. But if their existence is proved, so could his be. He's a vampyre, one of many, though their number is ultimately insignificant in the wider population of Manhattan. An abused, homeless kid, he became infected with the virus when he was selling himself for sex. There's nothing

paranormal about his fate, any more than there's anything supernatural about the bacteria in a zombie's bite that turns their victims into shambling brain eaters. Sunlight kills vampires but only because the virus leaves them susceptible to advanced skin cancer after twenty minutes' exposure or so.

An older vampyre saved Joe from the rapid death that would normally follow infection but only for his own reasons. As soon as Joe realized he was being used yet again, he got out. Now he lives his limited, lonely life trying to stay under everyone's radar because he doesn't want to be beholden to any cause or clique.

Only, one of those cliques isn't pleased with him. The police found the aftermath of the zombie slaughter. The Coalition want Joe to clear up the loose ends and they're vampyres who aren't used to being refused. In this world, the undead are drawn from a broad range of the modern under-classes and counter-cultures. Just because they become vampyres, they don't stop being gangsters, gangstas, bikers, anarchists, communists, or radical feminists. There are even devotees of an unnerving sort of Zen vampirism. Joe's not interested. He tries to stay on good terms with all these groups if he can. If he can't, well, he'll fight back as best he can. He may be a vampyre but he's not stupid.

It soon becomes apparent he's going to need all his wits about him when he's unwillingly forced into a hunt for a missing girl. She's a 'camper', a rich girl from the suburbs who comes slumming with the homeless for kicks. Only, her parents know the truth about the undead and could cause no end of trouble. So if Joe doesn't find her, the Coalition are going to be very unhappy. As it turns out, an awful lot of people end up unhappy,

dead or both. Because Joe isn't stupid and he soon realizes there's far more to this than he's being told.

This is vampire-noir with a vengeance, with echoes of crime fiction from Philip Marlowe to NYPD Blue in the imagery and argot. The vampyre subculture is convincing and compelling, with its own jargon, drawn equally from Dracula novels, horror films and the real-life crimes of deluded wannabes. The cityscape of Manhattan's underbelly is authentically claustrophobic and menacing, peopled by outcasts and sub-humans, only some of whom are actually dead. In many supernatural thrillers, the outcasts are the misunderstood heroes while the supposedly normal people are the true villains. Here, pretty much everyone's a monster.

Does this sound like a fun read so far? Well it's not for the faint-hearted. But if you're in a robust frame of mind, the pace is rapid, the dialogue snappy and the puzzles challenging. Characters and scene setting alike are hard-edged and vividly colored. There's black humour threaded all through the story from the very outset. Need to get rid of a zombie? Fill its pockets with stones and push it off a bridge. Consider the fate of a vegan turned vampyre. How does he find a substitute for blood?

Joe is an increasingly interesting protagonist. He's amoral and offers no apology for it. But he sits up late at night to watch old movies by Billy Wilder and Howard Hawks. He has a girlfriend. She doesn't know what he is but since she's HIV-positive and refuses to have sex with anyone, he doesn't have to worry about infecting her with his own virus. However, he does have to live with the knowledge that the virus would save her

from Aids, at the price of her becoming like him. So he is a kind of hero, albeit a tarnished and tawdry one.

As the pace gets still faster, with questions answered only to throw up new puzzles, it's impossible not to become involved in Joe's fate. There's gore aplenty but Charlie Huston has a fine instinct for that line between exploitation and exploration and doesn't stumble. Most intriguing of all, in a story where the crass realities of lust and greed drive so much of the action, it may just be that the Zen vampyres are on to something of vital significance for Joe. Oh, and for the girl he's trying to save.

If you're feeling you're in any kind of rut with your vampire-thriller reading, this will shake you right out of it. You may want to go straight back to cozier blood-suckers but if you do, you'll look at them with fresh eyes and that's got to be a good thing. I shall keep a look out for Charlie Huston's next book, and mark it down for reading, when I'm in that suitably robust frame of mind.

*Already Dead* - Charlie Huston - Del Rey - trade paperback

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## Never Judge a Book by its Cover

By Juliet E. McKenna

Inevitably, first impressions do count. *Mortal Danger* by Eileen Wilks doesn't look like a genre book and the classification is paranormal romance. On the plus side, it's a classy cover, with no bodices ripping or biceps rippling. There are enthusiastic quotes — from romance magazines. I remind myself there's a lot of good

writing in that genre even if I don't choose to read it. And I'm an author in a field too often judged on the basis of writers dealing in lowest-common-denominator clichés. So I'm honor bound to judge this book on its merits, if I expect anyone to do the same for my work.

The opening scenes are certainly intriguing. We see a vividly unnerving Hell through the eyes of a young demon, Gan. Wilks manages to make this creature appealing and yet entirely alien with its lack of conscience or guilt. Its mistress is a vile monster reveling in dehumanized sexual perversion, yet the most frightening thing here appears to be an unassuming human girl. We learn that the target of this unholy alliance is one Lily Yu but more questions are left hanging.

More questions arise as we're introduced to Lily Yu at her sister's wedding. She's fending off an importunate cousin when she sees a woman she killed three weeks earlier. It becomes apparent that this second book is very much a continuation of events in the first, *Tempting Danger*. This could be a far greater problem than any assumptions I might make about romance writers. If you haven't read the first book, you certainly have to be alert to pick up the details of what happened, to make sense of the current situation. Fortunately the balance never quite tips into incomprehensibility and there's soon plenty of action setting this story going in its own right.

Lily is brutally attacked as she follows this apparent ghost. Given she recently narrowly escaped being sacrificed to a vile goddess by the Most Reverend Patrick Harlowe, that brings in the FBI's Magical Crimes Division. Lily works for them now, partly because of her experiences but mostly because she is sensitive to magic,



experiencing it through a fascinating kinesthesia. The demon Gan's magic is orange, it turns out.

