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An Existentially Poignant, Angst-Ridden, Grimly Realistic Yet Surreal Interview With Tim Powers

By John Shirley

You say you look at the newspaper, the television, and there's nothing but bad news? Not true. There's a new Tim Powers novel about to come out, *Three Days to Never*. You see? Something to live for. Time to party. Powers, winner of the World Fantasy Award and author of classics such as *The Anubis Gates*, *Last Call* and *Declare*, consented to an interview, too. The party gets out of control and the neighbors call the cops.

JS: Powers, you don't take Joseph Heller composition time, but Tim Powers time does seem to stretch out a bit. This is presumably because your books are long or longish, extensively researched, and complex. Still, could you give us a sense of your process in terms of research-to-writing? How do you organize all those elements of research? And how much did you do for your new novel *Three Days to Never*?

TP: Well ideally it should only take me about two years to write a book! Ideally. A year to do the research that lets me know what it'll consist of, and then a year to write it. In practice, teaching at a high

school and various colleges eats up amazing amounts of time.

TP: What I do first is find some real-world situation or activity or person that looks as if a story could be hung on it. This is always the result of random recreational reading - I'll be reading something just because it's interesting, and then I'll think, "Wait a second, this looks like the sort of thing you could build a story around." Then I'll read everything I can get my hands on about that person or place or whatever it is, freely allowing myself to be sidetracked by anything this reading touches on. ("He was interested in goldfish? Let's read everything about goldfish!") I underline like a lunatic, and make customized indexes on the flyleaves of all these books, and soon I'm working in a little nest of stacked and tumbled books. (I have to make it an ironclad rule that no research book ever leaves my office - that way I know that any book I may need is somewhere in the pile and at worst no more than four feet away from me.)

TP: I make a lot of cross-indexed computer files, to try to keep track of everything. (I wish published books had a "Find" window!) All the while, I'm looking for "things that are too cool not to use" - events, customs, people, places, unique motivations or conflicts, means of transportation, anything. And when I've got a couple of dozen of such things, I can start to ask myself what sort of story these things might be pieces of.

TP: In other words, I don't come up with a story and then do research for it; I do the research to find out what the eventual story might consist of. It's easier that way.

TP: *Three Days to Never* started when I read that Albert Einstein went to a séance with Charlie Chaplin, in California in the

1930's. I'd already read a lot about Einstein, just recreationally, and I'd always wondered, for instance, why his hair is white in all photos after 1928 – okay, he had a heart attack or something while hiking in the Alps, but what *really* happened? But the séance settled it – a book of my peculiar sort could probably be built on Einstein. So I read a heap of biographies of him, which led me to his secret missing daughter, the history of 20th century Israel, and the Mossad, Pasadena and Cal Tech, proto-Nazi groups like the Thule Society, the history of Palm Springs, and of course Charlie Chaplin. All very interesting, and full of bits that were “too cool not to use.” So I assembled those bits and figured out a story to string them together.

TP: One frustrating thing about all this is the stuff you've got to leave out! Michelson, of the Michelson-Morley experiment that proved there's no luminiferous ether, built one of his big interferometers very near Newport Beach, with its barrel pointed to the nearby spot which later happened to be the epicenter of the 1933 earthquake. At one point in my novel, two of my characters go to that spot – but I couldn't manage to make Michelson's interferometer part of the story! If I ever do a sequel, that's the detail I'm going to start figuring from.

JS: In *Three Days to Never* you combine Einsteinian physics, quantum ideas, and mysticism – everything from ritual magic to the use of magic objects to the Qaballah – do you ever get a strange feeling, crossing from one to the other that it really is seamless, not just in fiction?

TP: Sure, all the time! In some 14th century Italian Qaballah text I'll find what seem to be speculations on $E=mc^2$, for instance, or the universe being expanding-

and-contracting. I found eerie parallels between General Relativity and certain Grimm Brothers' fairy tales! A lot of this is just the result of me looking at a whole lot of unconnected things with a very specific polarity (“Where's the supernatural?”), so that connections are apparent where in actual fact there are no connections – you can always find useful coincidences if you look real hard – but I think *some* of the apparent overlaps are real. After all, all these things were attempts by not-stupid people to figure out what's true, so it's not surprising if sometimes they come up with similar conclusions.

JS: *Three Days to Never* is a variety of time-travel novel. Kinda sorta. Do you ever fantasize (as I do) about the personal possibilities of time-travel? The moral issues of it? Would God permit us to go back and change time do you think? What do you mean, “How the Hell would I know?” You could guess. I guess. I guess all the time. What, you can't guess?

TP: Right, could you justifiably kill the toddler Hitler? Or would you have to wait for some token first concrete offense? (“He just stole a car! Broke the steering-column, even! Couldn't that do?”) I'd like to go back and give young Powers some stern advice, actually. But I have a Monkey's Paw feeling about it – I think the results would be worse than the original, and when I tried to go back to an earlier point and fix it again it would turn out worse still. Eventually I'd probably be trying to reason with a feral mute who's living in a hedge.

JS: Yes I dreamed of going back in time and getting myself to do some things different – “You're about to make a dreadful mistake, Shirley!” – but then it occurred to me that if I were able to do that, my earlier self would not do the same

things, not go the same places, not meet certain women, and my children would never have been born. So though I'd not make certain dire mistakes I'd be losing these excellent offspring and in a way committing murder!

TP: I wrote one novel, *The Anubis Gates*, in which the past was unchangeable – you could go back there and mess around, but everything you did would turn out to have been (largely unrecorded) elements of the exact same history you originally came from. In *Three Days to Never* I say that the past *is* changeable – you could go back and prevent your parents from meeting. This would not make you disappear, it would just mean you're a character with no origins – you entered the world for the first time when you stepped out of your Wayback Machine.

TP: But no, I don't think God lets us have any influence on the past! Just as well – I think He may have been over-optimistic in letting us screw with the present and future.

JS: There's almost a gourmand's appreciation of liquor and cigarettes on display in *Three Days to Never*. That's just from reading books about them, right?

TP: That's correct.

TP: Well no, actually I love alcohol and nicotine. I retired from alcohol some years ago, though I still don't like to go to parties or restaurants where it's not being consumed. I figure the respectful attitudes toward something as spiritually important as alcohol are either total indulgence or total abstinence – I did the one, and now I'm doing the other, just to be thorough. And I get impatient when people justify high taxes on tobacco by saying, "But that money is going toward programs to help you quit smoking!" Actually I don't want

to quit. So my poor characters don't get to quit either – I'm a bad influence on them.

JS: Were *Last Call*, *Expiration Date* and *Earthquake Weather* conceived as a trilogy of some kind? Or did some of the related themes just kind of extend themselves on their own insistence?

TP: Originally I believe I meant there to be four books – spring (*Last Call*), summer, fall (*Expiration Date*), and winter (*Earthquake Weather*). I didn't do a book for summer, I guess because I felt that summer for a Fisher King would be too unrelievedly pleasant.

TP: Of course it'd be impossible – for me, anyway – to thoroughly outline three big books before starting the first one, so in fact a lot of the overall plot elements cropped up after *Last Call* was already published, and I had to look back through *Last Call* to find initially unimportant things that I could later claim had been deliberately-placed plot elements. Don't tell anybody.

JS: As a poker player I sometimes think there are "tides" to card playing, as in *Last Call* – or anyway there are patterns in the random. You make use of that but what do you think of it? Do you ever feel that the chaos is just seeing order on an ant's scale of perception?

TP: I so love the idea – that if you can distill perfect randomness you'll find in it the consistent, basic patterns of reality – that I really want it to be true. The first time I read about the Mandelbrot Set, in James Gleick's *Chaos*, and saw those color-coded patterns in the Complex Plane, I just figured this was the fingerprints of God.

JS: In *Three Days to Never* you reference the Ayin of the Qaballah, which seems to speak of the Big Bang. I seem to find the

reference in this Qabbalistic text: "The beginning of existence is the secret concealed point, primordial wisdom, the secret conceptual point. This is the beginning of all the hidden things, which spread out from there and emanate, according to their species. From a single point you can extend the dimensions of all things. Similarly when the concealed arouses itself to exist, at first it brings into being something the size of the point of a needle; from there it generates everything." When you come across something like that in your researches, do you find that it touches you or affects your relationship to life as you live it? I guess what I'm asking is, do your researches for books change you? Do your books change you?

TP: Right, and "In the system depending on mathematical concepts, which is sometimes linked with images of light and rivers, the first *Sefirah* is nothingness, zero, and the second is the manifestation of the primordial point, which at this stage has no size but contains within it the possibility of measurement and expansion," from Gershom Sholem's *Qaballah*.

TP: Well, especially with my largely-unplanned research reading, and with so much of it being from previous centuries, I get a lot of information and perspectives that are new to me. A lot of times I'll be grateful that I read some book, totally independent of whether or not it gave me something to use in the book at hand.

TP: This is probably evidence of a totally closed mind — but I find that instead of changing my core convictions about everything, all this reading tends to confirm them. (I suppose any closed-minded person would find the same, whatever their initial convictions were.)

And it expands them! I see more surprising parallels than surprising divergences. Scientific breakthroughs are preceded by similar intuitive guesses (Newton guessed that light rays must be bent by gravity), Christian truths are preceded by centuries of inspired parallel speculations, the same crowd of archetypes keep popping up in different cultures. It's all one big piece of cloth, and the same threads show up down here as up there!

JS: I know you don't want to take yourself too seriously, but do you think a novelist, who's an entertainer first (especially when we write for genre audiences), has, or should have, another mission in writing books? Do you ever hope you're feeding something in the reader?

TP: Well I don't have any other mission than to provide a plausible-but-outlandish adventure story. Of course to make the reader "believe" it's all really happening, you want to have interesting characters who are confronted with problems worth taking seriously, and so the writer's idea of who's interesting and what's worth taking seriously is going to provide clues to what the writer thinks is important. What's admirable and what's contemptible. But I hope there's never any discernible message, aside from basic things like "Loyalty's good, treachery's bad"! Whatever I might have to say about pro-life or pro-choice, or the war in Iraq, or racism, can wait till I'm in the mood to write a letter to the editor at the *Los Angeles Times*.

TP: I do take the characters and the story seriously. I just don't think they're representative figures illustrating some bigger point outside the boundaries of the story. (And I work hard *not* to in any way let the reader notice that this is all, at core,

impossible nonsense. I'm definitely not doing Post-Modernism! Maybe I'm doing Pre-Modernism.)

JS: In *Three Days to Never* you write about secret-secret-secret services, and secret societies that operate like secret services — organizations which use the paranormal. The CIA did indeed have a remote viewer (telepathic spying) program, now (as far as we know) not operational. It wasn't very effective. Did you hear of children being kept in Remote Viewer facilities, underground, as described in your books? Did you come across stuff about paranormal villainy that seemed unnervingly real to you?

TP: I didn't read about children doing it, no, but I did read about proposals to dress up military installations as hospitals or Chinese restaurants or something, so that Soviet psychics who "saw" the places would assume they'd got a wrong number. I read a book called *Remote Viewers*, by Jim Schabel, about the Army's attempts to do psychic spying, and frankly I'm convinced that it got a lot of valid results.

TP: One unnerving bit was the apparently common experience among long-time remote viewers of running into hostile non-corporeal inhabitants of the psychic realms! *That* caught my attention. I'm always extra-ready to believe unwelcome news. It's an Irish thing.

JS: Do you ever get (as I do) letters from people who're bipolar and who claim that they know what your REAL meaning is, etc? Do you wonder why some writers (I'm not saying you're one but I bet you are) attract a certain amount of, ah, reality-challenged readership?

TP: Yes, from time to time I've got "the schizophrenic letter," which is always lots

of pages of single-spaced text with no margins, all about Jesus and Walt Disney and Nicola Tesla, with elaborate wiring diagrams and maps of Heaven and Hell. I don't write back. One guy called me on the phone and said he didn't appreciate being portrayed in books without his permission. You and I should be writing stories about talking bunnies.

JS: Speaking of reality challenging, do you think you have lots of Phil Dick "damage" (not necessarily a bad thing)? Weren't you one of his protégés?

TP: I knew him for the last ten years of his life, and after I met him I read his books feverishly and repeatedly. Jeter and Blaylock and I hung out with him a lot while we were writing our first things, and he helped each of us.

TP: I'm not sure what "damage" I sustained from him! Probably more than I can see. I learned that characters in fiction, even very weird fiction, *especially* in very weird fiction, have to have jobs they need, and probably have romances that aren't going smoothly. I learned that truly numinously scary stuff is practically the opposite of the guy in a ski-mask with a bloody chain-saw. And I learned that if you want to write fiction in the 20th Century you had better be familiar with lots of pre-20th Century literature. And I think I learned from him that bad guys are never bad guys in their own estimation (a disquieting thought!).

JS: Do you ever feel that just when you think you've got your literary "voice" refined and in place, suddenly another voice wants to come out?

TP: I find I have a different "tone of voice" in one story than in another, certainly. That seems like something that

happens naturally, deriving from the characters and events.

TP: But really, I try not to think about my literary voice! I'm sure that trying to make clear the things I think have to be made clear gives my narration some particular torque, what you could even call some awkwardness, and I suppose that's my voice — but to the extent that I'd ever be consciously aware of any idiosyncratic "Powers voice" I think I'd try to suppress it.

TP: Maybe because of this reluctance to see any such thing, I never re-read my stuff unless I've got to correct new proofs! I figure when I'm seventy I'll re-read it all — and then probably take up drink again.

JS: Do you ever ache to just write a purely historical novel, say, or spy novel, something with no element of the fantastic? If so what would it be about?

TP: No, actually! I couldn't write a mainstream story for very many chapters before some character would get a phone call from his dead father. I don't read a lot of science fiction or fantasy these days — and what I do read of it is nearly always stuff I've read many times before, like Heinlein and Lovecraft and Leiber — but when I was a kid that was *all* I read, and all my plot-imagining machinery is forever locked on those settings.

TP: I love reading Dick Francis and John D. MacDonald and Kingsley Amis and John le Carré and Raymond Chandler and Hemingway (though a couple of them did sometimes write SF and fantasy!), but I could never write a whole story in which nothing impossible happened.

JS: Do you ever feel like SF/fantasy writers are to spy novelists or detective novelists what 3-D chess is to regular chess? Not in a superior way but in the

sense that there's that much more WORK to it? We have to juggle more plates than they do. If you do feel that way, does it embitter you? Maybe you're a better man than I am. (There's little doubt of that anyway.)

TP: Yes, I do feel that, and the 3-D chess is a good analogy. I see mainstream fiction as a fairly severely restricted form — there's a lot of nicely-stressful or intriguing situations, even a lot of plain emotions, that they're barred from. (Shakespeare didn't acknowledge any such arbitrary confinement!) And you're right, we've got to juggle more plates than they do — but we're free to juggle *any* of the things in the kitchen, even the chairs and the cook, while they can only use a few specified sets of dishes.

TP: I do sometimes wish that more readers had an appreciation for our (more complex!) form! But some people can't grasp 3-D chess either. (I like to think I could, but I've never tried it.)

JS: Do you ever feel that a book is something hard to control, as you develop it? Like you're wrestling with something multi-armed? Especially when we consider the development of a book like *Three Days to Never* with so many levels, so much happening, so many sides of the paranormal, so many characters — how do you deal with all those threads? Isn't that a maddening challenge?

