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Picking Awards out of the Air

By Debbie Notkin

Here are some famous awards:

The Hugo Award has been around for 53 years. It's a popular award voted on by members of the World Science Fiction Society. In practice, however, only around 20% of those eligible to do so bother to vote. In some of the less popular categories (e.g. Best Fan Artist), only a few hundred votes may be cast.

The Nebula Award has been around for 41 years. It's given by popular vote of the Science Fiction Writers of America, with jury participation in determining the nominees.

The World Fantasy Award (presenting the ugliest statuette imaginable) is 31 years old. It's a juried award, with the jury members picked by the committee that oversees the convention. Nominees are chosen in part by popular vote of the convention membership.

This article is (mostly) not about these awards.

This year, Geoff Ryman's *Air, or Have Not Have*, didn't win the Hugo, or the Nebula. As a science fiction novel, it wasn't eligible for the World Fantasy Award. However, it won the James Tiptree, Jr. Memorial Award, the Arthur C. Clarke Award, the British Science Fiction Association Award, and the Sunburst Award.

Are you lost yet?

Basically, this means that the book was recognized by the gender-exploration award jury, a British award jury, a group of British fans, and an award jury choosing the best speculative book written by a Canadian. (Ryman is Canadian living in England.)

There's also a World Horror Award. And two different John Campbell Awards. And the Prometheus Award. And the Philip K. Dick Award. And the Susan C. Petrey scholarship. And the Carl Brandon Award. And the Sei-un Award. (Did I leave out your favorite award? I'm sorry, and at the same time that proves my point.)

What purpose do all these awards serve? Does Geoff Ryman benefit from winning four fairly small awards? Would he do better to win one Hugo than all of the awards he did win? Does it matter?

Well, first of all, he got cash for three of those awards (every one except the BSFA), while neither the Hugo nor the Nebula would put a penny into his pocket directly. Some authors negotiate an "award escalator," into their contracts. This means that the publisher pays the author a new advance on receipt of a major award. Hugos and Nebulas are probably the only awards that result in more sales: it's difficult to imagine a

publisher negotiating a "\$1000 extra from us if you win the John Campbell Award" clause, though the ways of publishers can be hard to fathom.

Second, it always *feels* good to win an award, just as it always feels fairly bad to lose one. So Ryman got four jolts of "feel-good," whereas a Hugo would only give him one. (Although, as was especially clear when Neil Gaiman looked at his phallic rocketship in 2002 with amazement and said, "Fuck! I won a Hugo!" the Hugo feel-good jolt is worth a lot.)

Third, of course, all awards are publicity of some sort, and they say all publicity is good publicity (we'll get to that in a minute). The more well-known and well-respected an award is, the more it's likely to cause Jane Bookbuyer to change her mind when she sees the "award winner" text on the book cover. Or at least that's the theory.

And that leads to the point of this essay. It's easy to talk about what awards are good for. It's also easy, though I haven't been bothering, to talk about what awards are bad for. More interesting (to me at least) and more complex is what place awards have in the web of obligation, communication, and interaction of this complex and elusive concatenation of individuals, groups, and special interests we so jauntily describe as "a community."

By definition, any award (new, old, juried, popular) takes on a responsibility for choosing wisely. "Best" is a qualitative standard. Popular awards at least have an uncomplicated way of defining best: it's the one that most voters chose, and the criteria for voters are usually a pretty simple bright-line test of one kind or another. What voters read and how carefully they read it varies from individual to individual over hundreds or

thousands of people. And if the resulting winners aren't to your taste, the only thing you can blame the awards administrators for is their choice of voters.

A juried award has a more complex web of obligations. The biggest responsibility the award administrators take is choosing good jurors. That in and of itself can be a can of worms: writers? academics? fans? How many of each? What kinds of diversity matter? Who will finish the job they started, and who will say yes and then vanish off the face of the earth? How much should the administrators look over the jury's shoulders?