Only Lily is more than any of these things. She's the mate of Rule Turner, a werewolf prince. Their bond goes far beyond mere love and he is far more inclined to rely on his own people and resources in his determination to protect her. The handling of this relationship soon shows the quality of Wilks' writing. The wedding indicated a deft touch and a keen eye for the bonds and tensions between sisters, cousins, children and parents. The fall-out from the attack on Lily shows similarly acute observations of professionals dealing with those they consider outside their circles. When it comes to Lily and Rule, we see both their viewpoints as they deal with the adjustments they both must make to their new situation. They have separate histories, professional and sexual, an age gap to deal with, and potentially difficult families standing on the sidelines. Both realize there's a lot more to making a relationship than the initial courtship.

I find this an unexpected plus of reading this second volume first. A few of the supernatural/human couples on the genre shelves seem permanently stuck in adolescent 'will they, won't they?' phase. In terms of this book, such a 'grown-up' element definitely helps anchor events to a recognizable reality which makes the transition to the unreal all the more believable. And as far as adult content goes, sex is handled with consummate writerly understanding of when less is more.

Wilks' choices in the werewolf mythos are very interesting. Aspects such as rapid healing, long life, clannish families and the rarity of true mate-bonds facilitate rapid familiarization for the reader. On the other

hand, she picks up a far less well-known tradition where werewolves are the 'dogs of God'. In this case, they are the chosen of a goddess, one whose key aspect is not unsurprisingly the moon. They fight against the evil of the hell dimension where that unassuming girl is plotting against Lily. Rule remains focused on this threat while Lily and the FBI pursue the Most Revered Patrick Harlowe, who has now apparently turned serial killer, because the evil that drives him, that comes from this hell, is blind to werewolves.

Opposition of female forces rather than typically masculine principles is another thing that distinguishes this book. So do the overt religious elements. Where some writers skirt such undoubted complications, Wilks sees how sensitive inclusion adds to the sense of reality vital for suspension of disbelief. Her restraint in adding references only when they naturally serve her purposes makes this all the more effective. A similar light touch weaves magic into an integral part of this world. Werewolves have recently come into the light and the supernatural has been grudgingly acknowledged. The FBI use sorcery for their own purposes, as do the werewolves.

Lily is working with Cynna Weaver, an abrasive female cop with a talent for magical finding, while Rule relies on Cullen, a clanless werewolf and instinctive mage. These secondary characters, and others, are adroitly drawn and offer their own perspectives on Lily and Rule, further rounding out the tale. The hunt is on, focusing on Harlowe's crimes with the clarity and compassion of the better class of crime novel, running in parallel with the supernatural. Thrill seekers visiting the tacky Club Hell get far more they bargained for: Rule is dealing with the

reality of evil, not fakery for the sake of entertainment.

It turns out Patrick Harlowe is killing to draw Lily to him. He's in possession of a lethal demonic artifact that could cause utter calamity. Rule sees the danger to Lily but she cannot hold back when Harlowe sets a diabolically heartless trap for her. She soon finds more than her loyalties divided. She's caught in Gan's inconstant, illogical hell. Rule is caught with her, in wolf form in a realm with no moon. If they cannot find a way out, someone will die. But can they find a way out without someone dying? The resolution is both satisfying and shocking. This battle is over but the war goes on. As opponents in this story are dealt with, new players have appeared who promise to change the rules quite drastically.

I found *Mortal Danger* a thoroughly enjoyable read. I'll be looking out both for the previous volume and the next book in what promises to be a series well worth following.

*Mortal Danger* - Eileen Wilks - Berkeley - mass market paperback

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## Where Arts Rule the World

By Mario Guslandi

Set in a parallel world and precisely in the isle of Mnemosyne, 2,000 years after the birth of the Divine Caesar, the three fictional pieces assembled in *The Wayward Muse* reveal Brian Stableford's personal muse as one able to inspire a type of narrative both fresh and mature, fit to satisfy the most sophisticated reader.

In "The Secret Exhibition" Claudius Jaseph, a young, talented painter, keeps secretly hidden the portraits of three beautiful ladies. Their souls and erotic powers are somehow embedded in their pictures even after all of them in turn have taken their own lives. An artistic competition with the enigmatic, older master painter, Alex Rathenius, and a rivalry for winning the love of the younger sister of one of the unfortunate ladies will eventually lead to the disclosure of the true nature of the uncanny portraits.

Like the above story the subsequent tale, "The Incubus of the Rose", has previously appeared in an earlier version in *Weird Tales*. The piece is a clever representation of the power of music as an art capable of summoning creatures from beyond. This time Rathenius appears to be the author of an ingenuous scheme to help the composer Conrad Othman to conquer the physical love of the lesbian harpist Dorothea. Well constructed and quite entertaining, the story has the levity of a musical Scherzo.

Stableford's writing style is delightfully unfashionable, classical in its way, now blunt, now reticent. The implications of his stories are deep and thought provoking, making his fiction unsuitable for anyone looking for mere entertainment or superficial frissons.

The long novella, "The Arms of Morpheus", original to this collection, is a much more complex and ambitious work featuring both Rathenius and his lady friend, the poet Hecate Rain, other inhabitants of Mnemosyne and a bunch of foreign characters. The piece is a medley of different motives such as the power of dreams and, again, the secret force of art, blended into the general framework of a

mystery where several murders take place.

Once more, Stableford's narrative is impeccable, his writing style learned and steady. The basic plot, however, is rather complicated and somehow lacks in plausibility. Moreover, the story appears too diluted, spread as it is across too many pages, and strained, here and there, with too much talking. A more synthetic rendering of the plot would have made more convincing the already slightly improbable chain of events.

All in all, however, the world created by Stableford is original and extremely intriguing, deserving to be further developed in new, future instalments which, hopefully, will soon take shape.

*The Wayward Muse* - Brian Stableford - Black Coat Press - trade paperback

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## Gentle Ghosts

By Mario Guslandi

*Phantoms at the Phil* is a cute, small book of 92 pages collecting three stories commissioned for a Christmas ghost-story event that took place at a private Library in Newcastle upon Tyne in 2004. A delightful non-fictional introductory piece by Ramsey Campbell sets the tone by reporting his experience with domestic, friendly ghosts dwelling in his own house.

The first story, "The Custodian" by Sean O'Brien, features a fastidious scholar who, day in, day out, attends the local library to peruse volumes in order to complete a totally insignificant literary essay. A ghostly apparition and a haunted book will trap him forever in a much more

demanding task. Written in an elegant prose, partly reminiscent of the classical Victorian ghost stories, partly of Kafka's atmospheres, the tale is quite enjoyable, in spite of its rather strained final section.