TP: It's a whole separate task, yes! The way I handle it is to outline it down to the most miniscule detail possible before I even start. I make giant calendars, with every event, even bits of dialogue, fitted into each big day-square. When I've finally got the whole thing diagrammed on my calendar, with a hundred-or-so-page outline printed out and strategically underlined, I figure, "Whew! The hard

part's over! Now all I've got to do is write the thing. Start right here and follow the arrows."

TP: During the notes-&-outlining stage I'm willing to write unplanned dialogue, and try out my characters in various provisional situations, but once I've got the outline finalized I won't permit any spontaneity from the characters. They're supposed to know their lines and cues and make it *look* spontaneous, but if I catch them improvising I put a stop to it right away.

TP: That's not exactly true. Sometimes they do improvise and I pretend not to notice. But they know the rules.

JS: Giant calendars with everything...?! Amazing! No wonder your stuff is so damn much better than mine. I just make shit up. I tried to write about magic combined with out of body travel in *Demons*, but in *Three Days To Never* you've done it so eerily well. How did you research that? Were you tempted to try it?

TP: I'm glad it seemed convincing! I read several books about it, and they seemed to be consistently describing the same thing. But I've never been tempted to try it, no! I'm sure I'd wind up getting caught in Coriolis forces or something, and wind up stuck in the Asteroid Belt forever.

JS: You seem kind of down on New Age stuff like the Harmonic Convergence, and the parents in *Expiration Date* — and I don't blame you but is that a little bit of your personal faith or philosophy emerging? I mean, isn't New Age stuff kind of just fuzzy and vague enough to make it a great camouflage for predators... mostly human, but perhaps the inhuman too?

TP: Yes, the New Age "philosophies" seem like blurry feel-good fantasies to me.

But since I'm a convinced Catholic, I believe there *are* real hikes you can take out past our normal boundaries, and the rattlesnakes and Gila Monsters out there won't back off just because you're smiling and wearing a peace-symbol. I like to write about this stuff, but I wouldn't have a Ouija board in the house!

JS: You seem to get into the head of a 12-year-old girl pretty damn well in *Three Days to Never*. Why is that? You have no children so how do you get that verisimilitude?

TP: Don't tell anybody, but I'm probably off by a few years, actually! For six years I've been teaching writing classes two days a week at a high school, and it's a very informal place — my classroom is the basement of a 19th Century building that used to be a Christian Science church, and there are no chairs, just a lot of bean-bags. The windows under the ceiling are ankle-level for people on the sidewalk outside. And I'm moderator of a physics-&-literature club that meets down there on Wednesdays, and one way and another I wind up spending a lot of time talking at random with 14- to 18-year-old boys and girls. (Luckily this is a "high school of the arts," and they all have to submit writing they've done to get chosen for it, and so they're all very bright and surprisingly well-read.) I probably talk to them, in any given week, as much as I talk to adults. I'm lucky *all* my characters don't talk and think like teenagers. I'm lucky *I* don't, if in fact I don't.

TP: Incidentally, this is a great job. My classes are just explaining how writing works, and my boss is Jim Blaylock.

JS: Working on a novel now? What is it?

TP: The new one is going to be set in Victorian London. Right now I'm putting

together six feet or so of books on then and there, and they'll doubtless lead me to more, on God knows what subjects. I'm sure I'll find lots of details that are too cool not to use, and see evidence of supernatural business going on!

TP: I sent the editor two outlines – book outlines are just bluff and guesswork, written before I do any research – and she said go with the Victorian one. But the other was going to involve mountain-climbing. I've been reading a lot of horrifying non-fiction books about guys climbing Everest and the Eiger, and I would like the excuse some day to research all that. It's made me resolve never to even go on a steep hike, but I can send my poor characters up those mountains!

JS: You have someone hiding a gun in a cat box in your new novel. How'd you ever think of that? Wait, could it be...that you have 800 cats?

TP: That's correct.

TP: I guess I do see cat boxes as a more standard item of furniture than many people would! Incidentally, it's not 800. We figure we have more than ten cats, and less than twenty. We could easily name them off and count up the number, but we don't think we'd be happier knowing it than we are not knowing it. I've got one on my lap now, trying to help me type.

TP: And I'd never hide a gun in a cat box. Some moron cat would manage to fire it.

The Physics of Metaphysics

By John Shirley

Tim Powers is his own genre. There are a few other novelists who write urban fantasy – de Lint and Gaiman, perhaps one or two others who attempt to bind physics and metaphysics, the spy novel with the novel of the fantastic, but none who move us with such proficiency, such deceptive ease from the gritty to the transcendent; who so excel at making us feel we too, if we follow directions, can travel effortlessly from three dimensions, to four, to five. Rudy Rucker's glorious novelistic thought experiments, *Spaceland* and *The Sex Sphere*, for example, are housed in some distinct category next door to the categorical residence of Powers' *Last Call*, his *Expiration Date*, his *Earthquake Weather* and *Declare*, and Powers' splendid newest, *Three Days to Never*, so that the authors could talk companionably over the fence about strange backwaters of relativity, Einsteinian Cosmological Constants, and the terrifying perception-shifts necessary to negotiate the realm of the infinite. But their contrasts keep that fence between them: Rucker's jazz-improv plots and off-the-cuff characterization contrast starkly with Powers' elaborate plotting and rich characterization, and Rucker, a scientist (if a psychedelically tinged one) is not likely to identify with Tim Powers' calm acceptance of the efficacy of ritual magic.

Recognizably influenced by Phil Dick, John le Carré and C.S. Lewis he may be, but Powers has created his own, personal, interior logic, his own pop cultural color-wheel, his own implied mythos – all of it somehow given more form, more definition, by what he believes philosophically, and rarely, if ever,

directly says, though he came close in the masterful *Declare*.

In all his work Powers uses incisive, sometimes wry observations from conventional life to anchor us in the story, so that we're never completely overwhelmed by the supernatural elements. His technique is partly his own, and partly drawn from outside the science-fiction/fantasy genres. John le Carré, Graham Greene and Len Deighton are evoked, for me at least, when I read exquisitely crafted passages like these:

Outside the vibrating window pane, the narrow trunks of palm trees swayed in the hard sun-glare over the glittering traffic on La Brea Avenue.

And:

Oren Lepidopt had crushed out his latest cigarette in the coffee cup on the blocky living room table, and he held the telephone receiver tight to his ear. Answer the page, he thought. It's a land-line, obviously it's something that I don't want broadcast.

And:

The only sound in the apartment aside from the faint music at the window was the soft rattle of keystrokes on an electric keyboard in the kitchen.

And:

...Marrity could see Grammar's house ahead on the left – and he remembered riding his

bicycle up the sidewalk here on many late afternoons in the winter rain, his canvas newspaper bags empty and slapping wetly against the front wheel fork, and the olive-oil taste of Brylcreem in his mouth from the rain running down his face.

It was tears he tasted now, and he quickly cuffed them away.

Set mostly in 1987, but sometimes the 1960's and the early 20th century, making reference to 2006, and sometimes set outside of time completely, *Three Days to Never* is a variety of time travel novel. But it's a time travel novel that ranges deliriously, incorporating back-alley warfare between a paranormal department of the Mossad and a secret society of diabolic mystics, with the folklore of the crypto-history underground (there really are people around who seriously contend that Einstein built a time machine), the physical implications of the metaphysics of the Qaballah, the unforeseen consequences of 1987's Harmonic Convergence, dueling remote-viewers, and the liberal use of mediums. This last might seem a page out of *Expiration Date*, but the use of the spirits of the dead is fairly discrete in *Three Days to Never* – they speak against the usual flow of time, and a particularly creepy decapitated head, of startling parentage, is one of the means of talking to ghosts. There is a great deal more: Powers weaves in precognitive flashes, human sacrifice, telepathic links, interfering dybuks, astral projection (made weirdly believable), gun battles, magical amulets and very peculiar objects of power. In the hands of a lesser writer we'd probably be saying he "larded" these things in. They'd seem excessive, confusing. But those of us who delight in being caught up in Powers'

world, those of us susceptible to his unique brand of internal logic, don't find it a whit excessive. We have to pay close attention, to parse all the players and the plot, but we don't mind. The ride we take in this marvelous novel is glorious and gripping. And if we have a mind-bending panoply of the fantastic to absorb, we feel privileged to pay the price of entry – we accept it all as being part of the “physics of the metaphysics” of the grimly glorious Powers universe.

It should be noted that *Last Call*, *Expiration Date* and *Earthquake Weather* are linked novels, sharing more referents to one another than they do with *Three Days to Never*; they're a kind of unofficial trilogy partly about the peculiar forms the legendary Fisher King takes nowadays (in *Last Call*, it was Bugsy Siegel for a while!) In *Three Days to Never*, Powers is shaking off some of that mythos, breaking new ground – but this is still recognizably the Tim Powers Genre.

One of the main characters in *Three Days to Never* is a time traveler (I can't tell you which character without committing a “spoiler”); the plot revolves around an effort, in 1987, by psychically trained elements of the Mossad to obtain a time travel device created by Albert Einstein, and utilized by Einstein's friend Charlie Chaplain, so the Mossad can rewrite history more to the advantage of Israel. Meanwhile our primary protagonists, a widowed Literature professor, Frank Marray, and his charming, Shakespeare-quoting 12-year-old daughter Daphne, are trying to stay out of the line of fire while investigating the bizarre legacy of Frank's grandmother – a legacy formed of gold swastikas and columns of glass, secreted in her backyard shed, where time has a way of hopping nervously from foot to

foot. (Is there a sprinkle of *A Wrinkle in Time* in *Three Days*...? Perhaps.)

Grandma, who used the ill-conceived Harmonic Convergence for her own mysterious purposes, ending her life with the use of her exotic contraption, had a mysterious relationship with both Einstein and Chaplin, both of whom are revealed, in *Three Days to Never*, to be part-time sorcerers themselves. Marray has to protect his daughter – with whom he has a psychic link, making his acceptance of the paranormal events unfolding around him more believable – and uncover his secret links with Einstein and another more sinister figure who's hovering in the background, circling for the kill. The agenda of “the Vespers” – the ironically-named secret society, Cathars gone terribly wrong – doesn't quite come into sharp definition, but we infer that one of its players hopes to use Einstein's access to the astral world – a.k.a. the dimension of eternity, outside of time – to break free of the constraints of individuality, essentially becoming a god, a kind of latter day Gnostic demiurge. The Vespers characters are reminiscent, to me at least, of the cold-bloodedly Satanic scientists in Lewis' masterpiece *That Hideous Strength*, but spun through the methodology of modern-day intelligence services, all of whom, in *Three Days To Never*, are by implication dangerously self-serving, and frighteningly hermetic – even the more likable operatives in the special division of the Mossad are utterly ruthless when they suppose they have to be, apparently unconcerned for the damnation of their own souls so long as their nation is served. But that issue – the tension between service to the perceived greater good and the right and wrong we see here in front of us in the present moment, is a pivotal turn of both plot and character, at the bloody

climax of *Three Days to Never*, and may contain the novel's real theme.

Like the rest of us – like the people who must dodge the bombs of the Taliban and the warring factions in Iraq, or the bullets of the gangs and cops in Richmond(*) – Murrity and his daughter find their imperative is finally just to survive the megalomaniacs battling for dominance. In Powers, the only way to survive these monsters is to see them coming from afar – to learn to read the secret signs, to find the hidden trap doors in reality itself. This may be Powers-code for the Divine: turn to the higher to find your way out of the traps of the lower.

Magic has its own physics, its own definite, inexorable rules – an idea common to Machen and Lovecraft and others – but usually one has to enter some special world, some shadowy realm, to make magic come alive; whereas in a Powers novel the whole world is pervaded with magic – or at least magical *potential*. Every object is a symbol or a part of a symbol and every symbol has metaphysical repercussions. In *Last Call*, playing cards used by gamblers were subject to magical “tides” and could manipulate reality; in *Three Days to Never* a concrete slab with Chaplin's fingerprints in it – and Chaplain's supposedly-magical suppressed movie – are as important to the story as guns or Einstein's *machinchen*.

Expiration Date frequently references *Alice in Wonderland* while *Three Days to Never* frequently references Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, in such a way that the Shakespearean tale seems to be intersecting (not quite paralleling) Powers' novel, which also invokes (as it were) movies extant in 1987, popular songs, Nazi history, and of course figures who

have become popular symbols, Chaplain and Einstein. The impression is that under the fabric of the mundane world, the chatter of the media, the artifacts of history, is a secret realm of vibratory significance. It's as if Powers is saying, the supernatural – or the miraculous – is actually everywhere.

[(*) Richmond is a California town north of Berkeley currently notorious for its gang warfare – Cheryl]

Three Days to Never - Tim Powers - Subterranean Press - manuscript

An Un-Civil War

By Cheryl Morgan

When you think about the music of The Doors I suspect that two things will come to mind. The first, of course, is Jim Morrison's haunting voice. But the other will be that swirling, magical keyboard sound (think of “Light My Fire”). It is a sound that makes a Doors song instantly recognizable, and it was created by Ray Manzarek. Jim Morrison is very famously dead, but Manzarek is still very much alive, and writing.

So what should a reviewer feel when presented with a novel by Ray Manzarek? Some suspicion, obviously. But then Manzarek is hardly a celebrity these days. It isn't like I'm being offered a book (supposedly) written by Britney Spears. Indeed, if I wasn't so geriatric I probably wouldn't know who Manzarek was. As it is, I have Doors albums on my MP3 player, and still listen to them. But this isn't just any book; it is a book from Night Shade. Jeremy and Jason are not the sort of guys to publish a celebrity novel just for

the publicity. These are people with taste, and it behooves me to trust them.

So to the book. *Snake Moon* starts as if it is going to be some sort of Californian pagan fantasy. There is stuff like this:

The night of the full moon in Taurus was different from the solstices, though. It was the night of secrets and sex. It was the night of special ripeness when Boone would drop his seeds into the soil and add the golden water to the seeds and the mystery of germination would begin. The mystery of life and creation. Only the earth knew how life was created and it was her secret. And it was called sex.

It soon becomes apparent, however, that what Manzarek is doing here is setting up an idyllic rural paradise for the precise purpose of contrasting it with the real world; a world which, in 1863, was deeply embroiled in bloody conflict. Boone Dillard and his family don't even know that there is a war going on, but they soon find out, and it isn't long before they too are embroiled in it. This is the point where they discover that wars, and civil wars especially, are anything but civil.

From here on in things get rather disturbing. The Dillards live in country Tennessee. They are, in theory, people of the South. Manzarek, thankfully, is not. But it is still hard for any American to write impartially about the Civil War, and it was a while before I became comfortable with what Manzarek was doing. Perhaps he intended that. Certainly he showed how easy it is for innocent country bumpkins to get carried away with the excitement and glamour of war. I think he just about got away with it, although I can see the more militant amongst persons of

color being deeply unhappy with this book.

Then, all too soon, it is over. *Snake Moon* feels more like a novella than a novel. This, in part, is because it is based on a screenplay that Manzarek wrote with Rick Valentine. (I'm assuming that this is the same Rick Valentine who, with Manzarek, co-wrote the horror movie, *Love Her Madly*.) The plot isn't exactly complex, but the story does go somewhere and the ending is impressively powerful. You wouldn't be able to sell this book in a mass market fantasy or horror format, it is just too thin. But it is a book that it was well worth Night Shade publishing, and an enjoyable, if at times disturbing, read.