Then there's the responsibility of choosing among the best possible range of works: How do jurors get recommendations? How far afield should they look? Is it their job to go searching in related and nearby fields? What if they disagree with the criteria used by previous juries? Either the jurors or the award administrators will have to decide what "qualifies" and what doesn't. Is a graphic novel a novel? Does a piece of fiction have to be published, or can it be distributed on the internet or for free on paper? What makes a work science fiction? Or not? If the award has a topic, what makes a work fit that topic?

Award administrators lose sleep over these questions.

Bear in mind that jurors are invariably unpaid and, by the nature of how volunteerism works, they are almost always overcommitted. Award administrators are also generally unpaid and overcommitted (this is probably not true for some of the major entertainment awards like the Oscars, but it's certainly true of every literary award I know). As a result, good intentions about breadth of reading don't always translate into right action; jurors flake out and others are left

trying to decide knotty questions with too small a group for good breadth; administrators make hasty decisions; life happens.

If an award is prestigious or successful, or has a significant following, jurors also tend to feel that they are under pressure: they need to choose the *right* book, the one that will make the audience breathe a sigh of relief for another good year. This can lead to juries rejecting an excellent book because one juror thinks it's just not good enough. Or getting hooked on one book, because they can all agree about it and that makes them feel comfortable, while passing over others about which some jurors are more enthusiastic while others are dubious or unhappy. If the award is topical, such as the Carl Brandon Kindred Award for books about race and ethnicity, how much does excellent writing really matter, if the subject matter is on target? And can the jury agree about what constitutes excellent writing? Can the "best" book that engages with race be distinguished from the "best-written" book that engages with race?

Jurors lose sleep over these questions.

Once an award is announced, the Monday-morning quarterbacking begins. Everyone who cares about the award (could be three people in a cabin somewhere or thousands spread around the globe) has their own ideas about what "should" win and why. Some of the books they think should win were considered and discarded, for any of a huge variety of reasons. Others never came to the attention of the jury. Some critics have more global concerns: the award isn't fulfilling its mission; it isn't attending to X subgroup that it should be watching; it is attending to X subgroup but it's not doing

it well, and it's doing the subgroup harm. And so on.

The great thing about being a critic is that you don't lose sleep. The other great thing is that the critics are an enormous factor in keeping awards alive, and responsive.

Which rather takes us full circle. It matters that *Air* won four awards, because that means that four constituencies will get to evaluate the book against their own sense of the award they care about. They'll read it, which is an Unqualifiedly Good Thing. They'll probably read other books which were nominated, or short-listed, or came to their attention in other ways. They'll talk about what they read with each other and — because our field is so delightfully small and approachable — they may well talk about their opinions with award administrators, jurors, and other interested parties.

And to my mind, that's the most important thing: awards keep the air (No pun intended) circulating. Their functions for authors and readers outside the field are important, and the thing I care most about is that they keep us talking to each other. They keep us awake.

Of ARCs and Bribes

By Cheryl Morgan

Those of you who follow the blog regularly will have noticed something of a controversy a few weeks back in which various people claimed that certain books were only given good reviews because reviewers had been "bribed" to tell "lies" about them. This later got toned down to reviewers being subconsciously influenced to praise bad books by hype and gifts

handed out by publishers, but the message remained the same: apparently you can't trust reviewers' opinions, because they are not honestly formed. Hal Duncan's *Vellum* was one book that was held up as an example of where people supposedly only praised it because of the high quality ARCs (Advance Reading Copies) that they were sent for free.

Most of you will, I hope, know that this is plain daft, but some pretty high profile people were making these accusations, including Niall Harrison (editor of *Strange Horizons'* review column and co-editor of *Vector*) and Graham Sleight (editor-in-waiting at *Foundation*). These are people who supposedly know the business well, and whose accusations of bribery might therefore be taken very seriously. I therefore thought it might be useful to talk a bit about the process of obtaining review copies from publishers so that people have a better understanding of what actually goes on.