"The Dusk Jacket" by Gail-Nina Anderson is a rather puzzling piece of fiction, involving an ailing landlord, an absent-minded tenant, a neglected rose garden and an odd booklet. Told in a delicate narrative style, it remains somehow unaccomplished and the spectre showing up in the last two pages seems a bit out of context. But it may well be that I haven't fully grasped the meaning of this flimsy, obscure yarn.

Finally, in Chaz Brenchley's "Another Chart of the Silences", the narrative ingredients are constituted by the cruel, haunted rocks on the sea coast luring ships and sailors to disaster and death, a friendship between a sailor and a teenager, and a cellular phone catching messages from Beyond. A modern, original ghost story, nicely blending elements from the past and the present.

Packaged with a CD recording the actual readings of the three stories during the literary meeting, the book can provide good entertainment and a few pleasant shivers to any genre fan.

*Phantoms at the Phil* - Chaz Brenchley (ed.) - SideReal/Northern Gothic - hardcover

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## Conflicting Emotions

By Karina Meerman

The first book of Fiona McIntosh's *The Quickening* series, *Myrren's Gift*, seemed like a standard epic fantasy, yet I couldn't

stop reading it. There were some fairly big annoyances and literature it is not, but I thought it a pleasant read. The ending was awful, yet I want to read Book Two. Now either I'm a very indecisive person, or this book is not very consistent in quality.

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## **General**

The story starts in the country of Morgravia, where magic is practically non-existent as witches have all been hunted down and burnt over the centuries. People live quite happily under the rule of the good king Magnus. The main character is Wyl Thyrsk, plain looking son of the rather ugly general, Fergys Thyrsk.

Fergys dies in the prologue. During the war with the neighbouring country of Briavel he sacrifices his life for that of his king and friend. Since plain Wyl and his pretty sister are now orphans, King Magnus promises to look after Wyl as if he were his own son and train him to be the general he is supposed to be. The daughter just needs to be married off well. And here is the first of my big annoyances. The women in the book are just not very interesting. They are either virgins or whores, sheep or vixen. I know this is supposed to be a Medieval-type community, but for goodness sake, it's fantasy so there is no need to set back women's development by hundreds of years.

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## **Cruel King**

Anyway, fourteen-year-old Wyl is taken to the castle to be trained as a general and befriend the king's son, as is another tradition. But alas... Magnus' son

Celimus, although gorgeous looking, is vain and cruel and spends his time torturing little animals and pestering Wyl. It's all a bit Marcus Aurelius and Commodus, but with a very young (and red-haired) Maximus.

When one of the last witches in the country is caught, the classic psychopath Celimus takes his entire entourage down to the cellars to watch her being tortured. The witch is a beautiful young girl called Myrren. During the lovingly described torture scenes (big annoyance number two), she connects with Wyl. When he shows her kindness at the stake, she gives him a gift. He thinks it's just the puppy she's asked him to look after, but we suspect it's something more than that. And of course it is, although we don't find out until later.

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## **General in exodus**

Years later, Magnus falls seriously ill and Celimus can't wait to take the throne. I don't understand how a good king can stand by and let an obvious tyrant take over after his death, but that's families for you I suppose. The full extent of Celimus' evil character is not revealed to the world until immediately after Magnus' death. Wyl's sister suffers a horrible fate and Wyl himself is sent away to Briavel, in the company of the mercenary Romen Koreldy. Romen is ordered to kill Wyl as soon as his mission is complete. Wyl is supposed to ask the King of Briavel for his daughter's hand in marriage, on behalf of Celimus. Marriage will bond the two countries so they can fight the increasingly aggressive mountain kingdom to the North.

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## Looks are not deceiving

Wyl meets the gorgeous princess Valentyna and falls head over heels in love with her. But he is shorter than her and uglier, so no chance there. According to McIntosh anyway. Looks obviously are very important to her, judging by the way characters are described. To me, they just contributed to the stereotypes (big annoyance number three). Wyl and the king get on so well that Wyl decides to be honest and tell him all about the nasty king Celimus. But a major conflict erupts in Briavel castle and everybody ends up fighting. The king dies and the princess escapes with the puppy, who has grown to become a big black dog with magical powers. In a final conflict between Wyl and Romen, we discover what Myrren's gift truly is. Not to give everything away, but Wyl ends up being a good-looking man who is unrecognisable to anyone who knew him as he was. And he is now taller than princess Valentyna, which is handy.

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## Next?

Disguised, Wyl sets out to rescue his sister, kill the king, marry the queen and find out what his big, black dog really is. He manages little of this in Book One, as McIntosh creates all sorts of problems for him. The marriage between his beloved Queen Valentyna and the cruel Celimus seems set to go ahead, war is brewing in the North and the best assassin of the country is after him. I want to read Book Two but am a bit worried about it too. Myrren's gift could be used for a novel storyline or for some really horrible clichés. The way I feel now, it could go either way.

*Myrren's Geschenk (Myrren's Gift)* - Fiona McIntosh (tr. P. Cuijpers) - Uitgeverij Luitingh Fantasy - mass market paperback

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## Fisheye View

By Sandy Auden

PS Publishing's *Postscripts* continues to prove that the genres really can embrace any topic at all. In this issue most of the authors are already published or just about to be published by PS themselves, and this gives the reader a good chance to sample stories before deciding whether or not to buy more. This edition is not quite as pert and consistently enjoyable as *Postscripts* #4 but it still maintains a high standard of writing.

Lawrence Person's "Starving Africans" story is a stark contrast to his gently humorous tale of Taoist magic in the previous issue. This time his setting is Mozambique and his main character is a journalist despairing in equal measures about the endless suffering around him and the Western World's utter lack of interest. When the rebels turn up at the UN refugee camp, it's not long before the journalist (and the others stationed with him) *are* the news. Written with warmth and frank emotion, this heart-rending story reads more like a documentary than fiction, but the journalist's hallucinations provide the genre interest and result in a short story that lingers in the memory longer than many full-blown fantasy volumes.