Snake Moon - Ray Manzarek - Night Shade - publisher's proof

The Princess Grows Up

By Cheryl Morgan

Somewhere or other the fates have been conspiring against Greg Keyes. Firstly I didn't have time to read *The Blood Knight* for last issue. And then, when I finally got round to reading the book, I went and lost it. Let this be a lesson to you. Never leave a book lying around at a convention. Someone will pick it up. I wasn't sure that I had the nerve to ask Del Rey for a new copy, and in any case I'd be rushing off to the UK as soon as I got back from WisCon. Fortunately Stef at Tor UK came to my rescue and I was able to finish reading the book. This is a good thing, because the Kingdoms of Thorne and Bone series is getting better and better with each volume.

So what exactly makes a good series of Big Fat Fantasy books? Why is what Keyes does good and the endless sausage of extruded, fabricated fantasy product pumped out by lesser authors not good? There are many things involved. In my review of *The Charnel Prince* I focused on the world-building. Keyes has done a lot of research into a wide range of different aspects of his world. It all seems to hang together in a coherent fashion. This is a very good start.

In addition he doesn't take the thing too seriously. He's not above poking fun at the whole idea of heroic fantasy when the mood takes him (and, of course, when he doesn't risk damaging the mood of the book). Here poor young Cazio worries about his role in the story. How is someone who, in his own humble estimation, is one of the world's best swordsmen, to earn his way amongst all this magical nonsense?

Now Anne had a knight with a magic sword, a woodsman who could drill an arrow through a pigeon at six miles, and a priest who could hear twelve leagues in every direction. Winna didn't have any arcane abilities that he could see, but he wouldn't be entirely surprised if she suddenly began calling the animals, imploring them to fight at her side.

"See?" says Keyes, "I know what should happen in Formula Fantasy, but I'm not going to do it."

Talking of Formula Fantasy, an essential element of it is that the Lost Prince (or in this case Princess) is restored to the throne. This is generally a simple process involving the slaughter of vast legions of orcs (who are evil and therefore deserve to die) and disposing of the Dark Lord (who

is fated to be disposed of, which helps a lot). Anne Dare is also apparently fated to regain her father's throne, but just because it is fated it doesn't mean to say that it is going to be easy. First Anne needs to avoid her uncle's agents, who will doubtless kill her if they can. Then she has to raise an army. And finally she has to lead it against the capital, subduing any enemy castles she might pass along the way. All of which involves killing people who ought to be her subjects.

The old songs also didn't talk much about women throwing their children over the walls in an insane attempt to save them from the flames or about the smell of a hundred dead men as the morning frost began to thaw. Or how a man could have a spear all the way through him and appear not to feel it, keep talking as if nothing were wrong, right up until the moment his eyes lost sight and his lips went lazy.

I've noted before that Keyes is relatively safe as fantasists go. He doesn't have George R.R. Martin's habit of killing off leading characters willy nilly. Nor does he have Steve Erikson's habit of killing off everyone in sight, sometimes several times over. But that doesn't mean that he tries to pretend that mediaeval warfare doesn't hurt anyone.

Next up we have the Dark Lord. Or rather we don't. In *The Briar King* it seemed fairly clear that the malevolent nature spirit was the primary villain of the series. By *The Blood Knight* we are pretty sure that he is on Anne's side, if not on the side of humanity as a whole. Praifec Hespero and his minions in the Church are clearly a bad lot, but probably only because they are hoping to use the darkness that is stirring

for their own ends. Well, you know what priests are like: give them a chance at eternal life and they are only too keen to sacrifice a baby or two to that end. The Skasloi have been portrayed as the ultimate (and vanquished) evil since the start, but in *The Blood Knight* we get enough information to leave us unsure of their role in the coming conflict against, well, who knows? Anne surely doesn't, and nor do we.

The important point here is that none of the "bad" characters in the series are bad for the sake of being bad. They are bad because they have aims and ambitions that are contrary to those of the heroes. Sometimes, like the followers of the Briar King, their philosophy is a little suspect, but they believe it firmly nonetheless.

"Life is always coming and going," she said, "if you watch. Always something being born, always something dying. In the spring more is being born; in late autumn more is dying. Death is more natural than life. The bones of the world are death."

Stephen's throat tightened. "Children shouldn't talk like that," he said.

"Children know these things," she said. "It's only adults that teach us that a flower is more beautiful than a rotting dog."

For me, one of the most important things in any book is that the reader should be kept guessing. With Formula Fantasy, because it is escapist literature, the whole point is that the reader should be able to guess what will happen next, and feel safe in that knowledge. In Keyes' books, even though you have a pretty good idea that the major characters will come through it all safely, you are never quite certain what will happen. And, like when reading a

Gene Wolfe novel, you are sometimes left with the nagging feeling that you read something very important earlier in the book/series and didn't recognize it at the time.

Although *The Blood Knight* is book three in the series, it does not appear to be the end. There is a lot more to be discovered yet. As I mentioned above, we still don't have much idea who the actual bad guys are (if indeed there are any). I, for one, would also like to know why Anne's most famous ancestor appears to be a famous character out of American history. So, when's the next book due?

The Blood Knight - Greg Keyes - Tor UK - hardcover

The Blood Knight - Greg Keyes - Del Rey - publisher's proof

Bridge Between Worlds

By Cheryl Morgan

When I heard that Holly Phillips had published a novel my first thought was that it would be a horror or dark fantasy work along the lines of her fine collection, *In the Palace of Repose*. Imagine my surprise, therefore, when I discovered that it was science fiction. Or was it? What do you think?

As *The Burning Girl* opens, Ryder Coleman is just being released from hospital. She was found in the street suffering from a mysterious fever. They kept her in for a long time trying to find out what was wrong, and whether it was contagious, but finally they have given up. She's free to go.

The fever was not an elusive thing. It was huge, crowding her body even when it slept, snarling her senses the way a kitten snarls a ball of yarn. (Gutting her memory the way a cat guts its prey.) She could feel it now, prowling through her, slipping color (redstone brown) into her sweating hands, sound (gravel crunch) across her tongue.

Some of the symptoms of the fever are clearly out of a horror novel. Rye's body is covered in sores, and at times they weep blood. She has little memory of her life before the fever, but chance encounters bring snatches back. There was the alien, Cleände; the enemies who were hunting her; Marky, whom they killed; and Dan Bardo, the renegade cop who was working with them because, well, how would you explain to your boss that your partner had been killed by aliens?

As she investigates her past, Rye discovers that she was captured by the aliens, by Cleände's enemies. The fever she has is not a fever, it is a weapon. She is a weapon. A weapon with which the government of Nohai plans to conquer Earth, just as they conquered Cleände's home world of Scalléa.

Amaran spoke, Amaran moved, and the fever recognized an echoing spark that jumped and brightened every time her heart clenched and relaxed, weak and yearning as a firefly calling for its mate on a warm summer's eve.

Calling to Rye's fever, as if a firefly could mate with a summer storm.

And slowly it becomes clear. The plot talks of aliens, the fever weeps blood, the women who understand the ways of moving between worlds are called

witches. But *The Burning Girl* is not SF, not horror, not fantasy, at least not wholly so. *The Burning Girl* is a spy story, a tale of deceit and betrayal. Who should Rye trust: the dissidents from Nohai? Cleände, whose first loyalty is to her own people? Bardo, whose lies come as easily to his tongue as those of Cleände? Or the fever itself?

Ultimately, however, *The Burning Girl* is not about any of these things, it is about words. It is another one of those novels about which people will complain that you couldn't see the plot for the style. Phillips isn't afraid to experiment, to let the rhythm and texture of her words convey description.

Rain fell on the arcwright, a shining heavy rain that lifted a faint mist off the black and silver gleaming hide, a soft silent blur of white above the narrow bone-ridged back and the shadow-sprung ribs and the head with the skull-like muzzle and the gun-slit eyes. Rain fell on the arcwright and ran like rain on a windowpane, raindrops chasing each other into streaks, that streamed like tears across the open black gun-slit star-shot eyes. Rain fell, a shimmer of rain, through a strong slant of sunlight to dance and hiss spray in the arcwright's shadow, a dark angular shadow like a crooked stain on the white cement paving stones.

Rain fell.

I happen to love this sort of stuff. Your mileage may vary.

The Burning Girl - Holly Phillips - Prime - hardcover

Sexy Cyborg Rescues Elf Rock Star

By Karina Meerman

I had read about Justina Robson and she was on my list of 'must read authors'. When I saw *Keeping It Real* in an English bookstore in Amsterdam I fell for it immediately. The gorgeous babe on the cover is a "girl cyborg secret agent with a troubled past". I read the first sentence and the book was mine. This was exactly what I needed: technology, rock music and magic. The elves in this book are not fluffy at all, no ma'am. Though to special agent Lila Black, initially, they all look the same: "ears (pointy, long), hair (lots of it, long) and expression (aloof, controlled, pole-up-the-ass)."

As the result of an explosion at the Superconductor Supercollider in Texas in 2015, all particles of space-time as we know it were shifted into something entirely new. The fabric of the universe was altered, "as if changing cotton into silk". No one remembers what Earth used to be like exactly, but the world now has six different dimensions that lie alongside each other and sometimes overlap. Otopia, the human world; Zoomenon, where the Elementals live; Alfheim, of the elves; Demonica, home of the demons; Thanatopia, the realm of the dead; and Faery, that claims to have always been close with the old Earth and has issued tourist visas since 2018. Relationships with the other dimensions are not always terribly good, and in 2021 (the year of the book), "an uneasy state of affairs exists between Alfheim and the other realms."

Lila Black is 21 years old. Severely damaged during a diplomatic mission to Alfheim, she has been restored to part girl, part machine. The girl-part is very

uncomfortable about her past and her present situation and worries about girl-things, like "god I must look hideous". The machine-part makes her a formidable soldier, with a small arsenal of fancy weapons hidden in her body armour. She also has "an AI-self", like a computer network extension of her own brain but quite possibly with an identity of its own. The combination of proper girl and kick-ass fighting machine is an interesting one; she has loads of attitude, despite her insecurity.

The Bike didn't talk. There were versions that did but Lila didn't want more machines in her head than were already there.

Her first assignment after her recovery is to play bodyguard to the famous elfin rock star, Zal. His band (with pixies in the backing vocals) is the hottest act around, which is rather unusual as everyone knows that "elves don't rock". But there is more to Zal that is unusual, as we find out during the story. Lila has to guard him because Zal receives magical threats. Very early on, Lila and Zal get involved in a Game. I really like the idea of that: sometimes you can't help yourself around certain people and seem to be compelled to act. I can rest assured now; it is a Game and has nothing to do with subconscious desires. A Game is wild magic drawing two beings together, forcing them to play out a scenario until one of them wins, or dies. Elves are known to easily trap humans to play Games. "You may end up in a duel, or promising away your worldly goods, or falling in love, or slaved to a duty not of your own choosing". The wild magic also plays by rules of its own, and some Games are extremely hard to get out

of. Lila quickly realises she and Zal have business other than bodyguarding.

Quite quickly the threats against Zal escalate. Lila gets to show off all her skills (both verbal and military), but despite her fire power Zal is abducted to Alfheim, where he supposedly has to play his part in an ancient prophecy. In order to rescue him, Lila has to accept the help of Dar, the elf responsible for her being as she is now. So can she trust him? They journey to the heart of Alfheim, where Zal is kept, and pick up the ghost of an elfin necromancer along the way. At this point in the story it began to feel as though too much was happening at once, and I was being instructed very quickly in elfin relationship etiquette. The ghost, Tath, seemed a neat trick to get Lila to do magical stuff she otherwise couldn't. There is a lot of interaction between Lila and Dar, and Dar and Tarth, and sometimes all three of them together. When they all get to where the final action is, relations become even more complex. Or is it fast-paced? Sometimes I can't tell.

Summarising: Lila meets Zal again, we learn about the Big Secret, and there is an action-packed finale. Although this is Quantum Gravity Book 1, the story is actually complete and I got to like Lila Black so much, I'll definitely read Book 2. Lila is tough and vulnerable at the same time, she kicks ass, and is not afraid to make Lord of the Rings-jokes. Or have sex with elves.

Keeping It Real - Justina Robson - Gollancz - trade paperback

Strangers in a Strange Land

By Victoria Hoyle

I've never been to Reno. Or, indeed, to anywhere in Nevada. In fact, I've never been to the United States at all, ever. (Shamefully, I had to look at a map on Google to even *locate* Reno). And so Zamatryna-Harani Erolorit, the young heroine of Susan Palwick's second novel *The Necessary Beggar*, and I have something in common: for us America is a foreign country. Necessarily it's more foreign for Zama than for me, since I'm from the UK and she originated in another dimension, but nevertheless...

In 2009 Zamatryna and her entire family – her mother Harani and her father Erolorit, her grandfather Timbor, her uncle Macsofo, her aunt Aliniana and her three little cousins – walk through an inter-dimensional doorway and into a refugee camp in Reno. She is just five years old. All they have is what they're carrying – a few bundles of clothing, pots and pans and sleeping mats, and just one personal item each. Also with them is Zama's other uncle Darroti, Timbor's youngest son, and the cause of this communal exile from their homeland, Gandiffri, and from their beloved city, Lémabantunk. A perennial drunk, he has confessed to the murder of Gallicina-Malinafa Odarettari, not only “the daughter of the third cousin of the second wife of the Prime Minister,” but also a Mendicant, a beggar just a month into her year of holy service. He was found, hovering over her corpse, bloody knife in hand; it was a particularly appalling crime:

To kill anyone is horrible, but to kill a Mendicant is inconceivable. For Mendicants

by definition have nothing, and they are helpless, and they are honoring the Elements... It was a terrible death.

In Lémabantunk, where the Law of Hearts – of love and familial responsibility, of mercy – is all, even the most grievous acts may be forgiven if the transgressor repents, and if the victim forgives. But not murder, since:

...the dead cannot forgive. The souls of the dead live on, as trees or birds or flowers, but they can no longer speak to people to say I forgive or I burn with vengeance. They live in a dimension parallel to the one where people live, but unbridgeable by speech. And so we were sent into a dimension like that too, into exile, knowing that we would never be able to return.

Because of this same Law of Hearts, Darroti cannot go alone; his family won't abandon him to his fate. They all must go.

Arriving at the door of the refugee camp, along with a drove of others from Afghanistan, Iraq and numerous war-torn regions of our own world is, in some ways, incredibly convenient: it gives them access to English language teaching and the immigrant integration process. That is what they are after all: asylum seekers, people without a choice about their final destination or control of their own fates. Then again their lack of "papers", their unintelligible language and their inability to explain where *exactly* they have come from causes incredible bureaucratic confusion and threatens to keep them in the limbo of the camp forever. Zama, translating for her grandfather in her nascent camp-learned English, tries to explain:

"How did you get here?"

"We walked...we walked from our city into this desert."

"That is impossible...Why do you have no papers?"

"We had to leave so much behind..."

"What direction did you walk in, when you walked to the United States? Did you walk north?"

"We walked forward."

Finally, in an act of pure desperation and guilt, Darroti hangs himself from the camp fence hoping that this will free his family of their exile. It doesn't. It only stands to make things worse, adding insufferable grief and a sense of pointlessness to their sacrifice. Still, it does bring all kinds of well-meaning officials to their little tent – social workers, immigration and army officers and some local Evangelists, Lisa and Stan. In the end it is these Christians, the ones operating outside the "system" and out of pure charity, who provide an escape route.