Of course the industry doesn't really work on the basis of bribes. As Colleen Lindsay (a former PR executive at Del Rey) pointed out, what little money SF publishers have to spend on buttering people up generally goes to booksellers (or more likely to the buyers at major chains), not to reviewers. Many books don't even get ARCs these days: reviewers either have to wait for the real thing, or work from a PDF. In the case of one of the books I've reviewed this issue the author asked the publisher to send me an ARC and the publisher refused. Apparently ARCs were in short supply and *Emerald City* wasn't important enough to warrant a copy. I eventually got one from a friend at another online review site who had been sent two copies. I am inclined to put this down to lack of organization on the part of the publisher

rather than to any serious research as to which web sites are most important.

As for gifts, very occasionally something turns up, generally where high-profile authors are concerned. Neil Gaiman's publishers' once sent me an *American Gods* t-shirt, which (amazingly) was my size and which I do actually wear. But I don't think that influenced my review of the book at all. Apart from that, all I remember getting in the way of material gifts were a ballpoint pen and a fluffy halitosis germ from Jeff VanderMeer when he was promoting the UK edition of the *Lambshead Guide*. Luckily for Jeff I had written my review some time before that. Halitosis indeed. One of these days I'll have words with Jeff's Evil Monkey about that.

And talking of jokes, the whole idea that reviewers could be influenced by this sort of gift, or by free beer, is frankly laughable, especially to me. In my day job I occasionally work on projects concerning the sale of power stations. The sums involved run to hundreds of millions of dollars. If you want to see people who take offering inducements seriously, work with investment bankers. So yes, I very much enjoyed my box seat at the Australian Open to see games featuring Arantxa Sanchez and Andre Agassi, not to mention the expensive meals and bottles of wine. But as a professional economist I couldn't let such things cloud my judgment or affect my analysis. The idea that, after dealing with that sort of thing, my judgment would be swayed by the gift of a fluffy halitosis germ is just plain silly.

The other lesson from more high-powered businesses is that you don't bribe everyone. Those people who are important and influential you offer inducements to. Other people you bully. It

is cheaper. So buyers at chain stores are worth courting. *Locus* might be worth courting, but a publicist would have to be young and naïve to try it. Charles is a wise old chap who has been at this job a very long time. He's not easily bamboozled. As for outlets like *Emerald City*, most publishers don't think I'm important enough to worry about.

If I do get pressure it is not to produce favorable reviews, but to produce reviews. I get sent far more books than we can cover, I get desperate pleas from young authors, and I get increasingly bizarre promotional emails from self-published writers. Although I don't think anyone means to harass me, the sheer volume of requests is hard to deal with. There is a constant worry that publishers and authors will think I'm being unfair by choosing to review one book and not another.

As Malcolm McLaren understood so well, all publicity is good publicity. In some cases negative publicity can be better than something favorable. The more some people complained about the Sex Pistols, the more other people bought their records. The vast majority of authors to whom I have given bad reviews have not complained about it. Quite a few have said something along the lines of, "thanks for reviewing the book even though you didn't like it."

Given the way the Internet works, probably the best way for a publisher to get attention for a book is to create a blog storm. The publicity that Janine Cross got for *Touched by Venom* could not have been bought. It may well have done a lot for sales, even though most people trashed the book. A better bet for an ambitious publicist would be to arrange for a negative review of a book and to have the

author and reviewer engage in a public row. That would get plenty of attention and a lot of sympathy for the poor author whose book has been "trashed". Not that any reputable reviewer would partake in such schemes, but I'm sure people will try it on.

Meanwhile, back with bribes, unfortunately there are aspects of the SF industry that make such accusations seem more plausible. One such consideration is the fact that the industry is a very small community in which everyone knows everyone else. Graham Sleight talked about reviewers having a "cozy relationship" with publishers. It is true, we do. We have cozy relationships with authors too, because we know so many of them, and see them so often. When I'm in London I may have lunch with an editor, having lunch being a great tradition in the publishing business. When I'm at a convention there's a good chance that you'll find me in the bar talking to editors and authors. At ICFA this year I spent one morning by the pool talking to Kathryn Cramer and helping keep an eye on the Hartwell children. Goodness knows how many authors and editors have stayed at John Clute's house in London. Many of them contributed to the festschrift book, *Polder*, to say how much they appreciated the generosity of the Clutes. Charles Brown is similarly hospitable to people visiting the Bay Area. All of these things can be seen as evidence of a "cozy relationship" by someone with a suspicious enough mind.