In "A Signal from Earth", Stephen Baxter has penned one possible outcome for three of the characters in his novel *Sunstorm* (co-written with Arthur C Clarke). The

electronic intelligences had been fleeing a solar disaster when they arrive at a planet where the main indigenous species is on the cusp of extinction. This isn't a tale about the electronic personalities though; it's a look at the evolution of a seal-like race whose history will end with the death of Witness, its final member. Not surprisingly, Baxter has managed to work huge timescales into this miniature tale as Witness recounts the history of her species. The stellar conditions and climatic issues are technically fascinating and the characterization is solid. It's an endearing little tale with an uplifting and optimistic ending.

Juliet McKenna's "Win Some, Lose Some" brings a flavor of adventure and risk to the *Postscripts* mix. A prequel to her first book, *The Thief's Gamble*, this story addresses the reader's curiosity about the incident ten years ago in Selerima that influenced Livak's future life, and includes details about how Arle Cordainer was actually involved. There's a large cast of characters for such a short tale, but McKenna handles it with skill. The dialogue is excellent and the author has deftly avoided any major info-dumps. The result is a story that rattles along at pace and finishes way too soon.

The opposite can be said of "Gold Mountain" by Chris Roberson. This well-written tale features a young woman with unresolved family issues, interviewing an old man about his work on the construction of a 3,000 km-high tower in China. While the world Roberson creates is deeply detailed, there's insufficient narrative drive in the wrap-around tale of redemption and confession to succeed as a short story. It will probably work well read as a background piece for Roberson's upcoming PS Publishing book, *The Voyage*

of *Night Shining White*, but as a standalone it's a heavy read.

Also surprisingly slow was Zoran Živković's "The Hospital Room". Equally as intense as the first story in the sequence in *Postscripts* #4, this new tale focuses on a man stuck in a hospital bed being visited by patients from other wards. Each visitor tells the patient about their jobs in the circus and how they dreamed about him. There's an imaginative array of tales and some entertaining moments. The underlying structure matches the previous story but somehow the forward momentum of the tale was lost. The other story delivered an ambiguous ending and this one sadly delivers the same. Perhaps when the final two stories in the series have been published, a re-assessment will be needed.

The humorous contribution in this issue is Joe Hill's story from the set of a George Romero zombie movie. Bobby Conroy was a budding stand-up comic who lost his way and his girl long ago. Meeting Harriet years later when they are both under full zombie make-up as extras on the film-set seems like a second chance to Bobby. Until he meets Harriet's son and husband. Hill likes exploiting pop culture for his horror stories (for another example see "Best New Horror" in his collection *20<sup>th</sup> Century Ghosts*) and he does it very successfully. More lighthearted than "Best New Horror", "Bobby Conroy Comes Back From The Dead" examines bittersweet relationships and the wrong turns taken in life that can only be seen with hindsight. A delightful read.

The non-fiction offering in this edition features Iain Emsley's interview with China Miéville and Matthew Rossi's article about Palenque. Emsley and Miéville take an interesting tour around

politics and genres, and Rossi takes us on a spiritual journey through the deserted corridors of the Mayan city of Palenque. Both articles feature rather abrupt openings that leave the reader trying to get up to speed but do offer some thoughtful comments for consideration.

Overall there is a feel of hit and miss with the stories in this issue but there's no denying that some hefty themes are put under the magnifying glass. Fiction has the breadth of scope to be everything from light and fun to dark and terrifying, and thought-provoking genre fiction that leaves an unpleasant taste in the mouth is something that *should* be published – if only to keep us all in touch with our sense of humanity.

*Postscripts* #5 - Pete Crowther (ed.) - PS Publishing – digest magazine

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## All Glitter, No Action

By Stuart Carter

I didn't discover until afterwards that *Casshern*, a remarkably beautiful CGI-fest, was based on a 1973 Japanese anime of the same name. It explains quite a lot.

*Casshern* is the eponymous hero of the film – the reanimated son of a scientist who has discovered 'neo-cells' (a bit like stem cells, but whizzier), the hoped-for basis of a revolutionary new spare-part surgery technology. Casshern's father works for a monolithic state that has been at war with another monolithic state for a very long time (shades of 1984 here). When Casshern is killed in the war and brought home for a hero's funeral something weird happens at his father's research lab. The neo-cells spontaneously organize

themselves into living human beings and try to escape, only to be shot and killed by the understandably rattled authorities. Four of them do manage to escape, however, and manage to reach a kind of mountain fastness, conveniently equipped with endless hordes of robot soldiers.

Meanwhile, back at the lab, a tired and emotional Papa Casshern drops his son into the neo-cell 'soup', which not only miraculously reanimates him but endows him with remarkable energy – so much energy, in fact, that our papa has to build a special suit of armor to contain it lest Casshern explode.

And it's fortunate he does so, because the product of the neo-cells – calling themselves, in a fit of originality, Neo-humans – return with a grudge against humanity that Frankenstein's monster might hesitate to endorse as proportional. Cue some remarkable fight scenes between the armored, energized Casshern and the unarmoured but very energetic (and backed with hordes of retro looking soldier robots) Neo-humans.

Unfortunately, it has taken more than 30 overblown minutes to get even this far, and the remarkable fight scenes are over far too soon. Imagine if an overexcited eight-year old had been given a few million dollars and no adult supervision to create a film that was bigger, brasher, faster, brighter and crazier than *The Matrix*. What might he have come up with? *Casshern* is not that film, sadly – which is a shame because it would have been substantially better if it were.

Once entire legions of retro looking soldier robots have been dispatched and the Neo-humans and Casshern have briefly squared off, things go downhill with a speed inversely proportional to that of the actual plot development in this film. I

thought Jim Jarmusch's recent *Broken Flowers* was a rather labored film, one that filled entire minutes with stillness and silence, dragging out too many scenes until I wanted to scream, "All right! I get it! Can we please move on now, please?!" In a cultural reversal of no little irony, *Casshern* makes *Broken Flowers* look almost anime-esque in its devil-may-care, breakneck pace. And *Broken Flowers* also has a significant advantage over *Casshern* in that **we know what is going on!** Despite the high production values, the remarkable similarity of the early fight scene to those of almost any average anime may set alarm bells ringing. (Even the sound effects seem familiar!) You soon realize that *Casshern* is, in actual fact, a 1973 Japanese anime, albeit one with 2005 special effects and inflation-adjusted budget. And it's almost completely incomprehensible. Stuff happens, people watch it happen, then we watch them think about it for a bit. If it's a particularly hectic section then someone might venture an opinion about what just happened. Another thing will probably then happen – which you will have to rewind because you'll assume you nodded off for a minute or so and missed the little clarifying link between the two things.