During an anti-immigration bombing attack on the camp, Lisa very neatly whisks Zama and her family away to a house beyond the desert, buys them fake papers and provides Western clothing. There they settle into the task of "becoming Americans" – learning English, finding work, going to school. A decade and a bit passes: Timbor ends up driving one of those familiar yellow cabs, Erolorit packs meat for superstores and Aliniana paints nails in a beauty salon. Of all of them though it is Zama who is preternaturally good at assimilation; she grasps at the American dream and its mantra of wealth and success through

hard work. As she so succinctly explains: "I'm an American now. That is my job." She memorizes dictionaries, organizes after school clubs, is a cheerleader and, graduating from high school two years early with phenomenal grades, is her class Valedictorian and Yearbook editor. She means to be a lawyer and earn enormous sums of money to make her family's exile more tolerable.

Nevertheless the cracks are starting to show and the harsh realities of American life, with its economics, morals and ethics so different from the Law of Hearts, is testing the strength of the family bond. Macsofo has developed depression as well as an alcohol problem and is becoming violent towards his wife, who, subsequently and against all traditions of Lémabantunk, is seeking a divorce. Meanwhile Timbor's and Zama's natural inclination towards charity for the homeless (the equivalents of "Mendicants" in Nevada) is alienating them from their new, ungenerous culture.

It's self-evident that the thrust of *The Necessary Beggar's* plot and thematics are timely, dealing as they do with one of the most controversial issues of our contemporary world. It is about immigrants and how they adapt to their new countries, about the conflicts of interest and understanding that may arise out of ideological collision. These things are ubiquitous in our time, wherever we may live. Zama's people hold to different spiritual truths: they believe that the spirits of the dead might enter into *anything* and so bless *all* things; they believe that giving charity is a sacred act for the health of the self; they believe that a unique combination of the four Elements of earth, air, fire and water make up each soul. America, in Palwick's contrary view, only sees its resources with an eye to

mindless consumption and reserves charity for the few "deserving" while calling the rest aberrant and tarring them as nuisances, delinquents and even criminals. Palwick plays on these divergences quite beautifully at times, by opposing them in the adults and having them confused in Zama and the other children. Dialogic set-pieces juxtapose the cultures:

...the children became good American consumers who could not eat just one Pringle, and who rarely remembered even to bless the first one. I remember Zamatryna when she was eleven, pulling a bag of popcorn out of the microwave and telling her uncle Macsofo, "You want me to bless every piece? Are you crazy?... Too much work... if the popcorn was haunted I'd know... it would be like scary popcorn. This isn't scary popcorn. Night of the Living Popcorn. Woo-woo-wooooo. Would you just chill?"

It is this aspect of the novel – the interiority of the immigrant experience – that Palwick does well, working in a naïve, even lyrical prose and using Timbor, the eldest of the family group, as a first person narrator in every third chapter. His experience and analysis of it is oftentimes moving as he tries to reconcile himself to exile so late in his life and to be strong for the sake of his grandchildren. Sympathy is not difficult. Equally, Darroti's back story and the revelation of his real relationship with Gallicina (narrated by his ghost in another third of the chapters) is prettily and cathartically told, although it seems a shame that we don't get more of Lémabantunk.

It is such a pity then that *The Necessary Beggar* also has some poor characterization and a dreadful, and I mean *dreadful*, dénouement; so syrupy and saccharine and tired that you can second-guess it right from the beginning.

Aside from the family themselves, Palwick's characters aren't really *people*, they're plot devices designed to get Zama, Timbor et al from one emotional tableau to another. Take Lisa the kindly evangelist who, without a qualm, gives up her mother's house, her inheritance and then her marriage to Stan, for the family. Certainly, I'm not suggesting that such acts of selfless kindness aren't possible, only that they cannot stand alone in the place of characterization. Lisa has *no* desires of her own. She's just a mouthpiece for platitudes.

Further, no doubt Palwick *is* a sensitive humanist, and clearly she is a political and moral Liberal, but did she have to be so didactically obvious about it? Here we have a discourse on the evils of capital punishment, and a few pages later a sketch on the insatiable evils of materialism. Here is a romantic interest for Zama so divinely kind and generous he could well be mistaken for Christ himself. And there a pair of Christians, one free-thinking and acting upon a gospel of love and one endlessly harping on the works of the Devil. (Guess which one finally sees the "light"?) Truly, there was a real opportunity in *The Necessary Beggar* to explore the socio-political xenophobia of a post 9/11 America and to get serious about the outcomes — good and bad — of immigrant realities. The idea itself is entirely worthy of that vital brand of anthropological Fantasy that other authors have commanded so well. But it all gets lost as characters ham up the melodrama

and paddle steadily towards their happy ending.

When, in the final chapters, the entire family leaps in Lisa's SUV to chase down a bus taking a homeless acquaintance to the exact refugee camp they escaped from a decade earlier you just know redemption is around the corner. Sooner rather than later ghosts are imparting vital plot points in people's dreams, while family members are breaking their addictions and saving their apparently wrecked marriages in minutes and everyone else is discovering the true meaning of love in exile. I was duly suffocated by the bathos. I was filled with a deep disappointment: it is **never** worth squandering your thematic capital for a heart-warming ending or to expound a Liberal polemic. Life isn't about to hand over uncomplicated, unconflicted solutions to the problems of immigration in this century and from where I'm standing Fantasy literature shouldn't pretend to either.

The Necessary Beggar – Susan Palwick – Tor - hardcover

Believing in Ghosts

By Juliet E. McKenna

The value of cover quotes is much debated. As a customer in a book shop, if I notice an author I like is praising a first novel by someone I've never heard of I'll probably pick the book up for a closer look. So seeing that Kelley Armstrong enjoyed *Touch the Dark* by Karen Chance certainly catches my eye. The cover art is less likely to do that; a model in a skimpy dress with a pentagram tattooed between her shoulder blades doesn't tell me much.

But neither of these things is as important as the first page. That's what makes the difference between my buying a book, or putting it back on the shelf. In Atlanta, Georgia, our heroine is looking at a computer screen showing her own obituary. Someone has broken into her office, scanned in the piece saying where and when she'll die the next day, and set it as the wallpaper, all while she was at lunch. Yes, I definitely want to know more.

As Cassandra Palmer grabs her gun and leaves her office, preparing to run for her life – again – we get to know a good deal more about her. For a start, she can see ghosts. But that's not what's got her into trouble. She's a psychic who was raised by Tony, a gangster vampire who killed her parents to make sure he got her talents all to himself. The only thing that saved her from being turned herself is that psychics are incredibly rare, and the last one the gangster brought over to the undead ended up psi-blind. Information is neatly balanced with action as we learn all this in quick, concise snatches while Cassie tries to make her getaway. She definitely doesn't want to be taken back to Tony. Once she learned what he did to her parents, she worked with the police to bring down his non-supernatural criminal enterprises.

But she's delayed by the ghosts who want to talk to her, including Portia, a persistent Southern Belle, and also by her need to let her roommate Tomas know she's leaving. That proves to be her undoing, as Tony's henchmen catch up with her at the club where Tomas works. Two things save her: the magical ward tattooed on her back, and a ghostly Confederate brigade enlisted by Portia. A bloodbath ensues, but for Cassie the horror of the attack isn't as bad as the horror of being rescued. It

turns out Tomas is a vampire as well. Only he's working for another faction in this world's supernatural politics. Cassie finds herself taken before the vampire senate as different interests stake their claim on her. Everyone's keen to know what's happening as established alliances and agreements are changing. A new order is coming but no one can quite see what it is.

Cassie isn't about to wait passively in the midst of all this. She's an intelligent, proactive heroine, and though she's human she has grown up in the supernatural world so we don't have to linger through any hand-wringing or disbelief on her part. Well aware of the danger she's in, she knows the value of keeping secrets, such as the fact that she can see and interact with ghosts; notably Billy Joe, the hapless cowboy-gambler who haunts her favorite necklace. He's her ace in the hole. Because vampires don't believe in ghosts. Nor do the mages, were-creatures and other denizens of this supernatural world. She soon turns this to her advantage.

Every writer in this kind of fiction needs to put their own spin on the classic creatures and myths, and Chance does this with an agreeable mix of the familiar and the unusual. As in many such books, a series of historical personages are revealed as vampires. Jack the Ripper and Rasputin make their familiar appearances while Cleopatra, Christopher Marlowe and the Man in the Iron Mask are original inclusions that pique the interest. Silver Circle mages come in more like Rambo than Gandalf: well-muscled with guns, grenades, magic daggers and a bandolier of holy water potions. There are Tinkerbell-like faeries with attitude, while supernaturals such as satyrs inevitably work in the sex industry. We learn that light elves are actually anarchists while

dark elves do at least have rules. Interactions between all these creatures are governed by MAGIC, or the Metaphysical Alliance for Greater Interspecies Cooperation. The contrived nature of that acronym makes my toes curl, but I'm enjoying the book so I'll pass swiftly over it. Besides, real-world organizations can come up with things just as cringe-worthy.

Cassie isn't overly interested in MAGIC's deliberations. She's just aware that she's in their Nevada HQ, which puts her within reach of Jimmy, the henchman of Tony's who put that bomb in her parents' car. Human or not, Cassie has certainly adopted the vampire's code of taking revenge whenever possible. Only things don't go to plan as dark mages of the Black Circle turn up. Now Cassie finds herself caught up in out of body experiences and nightmare visions of a kind she's never experienced before. Her role in these events turns out to be far more central than anyone had guessed when only her psychic powers were in demand. Someone is trying to rewrite the rules of the game, past, present and future.

It is a complex plot, threatening to become confusing in a few places, but it is well-constructed with sound internal logic. The tale unfolds with a swiftness that will keep you reading until the various threads knit together and clarify matters before taking new twists and turns. Cassie is an engaging central character and the lesser players are well realized. In keeping with the now established characteristics of this sub-genre, the violence is graphic and bloody, though Chance stays on the right side of gratuitous for my taste. There's also the sex we've come to expect, and here Chance does something that impresses me. Sex is explicitly tied to magical power, in a tradition going all the

way back to the archetypes of maiden, mother and crone, and the sacred coupling of male and female. There's the whole dark and sexy vampire vibe at work but Cassie isn't just blithely seduced by that. Rather she uses her own sexuality in a deft negotiation of give and take of favors and information, wholly apt as she's caught in such a potentially lethal situation.

Touch the Dark is a fast-paced, entertaining adventure in the best tradition of contemporary supernatural fiction with the added bonus of first-novel freshness. I look forward to seeing what Karen Chance does next.

Touch the Dark - Karen Chance - RoC - mass market paperback

Sophocles in Space

By Joe Gordon

To begin with, let's explain where the name Gradisil comes from: it is a corruption of Yggdrasil, the great World Tree from Norse mythology. As well as being a central character's name, it refers the reader to the technology Adam Roberts imagines to allow his near-future Earth to have space travel. Adapted aircraft are able to ride the branches of the magnetic tree of the world that branches out from the poles. This eliminates the need for immensely expensive rockets, enabling more ordinary (although generally still pretty wealthy) citizens to make it into low orbital space and construct their own homes. It also neatly inverts the normal geography of space flight where rocket designers prefer to launch from closer to the equator. Here, the closer to the magnetic poles the

stronger the branches and the better the grip an elmag plane can achieve to ride into space.

With such a random, scattershot collection of DIY settlers (and holidaying visitors with the orbital equivalent of a weekend holiday cottage) the Uplands, as the orbital region becomes known, slowly starts to build a population; although since it is anarchic, with no government or organization, no-one is sure just how many there are. In fact, since it is a free territory there is no real law. Earth-bound police have no jurisdiction there and little interest in any case, except where wealthy criminals have used the Uplands as a convenient hiding place. Some on the ground see the Uplands settlers as individuals taming a wild frontier, but many others, especially governments in Europe and America, are wary of an increasing population only a few miles above their heads. The Europeans attempt to make diplomatic and economic overtures, not realizing there is no real government to deal with, while the Americans tend towards a more gung-ho, military approach to secure the Uplands. An escalation in tensions between the EU and America, and actual outbreaks of combat between them, lend more urgency to their dealings with and attitudes to the settlers. As in any war, the high ground is a strategic asset – the mere fact that the Uplands has no army, weapons or even government proving to be as little a barrier to military adventurism as non-existent WMDs provided in the real world.

The novel isn't just a simple tale of innocent settlers of a new land being treated poorly by an arrogant and belligerent imperialist power, however. Twisted into the strands that make up *Gradisil* is a tale of revenge which crosses

generations in a fashion the writers of Greek tragedies would recognize. The story also examines the ways in which extreme circumstances can mould – and be used actively to mould – individuals, groups and even entire populations into new shapes. Gradisil herself comes across often as cold and calculating (continuing Robert's brave tendency to often populate his books with characters who are not entirely likeable). She is remote from her children (in one terrible case prepared to put her own agenda over her child's safety) and clearly uses her rich husband (who allows himself to be used but despises himself for it) and the American military threat to push her own agenda of forcing the disparate Uplanders into some sort of nation. Her determined stance may set her up as a freedom fighter and hero, leading the Uplands own version of the War of Independence against a dominant superpower, but it also sets her out as someone I doubt most of us would like to be around.

Gradisil's bitter mother seeks vengeance for the murder in the Uplands of her beloved father, killed by a woman who rented their Uplands home but turned out to be a wanted, murderous criminal. Or is she actually an American agent using the persona of a wanted criminal hiding out in the Uplands as a cover? Is this another reason for wanting to embarrass the world's remaining superpower? As anyone who has read a Greek tragedy knows, vengeance rarely brings events to a conclusion. Such is the case here, with Gradisil's sons later driven to an act of vengeance themselves in response to a betrayal, although to the reader this betrayal may seem at least partially justified. Just how closely these personal motives of revenge are tied into the creation of a new orbital nation is

impossible to describe in detail without spoiling too much of the plot. Let's just say that even noble-sounding motives such as establishing a free nation are not always pure. And as Roberts himself has noted, it allows him to have a family tree story mixed with his world tree, not to mention the metaphor of trees growing from acorns.

Gradisil provides a fascinating generational story paying homage to Classical tragedy that uses political ideologies – personal and national – for both dramatic effect and as comment on contemporary events. The science is not too far fetched (Stephen Baxter didn't categorically say elmag planes were ridiculous, according to Roberts, which he was happy to take as endorsement for the plausibility of this device). The characters are not always likeable, but they intrigue us and keep us reading (a Roberts trademark almost – think on *Polystom* for example). Others may be on the wrong side (depending on your view) but actually be likeable (*Salt* is a fine example of this device). Additional literary and historical allusions woven into the narrative include Milton and Tom Paine. That's the long version of this rich tapestry. The short version is simply: this is a new Adam Roberts books – you need to read it.

Gradisil - Adam Roberts - Gollancz - hardcover

The Author Behind the Editor

By Mario Guslandi

Renowned as the editor of countless successful books of dark fiction, including the mythical *Pan Book of Horror Stories*, *Dark Voices* and *Dark Terrors* anthologies (co-edited with Stephen Jones), David Sutton is also the author of a number of excellent supernatural short stories that appeared over thirty years in some of the best genre magazines and anthologies. Unaccountably they have never been collected in a single volume before. Sean Wright of Crowswing Books finally took the matter in his own hands by giving Sutton the chance to showcase his work as a horror author in *Clinically Dead and Other Tales of the Supernatural*, an elegant, beautifully produced collection. It was high time, and the publisher must be praised for his thoughtfulness and good taste.