The more insidious effects, however, are a result of the fact that different people like different books. The SF world is full of talented editors, but they don't all buy the same sort of book, and reviewers don't all like the same sort of book. If David Hartwell recommended a new discovery

to me I would be very likely to read it. Peter Lavery, of Pan Macmillan, also happens to like many of the same sorts of books as me. Not only did he sign Hal Duncan, he also brought us the first books by China Miéville and Justina Robson, and he was the first major editor to sign up Jeff VanderMeer. So if Peter recommends a new author to me, just as with Hartwell, I sit up and take notice.

The same is not true of all editors. Jane Johnson of Voyager, for example, is very highly respected, but her taste runs more to fantasy trilogies than to the sort of books I read. She could well be the person who discovered Naomi Novik, for which event I am eternally grateful, but more generally I'm less likely to take a recommendation from Johnson than from Lavery or Hartwell. Toni Weiskoff at Baen has hardly ever had a book reviewed here, but she's still a hugely respected editor and I'm sure there are reviewers who love everything she puts out.

So there you have your smoking gun. Cheryl goes to London and has lunch with Peter Lavery. Soon after she writes an enthusiastic review of a new book that Pan Macmillan is promoting heavily. You look back through *Emerald City* and see that Cheryl often gives rave reviews to books that Pan Macmillan are pushing. Is that clear evidence of a conspiracy? Hopefully, having read all that has gone before, you will say, "No." But if you just had those facts placed before you on someone's blog, out of the context of this article, I wouldn't blame you at all for saying, "Yes." The innuendo is way too easy to create.

The problem for me is that I have to work with editors from all major publishing houses. I can't just have a cozy relationship with Peter Lavery. I need one with many other editors as well. If editors

believed that I was biased against their authors I'd be in trouble. Then they might actually try to bully me (not bribe, I'm not important enough, remember).

One of the ways around this is to have a stable of reviewers. It is unlikely that I would have enjoyed many of the books that Juliet has reviewed favorably. I'm on record as not being very fond of Adam Roberts' novels, but Joe loves them and I'm happy to let him explain why. As long as you readers understand that the other reviewers are stating their own opinions, and not mine, then there should be no problem. I make sure that names are on all the reviews, and that people review fairly regularly, so you can learn their tastes as well as mine.

But there it is. Yes, I have a cozy relationship with Pan Macmillan. And yes, there is a review of one of their books that they are pushing hard in this issue. They were so keen to influence me to write a good review that they forgot to send me a copy of the book and I had to email them and remind them.

I guess if people choose to believe that my review has been "influenced" there's nothing I can do about it. All I can do is try to be as honest as I can and hope you trust me. I did try to write "disclosure" sections for each review so that you knew exactly how I stood vis-a-vis the writer and the publisher, but I'm afraid I couldn't take it seriously. I kept wanting to write things like, "The ARC was printed in gold leaf on the tanned skins of teenage Egyptian virgins who had been bathed in nothing but asses milk all their lives". Or in the case of the Charlie Stross book that Fluff Cthulhu offered not to eat my brains for a whole extra year if I was nice about it. I wouldn't care, except that people do believe this bribery nonsense when it

crops up, and the whole practice of reviewing is damaged because of it.

A Family Affair

By Cheryl Morgan

Meet Kit Nouveau, failed rock star, failed soldier, failed English teacher, failed husband and shortly to become failed bar owner.

The man who stared out from Pirate Mary's basement window inhaled a deeper sourness, one that danced in wisps of smoke from the heated foil in his fingers. Kit Nouveau kept his habit on a tight leash, limiting himself to one fix a day, but the dragon was restless and beginning to strain against its chains. One of them was winning and Kit guessed it wasn't him.