There are no little clarifying links between things.

I often don't mind films being a bit slow and portentous; similarly, I can sympathize with films that are, frankly, a bit silly. What I can't handle are films that are slow, portentous *and* silly as well. Which is *Casshern*.

In its favor, *Casshern* looks beautiful – remarkably beautiful; there's a lot of CGI here. No, there's more CGI than that – however much CGI you think there might be, double that, and add more CGI effects

over the top of absolutely everything, giving some very striking filter and light effects, but also some flashes of metaphorical vision that you simply would not see in a Hollywood film, let alone a Hollywood science fiction film (which are frequently rooted in a very Hard SF mindset). *Casshern* is, initially at least, a blizzard of images and colors that will make you gasp. After a couple of hours, which will feel more like four, your gasps will have long since turned to sighs.

*Casshern* - Kazuaki Kiriya - Momentum Pictures Home Entertainment - DVD

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## The Voting Dead

By Peter Wong

Can genre fiction become an effective vehicle for acerbic political satire? Director Joe Dante takes a stab at doing just that with his contribution to the cable TV anthology series *Masters Of Horror*. His episode, "Homecoming," mixes zombies and electoral politics.

The story is basically an extended flashback that charts the last month of the 2004 American presidential election. David Murch, a member of the inner circle shepherding the current president's re-election campaign, is touched by the grief of a Mrs. Hofstadter who lost her son in the Iraq War. In response, the campaign official wishes that the woman's son and the other American soldiers killed in Iraq could return from the dead. Murch's wish gets transformed into a pleasant presidential sound bite, and that would be that.

Then the wish comes true. Americans killed in Iraq start rising from their coffins.



The silent walking dead soldiers soon become an embarrassment to the presidential re-election campaign. It's one thing to advocate a war. It's another thing entirely to advocate a war when there are **very** visible reminders that in war, soldiers get seriously maimed and even lose their lives. But how do you get rid of zombie soldiers? As it turns out, you let them vote. Having voted, they return to the grave.

But what happens to the re-election campaign when the resurrections occur because the soldiers are willing to vote for anyone who can stop "the evil war in Iraq"? Further, how can political momentum be restored when the public starts to sympathize with the zombie soldiers and their views on the Iraq War? A plan to "persuade" the resurrected son of Mrs. Hofstadter to become the campaign's pro-Iraq War spokesman seriously backfires. Despite the campaign's political wounds, though, the election is not over yet.

"Homecoming" stakes out a moderate political position on America's presence in Iraq. Mrs. Hofstadter may question why America is in Iraq, but the episode declines to speculate on specific negative reasons. Thus, there is almost no articulation of such left-of-center ideas as obtaining control of Iraq's oil supplies or extending the American empire. On the other hand, the pro-Iraq War forces as represented by Curt Rand proudly talk about the invasion and occupation of Iraq as an unneeded product sold to the American people. Generous applications of horse droppings and elbow grease play a major role in the sale.

The film also clearly sympathizes with the men and women sent out to fight America's wars. The soldiers are generally

shown as pawns of others' politics. Viewers allergic to excess sentimentality will definitely have trouble with the scene of the impromptu family circle formed by a zombie, a family dog, and a couple of worried parents with a son in Iraq.

The film may not identify the party Murch belongs to, but several prominent Republicans provide models for "Homecoming"'s villains. Political pundit Jane Cleaver is Ann Coulter, right down to the best-selling "attack liberals" book and the personalized car license plate reading "BSH BABE." Campaign chief Curt Rand physically resembles Dick Cheney but displays the Machiavellian traits of presidential advisor Karl Rove. Unlike the Cindy Sheehan figure, Cleaver and Rand lack any humanizing characteristics.

The acting of the principal roles consequently doesn't rise above the "I enjoy being evil" level. One would be tempted on political grounds to let the one-dimensional villainy slide, saying it's a small payback for the 24-7 demonizing that the real-life Cleaver and Rand engage in on a daily basis. Also, the real life Republican Party controls the Presidency, both houses of Congress, a good chunk of the Supreme Court, and a majority of the state governorships. Their current party leadership wants still more power. Yet the mainstream media acts as if such ambition was natural and just.

But then *Heimat* comes to mind. The German television epic devoted episodes to showing the very human failings that caused average Germans to embrace Nazism without whitewashing Nazism's crimes. The evil of that belief became then a disturbing temptation. By contrast, the lust for power that motivates the supporters of "Homecoming"'s unnamed president never feels evil and disturbing.

The film's occasional references to real-life Republican dirty tricks don't bridge that emotional gap.

Had "Homecoming" appeared years ago, its genre fiction conventions would have limited its effectiveness as political satire. The film does mock the president's alleged empathy with common men. But it fails in the more crucial task of dragging forward and ridiculing the reasoning and motivations behind such Republican positions as supporting the Iraq War. The zombie soldiers may be sympathetic monsters, even if "Homecoming" assumes they'd all oppose a continued occupation of Iraq. Yet the film's most visceral charge comes from hoping the Republican politico surrogates suffer incredibly painful fates at the zombies' hands.

Nowadays, though, mass American political discourse has moved away from reasonably intelligent sophistication to favor the nurturing and channeling of visceral reaction. The Us vs. Them equation feels like the beginning and ending point for modern political discussion (e.g. the continued popularity of the red/blue state divide). "Homecoming"'s target audience has thus intellectually slid downwards to the point where Dante's film appears sophisticated rather than mildly amusing. That thought oddly provides more scares than any shot of the film's zombies.