The selected tales deal with a variety of subjects but, curiously enough, the core group of stories seem to revolve around the theme of a modern man (usually a British tourist) facing the mysteries and the horrors of an ancient world that he barely knows, let alone understands. Interestingly, and not meaning to do injustice to Sutton's originality, this seems to be a topic particularly dear to a certain pack of British horror writers, arguably to be numbered among the most prone to employ the chiaroscuro in their fictional work. Basil Copper is the first name coming to my mind, and one of Terry Lamsley's latest novellas ("Made Ready") tackles a similar subject.

So in the subtly unsettling and masterly crafted "The Holidaymakers", pagan rites and beliefs still ominously linger in remote

places, while in "Changing Tack" a girl on vacation taking a trip to visit ancient ruins – once the location of a witch coven – undergoes a kind of predictable shape-shifting. Of course Greece provides the ideal scenery for unearthing ancient horrors as in "The Janissaries", an effective tale about an excursion to a monastery turning into a nightmare, and in the compelling "Those of Rhenea", revisiting the darkest Greek myths through the experience of two unsuspecting tourists.

On a different note, "Photo-Call" describes in a grim fashion à la Dario Argento, the long-awaited but disturbing encounter of a young photographer with his professional idol. The title story "Clinically Dead" is a tragic journey into illness and its related horrors. In "Monkey Business", a compelling new tale making its first appearance in the present collection, a monkey skull becomes the instrument of a terrible curse which passes down from one individual to another.

"La Serenissima" constituted Sutton's own contribution to the excellent and now scarce anthology, *Phantoms of Venice* – another of his wonderful exploits as an editor. A decaying Venice is the apt setting for an extremely disquieting story with an unusual erotic undercurrent, featuring two twin sisters facing an inexplicable evil.

And now to the best and the worst of the book. By far my favorite story is "How the Buckie was Saved", an outstanding supernatural sea tale set during WWII, displaying a steady, skilful narrative style and superb characterization. By contrast in the novella "In the Land of the Rainbow Snake", a rather implausible story of aboriginal magic, Sutton appears like a fast-track runner unfit for long-distance races. A master of the short story, he seems ill at ease with long fiction, his

evocative and concise prose getting so diluted as to induce, now and then, a mild sense of boredom.

With said exception, the book is highly recommendable to any dark fiction enthusiast, either familiar or unfamiliar with the author's work. *Clinically Dead* collects only a portion of Sutton's large but neglected production so we are left with the hope that more volumes by this fine writer will become available in the future.

Clinically Dead and Other Tales of the Supernatural - David A Sutton - Crowswing Books - hardcover

Breaking the Chains

By Nic Clarke

Elizabeth Bear's first collection of short fiction, *The Chains That You Refuse*, amply showcases her flair for literate genre-hopping. From post-apocalyptic Faustian bargaining ("And the Deep Blue Sea") to a sparkling Irish fairytale ("The Company of Four"), via Victorian-era colonial horror ("Tiger! Tiger!"), and a genetically-engineered future ("Gone to Flowers"), Bear creates compelling, thoughtful and often moving stories in a diverse range of settings.

"Ice" takes us to the aftermath of Ragnarok, a vivid red and white vista of bone-freezing cold and bloody despair. For narrator Muire, however, the more difficult task is only just beginning. She must learn to cope with the guilt of having survived, when so many of her brethren fell. And, moreover, she must find a new purpose now that her world is shattered. Muire is a strong but believably conflicted

character, and her sad predicament is conveyed economically.

In the end it was complete, and the snow stopped falling, and clouds broke, and I stood over the grave and watched the sunrise paint the grey granite boulders with lichens of blood and time.

“The Devil You Don’t” — one of the most effective stories in the collection — picks up Muire’s story many centuries and half a world later. She is living as a teacher and doctor in the Wild West. Bear conjures the Western resonance — mores, manners, liquor and dust — effortlessly. Yet the shootouts-and-bodies setting is not merely a backdrop for her semi-mortal heroine. Rather, Bear is interested in the genre’s themes, implicit and explicit, and how they may illuminate her premise — and combine to tell a gripping story in their own right. The trope of the outsider appears in literal form as the mysterious stranger Stagolee, but is also reflected in Muire herself, an eternal outsider since Ragnarok. The position of women in frontier society, meanwhile, is neatly explored, providing the pivot of the action.

If there is a unifying theme to *The Chains That You Refuse*, it is — as the title suggests, and the titular story makes explicit — the exercise of free will and self-determination. Specifically, it is about people making brave choices in the most dire of circumstances, even contrary to apparent sense and the interests of their welfare. Bear’s characters repeatedly elect to step into an unknown future. Often they do this for the very fact that it is unknown, as in the Hugo-nominated “Two Dreams on Trains”, an expertly-

rendered image of a caste-ridden near-future society, and the shimmering beauty that is possible even in an industrial nightmare, given sufficient inspiration — and will.

This point is underlined by the fact that several of stories end with such a choice, leaving the reader facing a future literally unknown — a tale that continues beyond the page. “And the Deep Blue Sea” follows a motorcycle courier on assignment through the post-apocalyptic landscape of the South-Western US. The urgency and the precariousness of her day-to-day life come through strongly as she dodges crumbling freeways and radiation hotspots. Her Faustian bargain fits the world brilliantly, although her personality is a tad underwritten when set alongside the vividness of her surroundings.

Another ellipsis ending comes in “This Tragic Glass”, in which Kit Marlowe is rescued from premature sixteenth-century death by time-traveling, tenure-hunting academics from the twenty-third. The premise of “Glass” — effectively time-napping unfulfilled talents from history to give them a chance to shine in the future — is a fascinating but disturbing one. Marlowe’s dislocation over the whole business is quietly but effectively drawn, and the questionable do-gooding of the academics is — particularly in the area of gender perceptions — examined and critiqued without any strident polemic. The intercutting of Marlowe’s would-be fatal duel and the academics’ decision-making is nicely done. Ultimately, however, the story perhaps does not go quite as far as it could have done with the concept — partly as a consequence of the format’s constrictions, which do not allow us to see Marlowe experience much of the world beyond the lab. This reader, at least, also struggled somewhat with the

“Forsooth”s. While the point about language difference is well made, the clichéd dimension that such phrasings have taken on in modern writing means that the dialogue sounds unwontedly awkward.

Two other entries stand out. “Tiger! Tiger!” takes steampunk horror to the Raj in ebullient fashion, as an engaging assortment of characters venture into the Indian wilderness in search of a reputed man-eating tiger. The narrative voice nicely pastiches Victorian literary mannerisms without going overboard, and the ending leaves plenty of tantalizingly unanswered questions. “Botticelli”, meanwhile, plays with time and structure to excellent effect, flicking back and forth between the troubled pasts of its protagonists – a pair of post-Cold War spies, who are also lovers – and the dangerous present of their mission. Impressionistic glimpses of tender interaction offset vivid streaks of brutal violence. It all adds up to an intriguing, devastating picture, in which the story lives as much in the reader’s inferences as in the words on the page.

*Maybe there’s a war, and maybe you’re a boy,
and maybe you’re a soldier. In any case, you
see things – you are things – that no human
being should ever have to see, should ever have
to become.*

The collection is not without its misfires. The opening – and previously unpublished – “L’esprit d’escalier” is a curiously-uninvolving exercise in post-modern structuring that never quite gels, its main purpose seeming to be referencing as many iconic writers as possible. “High Iron” (miners in space)

and “Sleeping Dogs Lie” (about an ill-treated dog) both seem lightweight and unadventurous compared with the muscular prose and unflinching thematics found elsewhere.

Overall, however, this is a clever, accomplished, versatile and thoroughly entertaining assembly of stories. Mood, theme and setting sometimes win out over characterization, but it is tough to begrudge writing this distinctive and memorable.

The Chains That You Refuse – Elizabeth Bear –
Night Shade Books – publisher’s proof

Breadth and Depth

By Sandy Auden

Steve Erikson’s introduction sets a high standard in the latest issue of PS Publishing’s *Postscripts*. Telling the real-life story of his adventures with a group of friends in Whiteshell Provincial Park, Manitoba, he delivers forest fires, danger, great characters, atmosphere, spiritual comment *and* humor in one compact intro. It’s a strange piece to use as an introduction to other people’s short fiction admittedly, but it’s also great fun.

Continuing with more adventure is Juliet McKenna’s “A Spark in the Darkness”. In another prequel story to her first book, *The Thief’s Gamble*, we’re back with Livak’s early life. This time Halice has been badly injured, and her lame leg means that she can’t act as Livak’s muscle in a fight. This also hampers the team’s ability to escape after they’ve pulled a job. Twins Sorgrad and Sorgren are discussing their future with Livak when it becomes apparent that someone is out to kill them all. It’s a story

in two halves – the character and plot progression are strongest at the start, easing you into the new situation, before kicking in with tightly choreographed fighting scenes and arson attacks towards the end. The prose is tighter than previous stories, with no wasted words, and it all shows how McKenna is improving her skills at the shorter form.

Matthew Hughes chips in next with “The Farouche Assemblage”, a crime tale softly told. The crimes in question are fraud – copying artworks and re-selling them as original art – and art theft. Luff Imbry wants to steal the renowned art collection belonging to Paddachau Chin and to do it he needs to obtain a piece of art by Hassol Humbergruff. (Aren’t the names great!) Chin desperately wants to add a Humbergruff to his collection, so Imbry sets out to exploit Humbergruff’s addiction to the dreaming drug Blue Borrache and make the artist create a final piece. This gentle tale is bulging with themes about life choices and materialism, where perceptions of right and wrong are challenged and ego is examined. And it’s all packaged up in a wonderfully traditional (and satisfying) structure with a beginning, middle and end.

Rhys Hughes uses a less rigid structure and, on a really good day, his imagination is so far “out there” that it’s difficult to keep up. Even on a calmer day, he remains much more inventive than your average short story writer. “The Mermaid of Curitiba” sits in those calmer waters, shining quietly. It is the story of a traveler who falls in love with a mermaid at a carnival in Brazil. His desperate desire to see her again after their one night together turns out to be as bittersweet as it is hopeful. A lovely story that is perfect with “Ain’t No Mountain High Enough” playing in the background.

Zoran Živković also hits his stride in “The Hotel Room”. In the third of four self-contained stories making up the mosaic novel, *Four Stories Till The End*, the author has maintained the intensity demonstrated by the first two tales. Once more we have a central character in a room being visited by a series of (often unwelcome) guests to tell him stories. This time it’s the hotel staff telling tales of underground abattoirs and local suicides. As imaginative as ever, this time there are darker things on offer than in the previous stories (including a swimming pool full of blood) and the presence of a solid ending does much to lift this tale above its predecessors.

Stephen Baxter’s “The Long Road” doesn’t really have a beginning or an ending, just continuity. Anyone who has seen the author’s enthusiastic talk at conventions about the evolution of his hometown from Roman times to the present day will recognize a similar enthusiasm here. Standing at one geographical point, Baxter moves cleverly through the years to show us that progression is, in fact, an illusion.

Keeping us in the future, “12 Men Born of Woman” by Garry Kilworth has distinct overtones of the *12 Angry Men* movie – both being set behind the scenes at a trial in a room with an all male jury. But Kilworth moves his story to a more advanced society and opens up a completely different set of social questions. The defendant is on trial for killing a man on a yacht, but the victim wasn’t onboard when they set out on the fishing trip and could not have got onboard after departure. A theory of Random Spontaneous Cloning is put forward – several people go into a confined space and more come out – the question being whether the clone can be regarded as a ‘true’ man, since he wasn’t

born of woman. It's a thoughtful story of mob rule, environmental destruction and ethics and the main points are revealed deftly throughout the text. Intriguing in its own right. It's also a good ambassador for Kilworth's collection, *Moby Jack and Other Tall Tales* [reviewed here last month - Cheryl].

And finally, on the fiction front at least, there's Conrad Williams' "The Veteran". As a non-football fan, I was somewhat wary of this tale of football reminiscences but I needn't have concerned myself. Williams comes through with a character driven tale of people with a passion – in this case football, but everyone can apply that passion to some part of their life with ease. Deal's life is a mess and he isn't getting any younger. In an attempt to regain his youthful enthusiasm he returns to the football pitch with middle-age spread and a drink problem. But his new team has its own way of selecting the squad – a violent, bloody method that hides so much more than Deal understands. A dark one, this. Full of regrets, it seethes with revenge and the hopelessness of life. Williams pens an emotional story wrapped in an intelligent structure and, while he can be under-rated at times, he certainly shows his worth easily in these pages, rounding off the fiction in style.

The non-fiction offering in this edition features Iain Emsley's interview with Elizabeth Hand and Mike Ashley's article about Houdini. Elizabeth Hand bubbles through her interview with a seemingly single stream of consciousness. She details the influences and experiences that go a long way to explaining the depth of her fiction. Meanwhile, Mike Ashley turns out a beautifully researched and utterly fascinating article about how Houdini

may have influenced early 20th Century literature. Simply riveting.

Overall then this is a softer, more consistent issue than the last one. It's interesting, it's intelligent and it's well worth reading.

Postscripts #6 - Peter Crowther (ed.) - PS Publishing - digest magazine

Short Fiction

By Nic Clarke

This month sees the debut of *Cabinet des Fées* <<http://www.cabinet-des-fees.com/>>. Subtitled 'A Fairy Tale Journal', it combines scholarship with short fiction, and features some very interesting material. The trend is towards very short pieces, often only a few pages long, which seek to return fairytales to their darker, stranger roots. Some rework familiar stories: Donna Quattrone's "All For a Rose" takes on "Beauty and the Beast", although it adds very little that is new, while K. Eason's "Little Red" is a wonderfully creepy transfer of "Little Red Riding Hood" to a future where the woods have given way to concrete, and the wolves have evolved. Lila Garrott's "Une Conte de Fée", meanwhile, riffs on "Bluebeard" to great effect, producing a fantastic – and bleak – surprise ending.

Other authors opt instead for original fiction with fairytale theme and tone: dreamlike and atmospheric, with minimal dialogue. I particularly appreciated "The River in Winter", by JoSelle Vanderhooft, a quiet, evocative journey into memory and the changing seasons, experienced through the senses of a nixie who was once a young woman:

There is a reason why I stay here, even when I can't remember it. But when the nights are colder than the North and curled around the edges like the old leaves frozen to my back, I close my wet stone eyes, and memories sweep as surely as old moss along my bed.

Another magazine new to me this month was *Aeon* <<http://www.aeonmagazine.com/>>. Of the seven stories on offer - all of substantial length - most are broadly magical realist or science fiction. Joe Murphy's "The Doom that Came to Smallmouth" takes Lovecraft to eerie small-town Texas, with a fishing competition where the contestants are, unbeknownst to them, the bait. The protagonist is not overly sympathetic, but the overall murky, oppressive mood suits it well.

Elizabeth Bear and Sarah Monette investigate Jonson and Marlowe's "lost" play in a clever literary fantasy, "The Ile of Dogges". This is a return to territory first charted by Bear's "This Tragic Glass" - academics time-travel to rescue historical writers from untimely deaths. It proves a much more light-hearted spin on the concept, while retaining a clear, appealing insight into the Jacobean milieu.

Staying on a historical note, "Lupercalia" by Rita Oakes contrives to bring the more decadent part of ancient Roman society to vibrant life. The environment, particularly the garden, really is beautifully drawn. However, the heart of the story - the sufferings of a pair of werewolves kept as sex slaves by a lascivious noblewoman - is perhaps a touch too prurient with its interest in the details of its subjects' treatment. Unfortunately the chosen

viewpoint character was by far the least interesting of the two werewolves.

This month's *Strange Horizons* <<http://www.strangehorizons.com/>> selection threw up one very entertaining piece: John Schoffstall's "Fourteen Experiments in Postal Delivery" (5th June). It takes the form of a series of angry messages, sent by a woman scorned to her flighty, cheating ex, rebuffing his increasingly elaborate efforts to crawl back into her affections:

This morning I found waiting for me at the Lenox Hill post office a man astride a horse [...] He started in on whether any womman, be she yong or old that hath ymaked hir housbonde cokewold, which is just insulting, seeing as how you're the one with the zipper problem. I gave him your address, and sent him clip-clopping off across Manhattan towards the Village.

Try again. You're not understanding the forgiveness thing.

For much of its length it proves great fun: consistently quirky, frequently amusing, and with an enjoyable acerbic tone. But the break away from the epistolary form towards the end is accompanied by a denouement that was disappointing to this reader, and even a touch unpalatable in its implications. Samantha Henderson's "Cinderella Suicide" (15th May) displays considerable potential: there is a good sense of pacing, interesting ideas, and a setting that has been well thought through, but it overplays the disorientating slang at the beginning.

Son & *Foe* <<http://current.sonandfoe.com/>> is a free zine that offers a mixture of brief vignettes and much longer pieces. The quality varies

considerably, but three stories in issue #3 stand out. Nels Stanley's "All in a Night's Work" is a hallucinatory vision of life working the night shift at a factory, as seen – with little comprehension – by one of its workers. The overall feeling is one of extreme disconnection and dulled awareness; the narration is in the present tense, but this only heightens the way the subjective time moves in fits and starts. A real sense of unease is created as workers (begin to?) go missing, and the narrator suffers an injury but cannot feel the pain – but the story ends too soon, leaving not so much unanswered questions as what felt like an entire plot barely explored.

There is also a pair of strong stories from Dean Paschal. "Moriya" deals with a boy's emotional and sexual awakening at the hands of a mysterious, beautiful automaton kept by the New Orleans couple with whom he lodges one summer – but it is much more sensitive and touching than the summary makes it sound! "Sautéing the Platygest" sees a zoologist and his family posted away from home to explore unusual new life forms – predominantly by cooking and consuming them in a variety of disturbing, lovingly-detailed ways. It is, in short, a deeply strange story, with a fun, mannered narration from the somewhat distracted scientist. There is a thread of disquiet bubbling under the surface, all the more disturbing for the fact that the narrator never confronts it head-on: what makes his daughter so callous? What is the matter with his wife?

In short, is his family planning to kill him?

Still, I keep up my spirits as best I can.

My book of recipes is a major consolation. "Leviticus, Too," I plan to call it. When

demoralized, I think of it as a discreet series of challenges. About the other (the paranoia, I mean) I really should not complain.

I suppose I am not the first father to feel his family is in conspiracy against him.

Strange Horizons – Susan Marie Groppi (ed.) –
Strange Horizons – web site

Aeon #7 – Marti McKenna, Bridget McKenna (eds.) – Scorpius Digital Publishing –
electronic proof

Cabinet des Fées #1 – Erzebet YellowBoy, Catherynne M. Valente, Helen Pilinovsky (eds.) – Prime Books – digest magazine

Son and Foe #3 – Jeremiah Sturgill (ed.) – *Son and Foe* – web site

The Clenched Fists of Science

By Stuart Carter

Steampunk Victoriana (or rather Edwardiana since, although no proper date is given, *Five Fists Of Science* is almost certainly set in the 20th century) seems to hold an endless fascination for writers, and not least comics writers. We've had Alan Moore's *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, Ian Edginton's *Scarlet Traces*, Grant Morrison's *Sebastian O* and Bryan Talbot's *Luther Arkwright* series, to name just a few off the top of my head. And now we have Matt Fraction's hugely enjoyable 'blockbuster', *The Five Fists Of Science*, which in a very similar vein purports to show us just what Nikola Tesla was *really* up to with his mischievous writer pal Samuel Clemens, the lovely Baroness Bertha Von Suttner and, er, a young chap called Tim. I assume

the aforementioned fifth fist is Tesla's big invention (it turns out that ex-pat Serbian inventors had a thing about giant battle robots absolutely ages before the Japanese ever did). And it's worth noting that this is the first piece of US-based comic book steampunk – all the others are by British writers. Is the perceived transatlantic experience of the 19th and early 20th century entirely less hubristic or is there another explanation? Answers on a zeppelin, please.

The Five Fists Of Science is not a complicated book. It could be made into a Hollywood summer blockbuster with an absolute minimum of changes. The main difference between *The Five Fists Of Science: The Movie* and, say, *Star Wars Episode III*, would be that *Five Fists* is fabulous science-fictional fun, has some strong likable characters, and has a wicked sense of humor. Honestly. Not only is there some great dialogue here, but there's also some equally great observational humor brilliantly portrayed by artist Steven Sanders. Hell, I'll go even further and say that most of it is not even geek humor (e.g. referencing the 'hilarious' Batman continuity error from *Batman*, issue 25); it is humor that anyone who thinks Steve Martin hasn't been funny in *decades* should get.

And the story? Well, it's some nonsense about Nikola Tesla inventing giant robots, and an achingly idealistic plan by Clemens to use them to end war with the help of friend-of-the-rich-and-famous, Baroness Suttner, and Tesla's friend, Tim. It's a fine plan, and they would've gotten away with it too, if it hadn't been for that meddling opposing team of contemporary luminaries that included Edison, Marconi, J.P. Morgan and Andrew Carnegie.

To say that liberties have been taken with historical truth in *Five Fists* would be to underestimate Matt Fraction's chutzpah. Let it suffice for me to offer a warning to younger readers out there: if you use *The Five Fists Of Science* as a study aid for any kind of important, official examination you will fail that important, official examination. *Five Fists* plays fast and loose with the truth and is all the better for that. Fraction has an ear for snappy, alternating dialogue that compares favorably with Brian Michael Bendis or Warren Ellis. He is more than capably assisted in the art department by Steven Sanders who does smooth, clear work and has a real flair for comic (and comic book) pacing.

If I say that *Five Fists* often reminded me of *Ghostbusters* (not least the ending) then I think that should give you an excellent idea where this book is coming from and whether or not it's for you. Clemens makes an excellent replacement for Bill Murray's Venkman, and Tesla could almost be Spengler's (the brainy one's) great-grandfather; not to mention the fact that the scientific explanation in both is on about the same level!

It's a nice new twist on the well-trodden UK idea of steampunk, with fewer dandies and more action! I urge you all to "Retreat before the clenched fists of science!"

The Five Fists of Science - Matt Fraction, Steven Sanders et al. - Image Comics - graphic novel

Home Truths

By Farah Mendlesohn

Alison Bechdel has been entertaining us with *Dykes to Watch Out For* since 1983.

Initially one-box sketches, the *Dykes* evolved into a long running comic strip lesbian soap opera. Today the strip (recently ejected from *Planet Out* but available [here](http://www.dykestowatchoutfor.com/index.php) <<http://www.dykestowatchoutfor.com/index.php>>, and in book form), encompasses Raffi, son of Clarice and Toni, Carlos (Raffi's male role model), Stuart, partner of bi-dyke Sparrow, and Janis, an adolescent transgender child. *Dykes to Watch Out For*, although rarely discussed this way, is a rather wonderful piece of utopian fiction. Bechdel has cited as her formative influences Charles Addams, *Mad* magazine, Norman Rockwell, and Edward Gorey. You can see all of this both in the mildly surreal humor which drives the story lines and in Bechdel's attention to drawn character. So much of the story is carried in reaction shots, in poses, and in the awareness of racial and gender differences. One of the most fascinating aspects of her work is the way each of her characters moves and carries themselves in ways appropriate to their culture. I have to remind myself that these are static shots I'm reading.

This year Alison Bechdel has published a novel. I ordered it expecting just that. What I received was a graphic novel within the hard covers of a conventional novel. Before I opened it to see what was inside, I was struck by its beauty, a beauty to which on-line pictures cannot do justice. The cover is a dull metallic sea blue, the illustrations white and silver, the impression that of an eighteenth century sketch. And it isn't the only cover. Underneath the dust jacket the boards are bright orange and open out to a silhouette of the house and family, each member ensconced in their own space, an image that will come to dominate the novel. The lining papers are pale blue flowers. The

influences which Bechdel cites shadow the drawing. The cemetery at the end of Chapter 2 is recognizably Goryesque. The house and its inhabitants are frequently shown in Charles Adams poses. Norman Rockwell influences the down-home scenes, the family gatherings that are ever so slightly discordant.

Fun Home is what the young Alison and her brothers come to call the funeral parlor which her father runs, and which he has inherited from his father, and from his father before him. The Bechdels live in a small town in which there have been Bechdels for one hundred and fifty years. There are several hundred in the 'phone book, and Bechdels marry Bechdels. Alison's father met her mother while at college, in a short period of escape. *It's a Wonderful Life* reads as a weird, accurate yet disturbing parable for Alison. The modern tragic reading of the film makes perfect sense to her, for Alison grows up in a household that feels subtly wrong. Her mother is fanatically neat, combining house work with amateur dramatics. Her father moves them into a gothic pile and spends the next fifteen years restoring it to Southern colonial grandeur. Neither seems to communicate much with the other. The children are professionally cared for but there seems little emotional time.

As Alison grows older she begins to realize that her father is obsessive. She also can't help notice that while he is fanatic about house restoration, the obsession is with the decor, with fabrics, furnishings, flowers. His own clothing – velvet jackets, ruffled shirts – becomes part of the setting. He is also secretive: visits to the city involve his odd absences. He doesn't seem to have friends his own age, but is close to some of the male students from the local college. An "inciting a minor to drink" charge gets

dropped on condition that he sees a psychologist. As Alison and her brothers grow older they drift to their separate sections of the house. When Alison goes to university and discovers her own sexuality, the penny drops: her father is gay. When she tells him she is a lesbian, her mother confirms this fact. Her father continues to talk in the oblique code he has always used.

And then he walks across a street, is hit by a truck and is killed. Both Alison and her mother are convinced it is suicide.

I have given this detail away at the end of the summary, but Bechdel provides it at the beginning, and it is the event around which the book is constructed. Bechdel's father becomes a series of Chinese puzzle boxes, no one of which is ever completely unpacked. This describes the book itself. Inked with black lines and shaded with blue the images are layered. There are the pictured scenes. There are the words in the speech bubbles. There are the text boxes offering a gloss, frequently drawing from myth and legend. These components have to be read together or only part of the story is told. The layers reiterate the experience of childhood, the half contextualized information. Frequently the really important information is in those classical references dropped and picked up again at different stages in Alison's childhood. That blue shading keeps the story distant, moments of memory. Dictionary definitions in pale blue and black underscore the coldness, the formality of a life lived in emotional confinement.

Fun Home: a Family Tragicomic - Alison Bechdel
- Houghton Mifflin - graphic novel

Two-Fisted Gingerbread Man

By Peter Wong

Billy Hazelnuts, the titular hero of Tony Millionaire's newest graphic novel, might be called a two-fisted gingerbread man for the 21st Century. Even though its look may scream early 20th Century children's literature, its narrative sensibilities make it a creature of the present age.

Farmwoman Mrs. Rimperton has successfully defended her kitchen from incursions by mice. In retaliation, the rodents create a champion of their own out of mincemeat pie, houseflies, and other garbage. Billy Houseflies, the mouse champion, is a dough-like boy who possesses speed and strength beyond his small size. These abilities allow him, at great cost, to battle both Mrs. Rimperton and her cat. But when Billy flees Mrs. Rimperton's wrath, the mice abandon their creation.

Becky Rimperton, a girl scientist/inventor, knows little of these goings-on at first. Her interests lie in such things as using her very homemade holographic projector-telescope to examine the surface of Venus. The romantic attentions of would-be poet, Eugene, are definitely not one of Becky's interests. Eugene regales the girl with verse that may not sink to the depths of Vogon poetry... but not through lack of effort.

Fulfilling an errand for her mother, Becky finds Billy hiding in the barn. Her hostility towards the creature softens when she understands his vocal bluster conceals an essentially innocent nature. The girl scientist repairs Billy, beginning by replacing the houseflies in the creature's eyes with hazelnuts.

Billy Hazelnuts, as the homunculus is re-named, encounters Eugene. The would-be mechanical inventor cum failed poet immediately considers Billy a rival trying to steal his romantic property. Said love property furiously and permanently ejects her so-called suitor from her home. That ejection provides the final push to send Eugene down Mad Scientist Road.

Time passes. During one of Becky's stargazing sessions, Billy notices the moon sinking below the distant hills and disappearing. Out of curiosity, the artificial creature sets off to find the errant celestial body. Becky, on her motor-powered rocking horse, joins Billy on his wild search. Along the way, the duo encounter sheep annoyed at being mistaken for birds and a garbage dump for broken and cracked planets. Their ultimate challenge comes from a flying and walking pirate ship whose captain, a blind mechanical alligator, is accompanied by a seeing-eye skunk. The pirates' connection to Eugene, as well as how Becky and Billy deal (or not) with the pirates' threat, inform the rest of this oddball tale.

Calling the art in *Billy Hazelnuts* classic comic strip art will very likely confuse readers younger than this writer. These days comic strips are very simply drawn items, possessing generic background detail at best. But that minimalist look is a response to newspapers' tendency to reproduce comic strips as small as possible. In such circumstances, the fine artistic detail characteristic of classic comic strips would be no more visible than the fine print found in many consumer contracts.

It is the gorgeous visuals of those old strips that Millionaire freely draws upon for his artistic inspiration. His strange

world of talking shooting stars and bizarre telescopes comes alive through beautifully detailed images. One favorite panel takes up a full page. The illustration uses variegated line work to show Eugene in angry mad scientist mode. His hair seems electrified by the approaching storm cloud. A drifting cloud silently rises behind Eugene's head to the mountain-top, capturing his volcanic hatred and desire for revenge without the need for melodramatic declarations. In this age that cherishes the speedy processing of visual information, Millionaire's images compel the reader to stop and reflect on each panel to admire the visual details encoded therein.

For readers more interested in page-turners than art appreciation, *Billy Hazelnuts* provides a picaresque adventure that will serve them well. The story set-up, which introduces the main characters, moves at a dynamic and fast clip. The sights, during the journey to find the apparently vanished moon, build from absurdity to exciting bits of two-fisted action. The clash with the pirates that propels the last third of the book never sinks into absurdity despite the bizarre nature of the combatants.

Make no mistake, *Billy Hazelnuts* does not exhume and polish the reactionary sensibilities of the classic adventure comic strips for a new generation. Becky's self-assurance and inventive genius would have been ridiculed at best in the comic strips of yore. Newspaper editors of old would not have allowed the sight of Eugene vomiting, or the graphic fight between Billy and the cat, out of fear for family sensibilities. Billy's macho attitude and abilities, which would have been lionized in the classic comic strips, ultimately prove less important to the tale's resolution. That resolution is

provided by a quietly transcendent moment.

Yet despite his updates to the classic American comic strip cultural assumptions, Millionaire's tale still reflects some quintessentially American ideas. The optimistic belief in people's fundamental decency until definitively proven otherwise pervades its pages. Eugene acts in an incredibly immature and cowardly manner for much of the story until he realizes the error of his ways. The delight of strange discoveries during a road trip is reflected in Becky and Billy's pursuit of the disappearing Moon. Finally, there's a pronounced dislike for flaunting one's higher knowledge at others. Mrs. Rimperton seems unaware of her daughter's mechanical genius. Becky herself hides her work in her bedroom or uses her inventions out of her mother's sight. Eugene, by contrast, uses his poetic "skills" and inventive genius to unsuccessfully win Becky's heart.