*Masters Of Horror: Homecoming* - Directed by Joe Dante (Loosely based on Dale Bailey's "Death And Suffrage") - Showtime - TV

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## Secrets of the Loch

By Cheryl Morgan

One of the things I can be sure of when I come to read a new book by Tom Arden is that there will be something very strange about it. *The Translation of Bastian Test* is no exception. It starts off almost as if it is to be a mainstream novel. Our hero is the ward of Julian Test, a reclusive lesbian artist. The date is 1926. Julian is on the verge of a break-up with her latest "friend", the American actress, Magnolia Touch. Then everything goes wrong. Their house is burned down, Julian dies in the blaze, and Magnolia disappears. Bastian is left in the care of an eccentric lawyer called Mr. Quench.

At this point things turn a little pulpish. Quench takes Bastian up to London to introduce him to Society and do something about getting him educated (something Julian seemed to think would happen naturally). But it soon turns out that Quench is a member of an odd Freemason-like cult and has even odder Jacobite leanings. What is more, Bastian has a mysterious guardian, The Marquess of Drumhallurick, who is fabulously rich thanks to his involvement in something called the British African Survey Trust, a company that has based its fortune on gold mining in the British Anterior Sombagan Territory. (If you are starting to see a convergence of acronyms here, don't worry, you are supposed to.) Furthermore, said gold mines were supposedly found by an expedition led by Sir Lemuel Covery, FRS, an eccentric amateur geologist with some decidedly unorthodox views about prospecting that would not be out of place in a New Age bookstore.

Poor young Bastian gets packed off to his guardian's remote Scottish castle where he encounters yet more strange people: a retired Shakespearean actor, Sir Farley Elphinstone, who sounds like he was born to play Falstaff, and a villainous German-American scientist, Dr. Feuer. What has all this got to do with aliens from Antares? Well, if I haven't got you intrigued already then Arden has probably gone too far over the top for you. Otherwise you'll just have to read the book to find out.

In the meantime you will be treated to more and more revelations about Bastian's family. It is amazing what the British nobility hide away in their country houses and gothic castles. Really, there's material here for no end of tragic romances. Mad old women in attics, villainous rapists, tragic suicides, those sort of books. Arden mines a fair number of them. Bastian spends some of his time reading Sir Walter Scott, as anyone marooned in a remote Scottish castle might.

Unlike Arden's Orokon series, *Bastian Test* is not really a "gay book," although Bastian does develop relationships with both the son and daughter of Sir Farley. But like the Orokon books, this novel is at times very funny and at others decidedly off the wall. Hey, it is an erotic comedy gothic science fiction pulp mystery with added Tartan Tat. What can you expect? "Genre bending?" Did someone say, "genre bending"...?

Just one small warning to finish with. If the previous examples of word play have led you to expect the involvement of a certain Egyptian cat-goddess, then like me you will be slightly disappointed. Next time I see Mr. Arden I shall demand a bowl of fresh tuna in compensation.

*The Translation of Bastian Test* - Tom Arden - Immanion Press - trade paperback

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## Present Worries

By Cheryl Morgan

I'm trying hard to avoid reviewing anthologies these days, but when one comes in with a beautiful John Picacio cover, and is edited by Lou Anders, the book is hard to resist. Anders, of course, produced the highly regarded *Live Without a Net*, and it is likely that anything new he produces will also contain some very good stories. Also the new book, *Futureshocks*, has an interesting theme.

In his introduction Anders refers to Alvin Toffler's famous concept of "future shock," that being the discomfort that arises from the culture one has grown up with being supplanted by a new and more technologically advanced one. There are still people alive today who remember a world where motorcars were rare. My own life has seen the rise of television, space travel and the Internet. And books like Charlie Stross's *Accelerando* hold out the prospect of even faster technological advances to come. So Anders has got together a bunch of professional futurologists (i.e. science fiction writers) and asked them to speculate about what might produce future shock in years to come.

Of course with any venture like this the vision of the future presented is in part a function of the views of the editor, and of the people likely to submit stories to him. I note, for example, that there are several stories that anticipate the world being taken over by Evil Republican Fundamentalist Christian Monsters who oppress everyone. There are no stories about how the USA is so weakened by the actions of Commie Pinko Faggot Bleeding

Heart Liberals that it gets taken over by Raghead Terrorist Fundamentalists who oppress everyone. There is one story about how everyone converts to Judaism when a scientist develops a means to seeing God, but like so many pro-Jewish stories it is as much a self-deprecating joke about Jews as it is propaganda.

With that caveat in mind, what do science fiction writers worry about? Possibly the most interesting aspect of the book is that, although there are no stories specifically about the environment, many of the writers assume that by the time their stories take place the Earth's ecology will have been wrecked, perhaps sufficiently that everyone has to live in protective domes. This isn't the focus of the stories, it is more background, the way that in the 1950's all stories tended to assume that by the 21<sup>st</sup> Century we'd all have air cars and household robots, and would take our holidays on Mars.

While political worries affect many of the stories, another common theme is that of increasing social control in the workplace. "Shuteye for the Timebroker" by Paul di Filippo and "The Pearl Diver" by Caitlín R. Kiernan both imagine worlds in which all workers are subject to draconian behavior rules and transgressing them results not just in the loss of your job, but expulsion from middle class society. Sean McMullen in "The Engines of Arcadia" goes further and imagines a world in which Eloi-like humans are programmed to endlessly act out lives from a formula fantasy novel (the romance sub-genre rather than the quest sub-genre) in order to keep society "safe".

Other writers focus on more specific ideas. Alan Dean Foster's "The Man Who Knew Too Much" speculates about a new sickness called knowledge addiction. If

learning can be automated, he reasons, there will be people who simply can't get enough knowledge. Kevin J. Anderson in "Job Qualifications" speculates about how political candidates might make use of clones of themselves to help them get close to the electorate. And Chris Roberson's "Contagion" is about a world in which sucking the blood of certain people makes a lot of sense.

One or two writers looked much further into the future than I had expected given the theme. John Meaney's "Looking Through Mother's Eyes", while a great story, makes a better dark fantasy tale than a prediction of future biology. Adam Roberts' "Man You Gotta Go", on the other hand, while looking very far into the future, provides an interesting explanation of Fermi's Paradox, and of the likely fate of mankind.

A couple of stories also managed to find news ways in which civil rights would be extended in the future. Paul Melko's "The Teosinte War" imagines a world in which "alternate history" doesn't mean authors having clever ideas, but rather historians interfering in the timelines of parallel universes, sometimes with tragic consequences. Robert Charles Wilson, in "The Cartesian Theatre", one of the standout stories in the anthology, imagines a world in which it is possible to kill people for entertainment without committing a crime. The background to Wilson's idea is that the world has become so prosperous, and automation so prevalent, that no one needs to work. This, he speculates, will lead to few people bothering to work, and to those who don't seeking more and more degraded forms of entertainment in order to combat their boredom. It is a much darker vision of Eloi life than McMullen produces, but possibly preferable to having to spend eternity in a

long dress and a wimple simpering over the bravery of knights in tournaments.

When you are reviewing an anthology there are two very different questions you need to ask: whether the book works as a whole, and whether the individual stories work in isolation. Up until now I have been discussing the theme of the book and how the stories fit into it. Robert Charles Wilson's contribution is an excellent example of a story that does both jobs well. It has interesting futurological ideas, and is a gripping story as well. But my favorite story from the book is actually one of the "doom and gloom" political stories that I'm not sure Anders should have included.

"Absalom's Mother", by Louise Marley, imagines a world in which the "War on Terror" has become so all-consuming that children as young as 11 are drafted into the US army and indoctrinated to become ruthless killers of the "enemies of America". Personally I have a fair amount of faith in the good sense of the American people not to let things get that bad, and if things do get as unpleasant as the story suggests I doubt that peaceful protests of the type written about will have any effect at all. But as a story "Absalom's Mother" is particularly powerfully written and so gripping that I actually missed a train because I was so engrossed in it. I only wish we could see more short stories as good.

*Futureshocks* - Lou Anders (ed.) - RoC - trade paperback

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## Out of Synch

By Cheryl Morgan

March is a good month for British books being released in the US. We begin with Pyr's edition of Ian McDonald's *River of Gods*, which was one of my favorite books from last year. It won the BSFA Awards and was a Hugo nominee despite not having US publication. Any US reader who hasn't already bought the book on import should be going out and buying this book. Here's hoping Pyr give it a huge push.

Also due up from Pyr is the third and final volume of John Meaney's Nulapeiron series, *Resolution*. Anyone who has been waiting for the whole series to be available can now go out and get them.

Finally from the UK we have Night Shade's edition of Tricia Sullivan's *Maul*. This is another book I nominated for a Hugo on its UK publication. In 2004 it made the short lists for the Clarke, BSFA and Tiptree Awards. I hope to see large piles of it on the dealer tables at Wiscon, because anyone who is a Wiscon regular ought to read this book.

I note also that the paperback edition of Robert Charles Wilson's *Spin* has recently been released in the US. Those of you looking for another really good SF book to add to *Accelerando* on your Hugo ballot might want to go and buy this book in a hurry.

*River of Gods* - Ian McDonald - Pyr - hardcover

*Resolution* - John Meaney - Pyr - hardcover

*Maul* - Tricia Sullivan - Night Shade Books - hardcover

*Spin* - Robert Charles Wilson - Tor - mass market paperback

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## Miscellany

By Cheryl Morgan

### Locus Poll Voting Opens

Voting is now open for this year's *Locus* Poll. As usual, *Emerald City* is eligible for the Best Magazine category. We finished 8th in the past two years, which I think is phenomenal given that we are up against the likes of *Asimov's*, *Analog*, *F&SF* and *Interzone*. As regular readers will know, this is the award I really care about. It isn't one we'll ever win, but it is one that gets us credibility in the industry. It costs you nothing to vote. You don't even have to be a *Locus* subscriber. You can cast your ballot [here](https://secure.locusmag.com/2006/Issues/2006PollAndSurvey.html): <https://secure.locusmag.com/2006/Issues/2006PollAndSurvey.html>.

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### The Announcements Blog

Regular blog readers will have noticed something new this month. For a long time I have been struggling to keep up with the amount of SF&F news there is around the Internet. I generally post news if people send it to me, but I only get a fraction of what is available, and there's no way I can follow every author blog. There are just too many of them. What I felt I needed was a central place where I could get the news without the chat. And I thought other people might like to see such a thing too.

Not that I have anything against author web sites. Putting up a whole load of personal information is exactly what a lot of fans want authors to do. But people will only follow such blogs for their favorite

authors, and thus might miss the news of someone coming to town for a signing, or releasing a new book.

So far things are going quite well in that I have a lot of people signed up: mostly authors but also editors, publicists, critics and so on. Basically this is a "more the merrier" thing. I don't expect many people to post regularly, but with a lot of people involved we'll still get plenty of traffic.

Anyway, the blog is here: <http://www.emcit.com/announce/>. And if you'd like to be involved please let me know.

And, not content with that, I'm pleased to note that you can also get industry news from the SFWA Pressbook. Thanks to the nice people at SFWA, you can read it on the *Emerald City* web site, right next to the Announcements blog. There's a small amount of clever technical stuff involved here, but basically syndication is good. Expect to see more news on the web site soon.

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### Crawford Award Short List

The short list from which this year's Crawford Award will be picked has been announced by the Award's Administrator, Gary K. Wolfe. The Award will be presented at ICFA, March 15-19 in Fort Lauderdale, though the winner may be announced before then.

The Crawford is presented to a writer for a first fantasy book. The lucky nominees are: Judith Berman for *Bear Daughter*; Hal Duncan for *Vellum*; Frances Hardinge for *Fly by Night*; Joe Hill for *Twentieth Century Ghosts*; Sarah Monette for *Melusine*; Holly Phillips for *In the Palace of Repose*; Anna Tambour for *Spotted Lily*.

There has been a certain amount of confusion in the blogosphere as to what the award is actually for. Just to clear this up, the Crawford is for the Best New Fantasy Writer (or words to that effect) of the preceding year. However, one's status as a "new fantasy writer" is defined by the production of a book. You can't, for example, win the Crawford on the basis of short fiction in magazines. And, unlike say Best Professional Artist in the Hugos, the judging is not done on the basis of the entire body of work in the year in question. It is done on the basis of the book that qualifies the author for the award.