Could Billy be a quintessential American? His birth is the product of an improvisational mixing together of literally different ingredients. Brashness and fearlessness in the face of stronger opponents mark his life. Yet a strong moral sense tempers his strength, otherwise Billy might not have run off after Mrs. Rimperton hit him for cruelly injuring her cat. What people (literally) stuff in Billy's skull affects his subsequent behavior, making a metaphor for political manipulation. Then again, these character elements don't seem unique to Americans, as they sound like qualities that could appear in the tales of other people around the world.

What is certain is that Millionaire's *Billy Hazelnuts* travels a creative middle road between the cheerful taboo-busting of his

"Maakies" comic strip and the odd children's stories told in "Sock Monkey." In this case, that path does not reach mediocrity at the end. Instead, *Billy Hazelnuts* proves to be a work whose cheerfully wonky invention doesn't quite conceal its dark heart of spiritual struggle.

Billy Hazelnuts - Tony Millionaire - Fantagraphics - graphic novel

War with the Crabs

By Cheryl Morgan

I've suddenly realized why I like Neal Asher's Prador so much. Sure they are giant crabs, so I have a good excuse for eating their Earthbound brethren. But the main reason I like them is because they are like Daleks who have discovered Libertarianism. The Daleks, of course, were deeply into collectivism long before The Borg. "I Obey" is one of the most common Dalek phrases, and they mean it. Their mission to conquer the galaxy is far more important to them than anything else. Individual ambition is anathema to them. The Prador say "I Obey" lots as well, but what they are actually thinking when they say it is this, "I obey for now, but one day I shall be ruler of the galaxy and then you will all obey me!" The Daleks are coldly, calculatedly evil, but the Prador are a perfect expression of childish selfishness and greed. They are such very human bad guys.

Asher's latest Polity novel, *Prador Moon*, takes a step back in time to the point when mankind and the Prador first encounter each other. As such it is a first contact novel. However, that part of the book is fairly perfunctory. It goes like this:

humans meet Prador, Prador meet humans, you will now fight to the death. And so they do, in typical Asher fashion. Night Shade's back cover blurb, in a moment of significant understatement, describes the Asher style as, "over-the-top violence and explosive action." That was just the first book. Asher has been trying hard to out-do himself ever since.

So what is the book actually about? Well, a large part of it is an amusing hard SF tale of how those cunning humans can manufacture absurdly deadly weapons out of the simplest of components. I can't describe what they do here, partly because it would be a massive spoiler, but also if I did I'd probably find concerned politicians asking questions in Parliament about the sort of dangerous information that is available to children on the Internet. (Those of you who have read the book may detect a touch of irony here, but I don't expect many politicians to have much idea about whether or not you can buy matter transporters online.)

The other element of the book is the contrast between the human and Prador societies. Both are in fact dictatorships of some sort. The Polity is a close relative of Iain Banks' *Culture*, except that in *The Polity* the fact that the AIs are in charge is openly acknowledged. Consequently there is political opposition. A common theme of *Polity* novels is the existence of groups of "Separatists" — people that might be characterized as freedom fighters or terrorists, depending on whose side you are on. In practice the Separatists are generally presented as selfish, and heavily infiltrated by criminals and murderous psychopaths. They are much more reminiscent of the IRA than of Luke Skywalker and Han Solo.

There is, of course, no dissent in Prador society. If there was any it would be ruthlessly suppressed, and in any case obedience is generally enforced using pheromones and, where necessary, the use of mind-control technology. Instead the Prador plot against each other constantly. The goal of this plotting is not revolution and the creation of a democracy, but rather to supplant one Prador ruler with another. In response Prador adults routinely kill any of their offspring who show too much ambition and intelligence (a habit they may have picked up from Margaret Thatcher who did something similar with uppity Cabinet ministers).

The important point here is that, as far as the Prador are concerned, it is every crab for himself. They have no conception of cooperation, only obedience. The humans, on the other hand, have this odd habit of becoming fond of each other. Not only will they band together and cooperate without being forced to do so, they will actually risk their own lives willingly in order to save their friends. The Prador cannot understand this at all.

At first sight the humans of *The Polity* are a free and democratic society fighting against a vicious and brutal dictatorship. Look a little closer, however, and you will find that the humans are willing citizens of an (apparently) benevolent dictatorship and are strong believers in mutual cooperation. The Prador, in contrast, are the ultimate rugged individualists who will do anything to advance their personal interests (including enslaving and eating their own children). Asher is no Ken MacLeod — he doesn't spend page after page having characters debate politics — but he does present some interesting ideas.

A Ritual Journey

By Cheryl Morgan

I think I’ve mentioned before that Sean Wallace of Prime seems to know just the right books to send me. Things turn up out of the blue, and they seem to be just what I want. In this particular case the volume in question was a slim book called *Killing with the Edge of the Moon*, by A.A. Attanasio. It calls itself a “graphic novel (without illustrations)”, but it is actually a dark fantasy novella providing a modern riff on Celtic myth.

Many religions have myths in which someone dies, or is at least snatched away, and then his or her lover journeys to the underworld to perform a rescue. None of these myths, as far as I know, involve the goddess, Blodeuwedd. She is, however, a good choice as the focus of such a story, and Attanasio shows a deft touch with mythology in the way he uses her.

Jerking like a puppet, Nedra danced about her tree stump altar. Silver threads decorating her long-sleeved gown glittered in the moonlight with embroidered spirals, hex signs and raying stars. Skinny arms, thin as sticks in those wide cuffs, beat the darkness, and long hair jerked across her haggard face.

Our modern day Blodeuwedd is the teenage Flannery Lake. She lives with her aged grandmother, Nedra Fell, in a roadside store from which Nedra sells pagan charms to tourists. The setting is

perhaps Ireland, though Attanasio never says so and he drops in far too many Americanisms for it to be convincing. As far as Flannery is concerned, her grandmother is a liability, yet another reason for kids at school to tease her. She doesn’t believe a word of the nonsense about magic and the Shee that Nedra obsesses over. Perhaps if she knew how old her “grandmother” really was, she would take it more seriously.

The other half of our lovers’ knot is Chester “Chet” Hubert, a geeky boy with a talent for math and an upper-middle-class family that is as much an embarrassment to him as Flannery’s extreme poverty is to her. Being the two outsiders of the class, Chet feels that he and the fey girl have something in common. But Flannery affects to despise the world. She’s a professional loner. Heck, if someone offered her the chance to leave this world behind she’d jump at it, no matter how many times Nedra has warned her about such offers.

In modern times, the Moon has become a rock. In the time of the faerie, she was the swollen belly of mother night authoring souls and dreams. Rock and dream. The edge between these realities is sharp – and the faerie use that edge to kill.

While the mythology in the book was fairly well done (apart perhaps for the dragon stuff, which didn’t feel at all Celtic to me), what I really liked about the story was the kids. Both Flannery and Chet are outsiders and are regularly bullied at school. Flannery’s difference is perhaps explainable. She doesn’t exactly come from a normal family. Chet, on the other hand, is a perfectly ordinary kid who has

spent much of his school life being tormented, mainly because his parents are over-protective and he's not smart enough to pretend not to be smart. His story is that no matter how low you have got – no matter how wretched and awful everyone tells you that you are – redemption is still possible. No one's life is completely worthless if it can be given away to save the life of someone you love.

Killing with the Edge of the Moon - A.A. Attanasio - Wildside - trade paperback

Of Politics and Awards

By Cheryl Morgan

The Lambda Literary Awards <<http://www.lambdaliterary.org/>> are an institution that I follow with passing interest, mainly because they are one of the few self-professed "literary" awards to include a category for SF/F/H fiction. They are also specifically aimed at works with an LGBT character to them, which provides some overlap with the Tiptree. This year the Lambda winners were announced over WisCon weekend. Some surprise was expressed in various quarters that Octavia Butler's *Fledgling* was beaten to the SF/F/H prize by a book most of us had never heard of, and which A Room of One's Own, Madison's feminist bookstore, had not bothered to bring to the dealers' room. The winning book was *Daughters of an Emerald Dusk*, by Katherine V. Forrest. I decided I'd better take a look.

I wasn't entirely sure what to expect, but conversations at WisCon, and the fact that the store had the book hidden away in their "lesbian interest" section rather than on the SF shelves, had me primed for a

rather poor piece of SF with lots of hot lesbian sex. What I actually found was a proper SF book with a political philosophy so utterly abhorrent to me that I'm going to give away the ending to talk about it. If you don't like spoilers, stop reading now.

Initially all of my worst fears looked like they were being fulfilled. The beginning of the book is full of pompous, portentous prose that I had great difficulty getting through. In places it was also just sloppy. For example:

Celeste is prostrate over the reality that her friends, her entire peer group, are suddenly three decades older than she.

I've never tried lying on top of a reality myself. I wonder how uncomfortable it is? Or this:

Laurel, and their daughters Emerald and Crystal, are thirty years older than when Megan left Maternas on what we had all believed to be no more than a year's voyage to visit our sisters on Earth to bring news of the home we had found in the stars, and then return.

That sentence clearly got away from Forrest half way through and could benefit from some of Anne's excellent copy editing.

Other things grate too. For example, I can't believe that real people would say things like this:

"This would be child's play compared to the years of evading Theo Zedera and the role you took the day your Earth changed forever."

By half way through I was really struggling to understand what the judges had seen in this book. But at least by then I had absorbed enough background about the previous books in the series to know what was going on.

What we have here is a tale of a feminist utopia. The women in the book have found a way to produce offspring without the aid of men and have set up a separatist society. Attempts to co-exist with male-dominated societies on Earth have apparently failed, but an idyllic community has been founded on the planet of Maternas (on the continent of Femina – sigh). The founders of the society, having given up on Earth, have just returned to that world.

And here, suddenly, Forrest gets into her stride. There is a plot, and a story to be told. The pompous prose mostly goes away, and we get action instead. The three viewpoint characters: Minerva the Historian, Olympia the Philosopher and Joss the Heroine, all appear to talk with Forrest's voice, but at least the book is now readable.

In the 30 or so years that our heroines have been away from Maternas, disturbing things have happened. All children born in the first generation of colonists have shown physical differences from normal humans and have been unusually rebellious. The second generation matured unusually quickly, stopped talking around the age of four, and left home to live in the jungles soon after. The colony's scientists can find no

biological explanation for what has happened.

The truth is eventually revealed to Joss (and I do mean revealed, this is not a book in which characters strive and succeed). It turns out that Maternas has a mind of its own. It is a Gaian world. And despite the fact that the colony has done everything it can to manage its interaction with the local environment in a sound and caring way, humans are not welcome. Indeed, humans are not welcome anywhere. It turns out that they only managed to evolve on Earth because our local Gaia-mind had been seriously damaged by meteor impacts. On healthy worlds, creatures as evil as humans are never allowed to evolve.

"That we're an inferior and malignant species, that we would never have come into existence even on our own planet except that Earth was too weak to rid herself of us – these are facts we can believe or not, as we wish."

This, of course, is myth-making. It is on a par with saying, "God came to me in a dream and told me that we must all live by the following laws." Forrest has no logical argument to demonstrate that humans are evil; she just has Joss, on behalf of the planetary mind, state it as a "fact." Thankfully she doesn't then immediately advocate genocide. She appears to be willing to let her characters survive in the vastness of space, where they can do no harm to other living beings. But you can imagine how the Pat Robertsons and Osama bin Ladens of a putative Forrestite religion would interpret such ideas.

Which brings us back to the Lambdas. *Daughters of an Emerald Dusk* is not really a book about LGBT issues. There are a few

pages of fairly juicy lesbian group sex, but all of the gender politics appears to have happened in the earlier books of the series. There is a remarkably hard-line Environmentalist message in the book, but that isn't supposed to be part of the Lambda remit. And as far as literature goes, I'm sure that Octavia Butler's book beats this one hands down.

That in turn brings us back to the Tiptree. This year's Tiptree winner is a very fine piece of literature. It has won three other major literary awards as well as the Tiptree. Anyone who suggests that *Air* winning the Tiptree is a triumph of politics over literary quality is liable to get laughed at. There was, it is true, a highly controversial book on the short list, and a work of highly dubious quality on the long list. That's how the Tiptree deals with politics. The more a work is politically interesting but of suspect literary quality, the further down the list it goes.

In contrast, *Daughters of an Emerald Dusk* was not on a short list or a long list. It won a major award, beating out a book by an acknowledged literary genius. So, to those of you out there who have been claiming that the Tiptree has lost all credibility by putting politics above literary quality, for goodness sake have a sense of proportion. If you must go after an award, take pot shots at the Lambdas instead.

Daughters of an Emerald Dusk – Katherine V. Forrest – Alyson Books – trade paperback

A Life in Politics

By Cheryl Morgan

Ken MacLeod was a Guest of Honor at Boskone this year. As usually happens in

such situations, NESFA press has produced a book to commemorate the event. With most writers they tend to publish short fiction, and *Giant Lizards from Another Star* is no exception. It contains MacLeod's YA novella, "Cydonia", the novella he produced for PS Publishing, "The Human Front", and a selection of short stories.

But in the case of MacLeod the quantity of short fiction available is not quite enough to fill up a decent-sized GoH book. It amounts to under 200 pages. Fortunately for NESFA Press, MacLeod doesn't just write fiction. Indeed, the other half of the book is in many ways the most interesting part of it. So I'm not going to talk about the fiction. You know that MacLeod writes good stories. What I will concentrate on is the fact that MacLeod is a very interesting writer about science fiction and politics.

There are con reports. I'm pleased to see that MacLeod found the Finns as hospitable as I did. I'm looking forward to Helsinki even more now. MacLeod has also been to Sweden, Spain, Poland and Croatia, all of which sound interesting. The less said about Hinckley the better, though MacLeod seems to have survived the hotel experience.

The next section is science fiction criticism, including the article that MacLeod wrote for *Emerald City* #100. Inevitably this section is about politics as well. MacLeod is one of the few SF writers who really understand politics. He's also one of the few who can talk about Libertarianism without my wondering whether the author has had a lobotomy, and wanting to flush the book down the garbage disposal system. Here MacLeod explains succinctly why so much SF includes Libertarian themes.

...if you're writing a story about the future and you want to make it interesting, your heroes or heroines might be struggling against an oppressive regime or stuffy bureaucracy or reactionary mob to build their spaceship, raise their robot child, twiddle their DNA and become as gods. Or they're rich, like Heinlein's Man Who Sold the Moon, and how did they become rich, huh? By screwing taxes out of the peasantry? Taking or giving bribes? Well... maybe, but it's so much more sympathetic to present someone who made their pile in some kind of free-market way, and that implies a certain kind of society, for a start one that lets them bloody well keep it.

Nor is Libertarianism the only "ism" with which MacLeod is familiar. He is, of course, a Trot, or at least an ex-Trot. That makes him familiar with both Trotskyism and Marxism. You can't talk about them without talking about Socialism. And it seems that you can't be a Scot without talking about Nationalism. In addition, here he is talking about Feminism.

I worked on one campaign with a rather nice radical lesbian feminist. At a party I had a long and serious conversation with her, in which she explained that all relationships between men and women were oppressive, that there was nothing men could do about it, if men wanted to help they should stop having relationships with women, and that ideally, men and women should live in separate societies. I decided that if that was what feminism meant, then it actively didn't want any support from me and it wasn't going to get any.