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### Hugo Deadline Approaches

The nominating deadline for this year's Hugos is midnight on March 10<sup>th</sup> (PST), so if you have not nominated yet you don't have a lot of time. If you are still stuck for ideas, you can find a lot of suggestions on the *Emerald City* Hugo Recommendations Page:

[http://www.emcit.com/hugo\\_section.php?rec.htm](http://www.emcit.com/hugo_section.php?rec.htm).

And, quite importantly, if you are kindly considering nominating *Emerald City*, please remember that you have to do so in the Best Semiprozine category.

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### Mewsings Move

At the same time as setting up the Announcements Blog I also moved my personal blog to the *Emerald City* site. This was basically a matter of my being fed up with Blogger but not wanting to have to pay for database support on the cheryl-morgan.com web site. The plus side is that if you do what to know where in the

world I happen to be then the information is one click away from the main *Emerald City* blog. The new location for *Cheryl's Mewsings* (rugby rants and all) is: <http://www.emcit.com/mewsings/>.

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### Nebula Final Ballot

Just in time for this issue, SFWA has issued the final ballot for this year's Nebulas. The short lists are:

**Novels:** *Air* - Geoff Ryman (St. Martin's Press, Sep 04); *Camouflage* - Joe Haldeman (Analog, Mar-May 04, also Ace book Aug 04); *Going Postal* - Terry Pratchett (HarperCollins, Oct 04); *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell* - Susanna Clarke (Bloomsbury, Holtzbrinck Publishers, Sep 04); *Polaris* - Jack McDevitt (Ace, Nov04); *Orphans of Chaos* - John C. Wright (Tor, Nov 05).

**Novellas:** "Clay's Pride" - Bud Sparhawk (*Analog*, Jul/Aug 04); "Identity Theft" - Robert J. Sawyer (*Down These Dark Spaceways*, Mike Resnick, Ed., Science Fiction Book Club, May 05); "Left of the Dial" - Paul Witcover (*Sci Fiction*, Sep 04); "Magic for Beginners" - Kelly Link (*Magic for Beginners*, Small Beer Press, Jul 05); "The Tribes of Bela" - Albert Cowdrey (*F&SF*, Aug 04).

**Novelettes:** "The Faery Handbag" - Kelly Link (*The Faery Reel: Tales From the Twilight Realm*, Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling, Ed., Viking Press, Aug 04); "Flat Diane" - Daniel Abraham (*F&SF*, Oct\Nov 04); "Men are Trouble" - Jim Kelly (*Asimov's*, Jun 04); "Nirvana High" - Eileen Gunn and Leslie What (*Stable Strategies and Others*, Tachyon Press, Sep 04); "The People of Sand and Slag" - Paolo Bacigalupi (*F&SF*, Feb 04)

**Short Stories:** "Born-Again" - K.D. Wentworth (*F&SF*, May 05); "The End of the World as We Know It" - Dale Bailey (*F&SF*, Oct/Nov 04); "I Live With You" - Carol Emshwiller (*F&SF*, Mar 05); "My Mother, Dancing" - Nancy Kress (*Asimov's*, Jun 04); "Singing My Sister Down" - Margo Lanagan, (*Black Juice*, Eos, Mar 05); "Still Life With Boobs" - Anne Harris (*Talebones*, Summer 05); "There's a Hole in the City" - Richard Bowes (*Sci Fiction*, Jun 05).

**Scripts:** "Act of Contrition/You Can't Go Home Again" - Carla Robinson; Bradley Thompson; and David Weddle. (*Battlestar Galactica*; Jan 28, 05 / Feb 4, 05 [two part episode]); *Serenity* - Joss Whedon (Universal Pictures, Sep 05).

**Andre Norton Award:** *The Amethyst Road* - Louise Spiegler, (Clarion Books, Sep 05); *Siberia* - Ann Halam (Wendy Lamb Books, Jun 05); *Stormwitch* - Susan Vaught (Bloomsbury, Jan 05); *Valiant: A Modern Tale of Faerie* - Holly Black (Simon & Schuster, Jun 05).

The winners will be announced at the Nebula Award Banquet to be held in Tempe, Arizona on May 6<sup>th</sup>. I'm keeping my fingers crossed for Geoff Ryman and Kelly Link. I'm assuming that Margo Lanagan doesn't need any finger crossing.

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## Editorial Matters

By Cheryl Morgan

I'm delighted to be opening this issue with an essay by Gary K. Wolfe. Gary's review column in *Locus* has been required reading for me for, gosh, decades. Although Gary is a literature professor and perfectly capable of holding his own in amongst

those people who never use one common word when ten obscure ones will do, he also has the happy talent of being able to explain academic ideas in a very approachable way. Here's hoping that lots of you found his essay as interesting as I did.

This issue is a little light because February is a short month and I've had more long books to deal with than usual. If you check back with #125 you'll note that there are books I had planned to read for this issue that I just haven't had time to get to. I'm therefore very grateful to Juliet and Mario for providing two reviews each this issue.

The pile of books I really want to read is growing steadily. What I need is some travel, which means it is probably a good thing that I'll be flying back to California in just over a week's time, and very soon after that turning back to fly to Florida for ICFA. Lots of time to read.

Which means what? Catching up on backlog is a possibility, but I also have this huge pile of April releases that I have committed to. It includes books by Liz Williams, Chaz Brenchley, Sean Williams, Amanda Hemmingway and Theodora Goss. Mike Carey, who is scripting the *Neverwhere* comic, has a debut novel due out. The latest in Gwyneth Jones's Bold as Love series, *Rainbow Bridge*, is also due out, though I'm not sure if I'll get that in time for next issue.

And if that wasn't enough content, we have Karen Traviss talking about the differences between writing traditional SF and tie-in novels, we have a guest review from Farah Mendlesohn, and we have R. Scott Bakker responding to Jeff Vandermeer's article on politics in fantasy.

Finally, in addition to all the blog stuff, you may notice a new trick or two on the



web site. I've finally managed to get to grips with the interface to Amazon's web site and can search for books. I'd still much rather you bought from The Aust Gate or Wrigley-Cross, because we need specialist SF dealers, but hopefully you'll find the new links to Amazon useful.

Best wishes,

Cheryl

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