Something like this conversation must have gone on up and down the country, because that is exactly what all too many people now take 'feminism' to mean. Over the years I have met a lot of women, and heard of a lot more, who

are feminist in every aspect of their beliefs and attitudes but who firmly insist that they are not feminists. The reason they give is always the same: they don't consider themselves feminists because they don't hate men.

If only I'd had that little passage available at WisCon. It would have saved so much time on panels.

It also reminds me that we ought to get MacLeod along to WisCon one of these days so that he can meet some real feminists for a change. Of course we need to wait until the American Left has got over the Dubya thing and is capable of talking intelligently about politics without indulging in absurd flights of hyperbole and hysteria.

One of the things I really like about MacLeod is that he is willing to be experimental in his thinking and then happily admit when he got things wrong.

I've also attributed the New Space Opera and the British boom to the application of a 'British New Wave [...] sensibility to traditional tropes'. The Americans, I've suggested, supplied the big ideas, and the Brits came along with the literary sophistication and political complexity. This is just insultingly wrong, as well as being an unconscious, and thus all the more galling, echo of that British declining-imperialist conceit of being Athens to the new Rome.

Unfortunately that comes in the same article in which he assumes that no one outside the US would know what "the gripping hand" means, but at least he means well. And thankfully he's smart enough and well respected enough that admitting he's wrong just gets him more

respect rather than having his mistakes held up as evidence of his villainy for ever after.

The material on Scottish politics is perhaps the least interesting, unless you happen to be Scottish yourself. The few bits that I did follow were not impressive. The essay on Scotland and the EU might have come straight out of a tabloid newspaper, concentrating on the excesses of European bureaucracy and making no mention of the significant advances in civil rights that we have made in the UK because the European Court of Human Rights forced changes of attitude on unwilling British governments.

The final section is called squibs. The appropriate dictionary definition here is, "A brief satirical or witty writing or speech, such as a lampoon." However, I suspect that such things are only called squibs because their effect is rather like that of "a small firecracker" tossed into the middle of the publication's readership. MacLeod's squibs are very funny, provide that you actually realize that they are squibs and know who or what they are lampooning. My only complaint is that he makes no mention of dill pickle.

Regardless of what you think about MacLeod's political views, you can guarantee that what he writes is going to make you think. It is hard to provide a better recommendation for a book than that.

Giant Lizards from Another Star - Ken MacLeod
- NESFA Press - hardcover

Doctor in the Dock

By Cheryl Morgan

There have been many books written about *Doctor Who*. People like Dave Howe and Paul Cornell have done an excellent job documenting the series and providing the sort of in-depth information that fans love to pore over. However, to my knowledge, the new offering from Kim Newman is the first book on *Who* by someone who is not only a well-respected writer, but also a top-notch film and TV critic. *Doctor Who*, published in the British Film Institute in their TV Classics series, is a very different animal to the *Who* books that have come before. It is also an excellent read.

The book is short: a little over 100 pages, but is packed with critical analysis of the series. Newman divides the book into five chapters. The first deals mainly with the origins of the Doctor and the William Hartnell era. I had entirely forgotten that the BBC originally intended the series as an educational tool for children. It was no accident that the Doctor's first companions were a schoolgirl, a history teacher and a science teacher (though from my vantage point behind the sofa I entirely failed to notice this). Thankfully the BBC's high-minded ideals and instruction that the show should not feature bug-eyed monsters were ignored by the production crew. The Daleks arrived in the second story-line, and have been the stars of the show ever since.

Part two of the book is devoted to the Troughton era. Newman points out that for most people their favorite Doctor is the one who was current during their early teens when they became fans of the show. Being of a similar age, he and I both love Patrick Troughton's portrayal of the

Doctor, and have fond memories of UNIT and the absurdly teddy-bear-like Yeti. How I came to be terrified of those things I do not know. Fans of later periods may be disappointed by Newman's focus on the early years but, as he points out:

It seems to me that Doctor Who was at its best and most interesting when addressing the widest audience (60s and 70s kids, plus their youngish parents) but lost its grip when it became aimed almost solely at its fans.

I'm not sure if I agree with him in placing much of the blame on K9, but I think he's right in saying that with later incarnations of the Doctor the show descended to producing parodies of itself. TV scriptwriters can do fanfic too.

Chapter Three is devoted to the Jon Pertwee era, in which UNIT is once again a major element of the program. As Newman points out, by this time the show was competing against ever more elaborate series produced by Gerry Anderson for commercial TV channels who understood merchandizing.

On the BBC's licence-payers' money, UNIT couldn't compete with Anderson's wonderful toys. There were no die-cast Dinky models of the battered army lorries they trundled around in while Captain Scarlet zoomed off in a Spectrum Pursuit Vehicle. The colour-coded captains spent their off-duty hours in the luxury lounge of a floating city (Cloudbase) with the Angels, fighter pilots who could pass for fashion models, whereas the most Sergeant Benton (John Levene) and the UNIT lads could hope for was the odd cup of teabag tea brewed in a retort over a Bunsen burner by Jo Grant (Katy Manning) if she wasn't too busy getting into trouble.

The Anderson shows had their own comic too (*TV21*). Surprisingly this included a *Doctor Who* strip, or rather it didn't. It included a Daleks strip in which the lovable psychopathic pepperpots were the heroes, busily saving Skaro from the predatory attentions of rival races like the Mechanoids.

For most of the people I know, Tom Baker is the archetypal Doctor. As Newman points out, part of the reason for this is that it marks the first time that the show was seriously marketed in the USA. The amateur *Doctor Who* movies that Kevin made in college are from that era. But they were also the beginning of the end in that they marked the point where the show stopped taking itself seriously. I am actually quite fond of K9, but as Newman points out he was an even more spectacularly incompetent design for a robot than the Daleks (who are, of course, not really robots). K9 can't actually do much except get into trouble in much the same way as the endless succession of screaming girl sidekicks do.

The less said about the post-Tom Baker Doctors the better, save to note that if Newman was going to spend quite so much time talking about Peri's cleavage the BFI really should have provided a photo of her to go with the text. She's one of the few Companions not to get a picture in the book.

And now, resurrection: Newman devotes much of the final chapter to the New Doctor, which he (probably rightly) regards as a new incarnation of the show rather than a continuation of the old version. Remarkably for a book published in 2005, he even manages to include some discussion of the David Tennant Doctor. Clearly there was some rushed work here

just prior to publication. Newman generally approves of the new series. It is very self-referential, but not at the expense of the stories. Aside from the irredeemably awful first episode of the Ecclestone series, it has done very well.

All of this, however, is history. What Newman's book is really about is analysis. He has done a superb job of getting under the skin of the series and understanding what made it tick, why it was a success, and why it went wrong. For example, here he is on the mysterious star quality of the Daleks.

... the Daleks brag about their superior intellect but act like toddlers in perpetual hissy fits. In this, they are the perfect playground monsters, utterly evil but also utterly childish.

Another interesting insight is that, prior to *Star Wars*, most SF TV had more in common with horror than fantasy. *Doctor Who* owes a number of debts to Nigel Kneale's legendary Quatermass stories, and the pre-Tom Baker *Who* used classic horror techniques for many of the story structures. In later years, with the BBC hounded by "clean up TV" campaigners such as Mary Whitehouse, *Doctor Who* stories became a lot less scary, and a lot less effective as a result.

Finally I'm pleased to see Newman give a nod to the debt *Doctor Who* owes to the excellent *Doomwatch* series. (Teenage Cheryl had a serious crush on Robert Powell). He comments in a footnote that when Ian McDonald was asked to present ideas for the revival TV movie that eventually became *Doomwatch: Winter Angel* (1999), he pitched a bunch of cutting edge scientific ideas only to find that the

original show (1970-72) had already covered all of them.

I guess Newman's book will not be for everyone. It is very much a critical appreciation of *Doctor Who*, not a fan tribute. And that small and dedicated (if deeply, deeply misguided) legion of Colin Baker fans out there will not be happy with Newman. But for me this is just about the best book about *Doctor Who* that I could ask for.

Doctor Who - Kim Newman - British Film Institute - mass market paperback

Miscellany

By Cheryl Morgan

Locus Awards

The winners of this year's *Locus* Awards were announced overnight in Seattle. Here's the list:

Best Science Fiction Novel: *Accelerando*, Charles Stross (Ace; Orbit);

Best Fantasy Novel: *Anansi Boys*, Neil Gaiman (Morrow; Review);

Best First Novel: *Hammered/Scardown/Worldwired*, Elizabeth Bear (Bantam Spectra);

Best Young Adult Book: *Pay the Piper*, Jane Yolen & Adam Stemple (Starscape);

Best Novella: "Magic for Beginners", Kelly Link (*Magic for Beginners*, F&SF 9/05);

Best Novelette: "I, Robot", Cory Doctorow (*The Infinite Matrix*, 2/15/05);

Best Short Story: "Sunbird", Neil Gaiman (*Noisy Outlaws* etc.);

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

Best Publisher: Tor;

Best Anthology: *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror: Eighteenth Annual Collection*, Ellen Datlow, Kelly Link & Gavin Grant, eds. (St. Martin's);

Best Collection: *Magic for Beginners*, Kelly Link (Small Beer Press);

Best Editor: Ellen Datlow;

Best Artist: Michael Whelan;

Best Non-Fiction: *Storyteller: Writing Lessons and More from 27 Years of the Clarion Writers' Workshop*, Kate Wilhelm (Small Beer Press);

Best Art Book: Cathy & Arnie Fenner, eds. *Spectrum 12: The Best in Contemporary Fantastic Art* (Underwood).

The *Locus* Awards not only have more participation than the Hugos, they also seem to produce better results (at least I think they do). Here's hoping that this is a good omen for Charlie in the Hugos.

Sunburst and Aurora Short Lists

Our friends in Canada have been busy. Here is the list of nominees for the Sunburst Award:

Someone Comes to Town, Someone Leaves Town, Cory Doctorow (Tor Books); *Gravity Wells: Speculative Fiction Stories*, James Alan Gardner (HarperCollins Canada); *The Wave Theory of Angels*, Alison MacLeod (Penguin Canada); *In the Palace of Repose*, Holly Phillips (Prime Books); *Spin*, Robert Charles Wilson (Tor Books).

Interesting list. I'm rather fascinated by a book called *The Wave Theory of Angels*. I'd

like to see *Spin* win, but I know that the Phillips and Doctorow books are good too.

The winner will be announced some time in the fall.

That was the judged awards, but there are also fan-voted awards, the Auroras. The full list of nominees is here: <<http://www.sentex.net/~dmullin/aurora/>>. The English language novel short list is as follows:

Migration (Species Imperative 2), Julie E. Czerneda (DAW Books, May/2005); *Cagebird*, Karin Lowachee (Warner Aspect, Apr/2005); *Mindscan*, Robert J. Sawyer (Tor, Apr/2005); *Silences of Home*, Caitlin Sweet (Penguin, Feb/2005); *Lone Wolf*, Edo van Belkom (Tundra Books, Oct/2005); *Spin*, Robert Charles Wilson (Tor, Apr/2005).

Spin again, I hope.

Sidewise Short Lists

The Short Lists for this year's Sidewise Awards (given for works of alternate history) have been announced. The lucky nominees are:

Long Form: *The Summer Isles*, Ian R. MacLeod (Aio Publishing); *Romanitas*, Sophia McDougall (Orion); *A Princess of Roumania*, Paul Park (Tor).

Short Form: "Harvest Moon", William Barton (*Asimov's* September 2005); "The Illuminated Heretic", A.M. Dellamonica (*Alternate Generals III*, edited by Harry Turtledove, Baen April 2005); "Prix Victor Hugo Script", Kim Newman & Paul J. McAuley (Interaction Events); "Panacea", Jason Stoddard (*SciFiction*, September 14, 2005); "Pericles the Tyrant", Lois Tilton (*Asimov's*, October-November 2005)

Congratulations for Kim and Paul on a second award nomination. Captain Standlee is very pleased.

The winners will be announced at this year's Worldcon.

International Horror Guild Awards

The short lists for the International Horror Guild Awards are available online here: <<http://www.ihgonline.org/>>. The novels are as follows:

Lunar Park, Brett Easton Ellis (US: Knopf, UK: Macmillan/Picador); *The Historian*, Elizabeth Kostova (US, UK: Little, Brown); *Beyond Black*, Hilary Mantel (UK: Fourth Estate, US: Henry Holt); *The Stone Ship*, Peter Raftos (Australia: Padanus Books, US: University of Hawaii Press); *The Horrific Sufferings of the Mind-Reading Monster Hercules Barefoot, His Wonderful Love and His Terrible Hatred*, Carl-Johan Vallgren (Tr. Paul Britten-Austin), (UK: Random House/Harvill Press, US 2006: HarperCollins).

There's lots of good stuff elsewhere in the list as well. China Miéville is in Short Fiction with "Go Between"; Jeffrey Ford's fabulous "Boatman's Holiday" is in the Mid-Length; Joe Hill gets several mentions, including *20th Century Ghosts* for Collection, but is up against the ubiquitous Kelly Link (*Magic for Beginners*); and Chelsea Quinn Yarbro becomes a Living Legend.

Mythopoeic Awards Short Lists

The shorts lists for this year's Mythopoeic Awards are posted here <<http://www.mythsoc.org/awards.html>>. The list for Best Adult Novel is as follows:

The Penelopiad, Margaret Atwood (Canongate); *The Hallowed Hunt*, Lois McMaster Bujold (Eos); *Anansi Boys*, Neil Gaiman (Willow Morrow); *Metallic Love*, Tanith Lee (Bantam Spectra); *The Strange Adventures of Rangergirl*, Tim Pratt (Bantam Spectra).

I'm especially pleased to see Tim Pratt's book on the list as I thought it took a lot of interesting risks and (mostly) pulled them off.

Thomas D. Clareson Award

The Thomas D. Clareson Award is given by the Science Fiction Research Association to honor "outstanding service activities – promotion of SF teaching and study, reviewing, editorial writing, publishing, organizing meetings, mentoring [and] leadership in SF/fantasy organizations." This year's winner is Paul Kincaid, doubtless for his outstanding work on the Arthur C. Clarke Award over the years.

Editorial Matters

By Cheryl Morgan

I'm delighted to have John Shirley's contributions in this issue. Tim Powers has long been a favorite author of mine, and I'm sure that many other people are looking forward to *Three Days to Never*. I'm also looking forward to John's new novel, *The Other End*, in which he promises to take back the Day of Judgment from the right wing. For more information on John and his work, see his web site <<http://www.johnshirley.net>>.

I've decided not to have an official subscriber draw this month. It isn't exactly fulfilling its purpose. Some months it has cost more to send out the books than we have got in from subscriptions. And we have a bunch of unclaimed books from previous months. I'm going to do a draw with some of those instead. Hopefully I'll find people who want them.

There is also no Out of Synch column, because I can't find any books that I need to mention in it.

I see I promised a review of David Louis Edelman's *Infoquake* for this issue. I did try to read it, but I just couldn't get into it. I suspect this may be because I've seen too many devious and dishonest businessmen in real life and Edelman's Natch seemed like a rank amateur to me. Anyway, I don't like reviewing books I haven't been able to finish, so I gave it a miss.

Definitely in the line-up for next issue are *End of the World Blues* by Jon Courtenay Grimwood, *The Demon and the City* by Liz Williams, and *Scar Night* by Alan Campbell. Charlie Stross's *Glasshouse* is winging its way to me from California and should be in there as well.

Best wishes,

Cheryl

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