In a few hours, Kit will have no money, no property, no wife, no relatives who will speak to him, and rather more enemies than is entirely healthy. When a mugger threatened to kill him he could easily have said, "Go ahead, I don't have anything else left to lose." Which makes it all the more odd that he should find his life saved by the beggar girl in the cos-play outfit. OK, so he bought her coffee most mornings because she looked so cold and lonely. But did that make his life worth saving? And where did she get those knife-fighting skills anyway?

Kit doesn't know much about Lady Neku, but then there's a lot she doesn't know about herself either.

She'd left her body on a chair beside the door. At first she imagined her bedroom had just tidied it away, but all her wardrobes were empty. So she checked the room she'd used as a child, just in case the household gods were being more forgetful than usual, only her body wasn't there either.

The book is called *End of the World Blues*, and it is the new novel by Jon Courtenay Grimwood. Some blurb on the back cover of the ARC says, "...combines the literary brilliance of *9 Tail Fox* with the SF 'wow' factor of *Stamping Butterflies*. I hope they keep that for the production version, because it is remarkably accurate.

The plot of *End of the World Blues* shuttles back and fore between Tokyo and London, with occasional excursions to Lady Neku's home of High Strange, a failing orbital habitat situated at the end of the world. Temporally, that is.

Writing a book set in a foreign culture is always a dangerous thing to do. I was enormously impressed with the sense of San Francisco that Grimwood achieved in *9 Tail Fox*. I'm sure he worked equally hard on getting Tokyo right, and while Japan is considerably more foreign than California, I'm happy to take it on trust that he did a good job. Besides, you know he works at his cultural observation because he tries to see England as a foreign country.

A metro ran from Heathrow airport to one of the most famous underground stations in London. She knew this because it was in a magazine stuck into the back of the seat in front of her on the plane. The magazine said using the London metro system was very easy, which turned out to be a lie.

Note the use of the word "metro". Not a word an Englishman would use in this context. Very nice touch.

But let's leave the cultural stuff for now. Many of you will want to know what the book is about. Families, basically; gangster families. Kit Nouveau has an unerring ability to get himself involved with the sort of people you normally only find in *The Sopranos*. Except that Kit's not-quite in-laws are London Irish on one side of the world and Yakuza on the other. Fortunately he is not actually "involved" with Neku, because her family might well be the worst of the lot.

Quite what all this has to do with Kit's teenage years in Hampshire, with a rock band called Switchblade Lies, and two boys who ought to be friends but have this issue over a girl bassist/singer with the worryingly prophetic name of Vita Brevis, I need to leave you to find out. After all, Kit spends much of the book finding it out. And what he learns is, of course, that the past has gone and you can't go back. That lesson even applies to time-traveling teenagers from the end of the world.

"Come on," said Lady Neku, giving the door a kick. "All you have to do is open."

"You know," said the door. "I'm not sure that's a good idea."

"Why?" she demanded.

"Because," said the door, "once opened, I'm open. Returning to a time when I was locked becomes impossible."

"I can relock you myself."

"That's not the same," said the door. "And you know it."

Which leaves us with just one question. Why? Why are the tales of Kit Nouveau and Lady Neku intercut like this? The question as to why Neku chose 21st Century Japan as her destination is answered in the book. But that doesn't tell us what purpose Neku's story has in a book that could easily just have been a simple thriller. I have my own theories, of course, but I suspect that this may be a question that exercises the Clarke judges when they debate the book. You will need to make up your own minds.

In the meantime, *End of the World Blues* has made it comfortably onto my top ten SF novels of the year. It may well end up on my Hugo list, although it has no chance of being on the ballot in Yokohama because the US edition won't be out until at least next year. Ah well, I guess I can get all excited over it again when America does get to see it.

Now if only the book had come complete with a soundtrack by The Seatbelts...

End of the World Blues - Jon Courtenay Grimwood - Gollancz - publisher's proof

CSI: Singapore

By Cheryl Morgan

Another fabulous Jon Foster cover; another of Liz Williams' Inspector Chen novels. OK, so it is only the second, but it is evidence of the quality of Williams' writing that I already feel that I know Chen and Singapore Three well. However, *The Demon and the City* is not just more of the same. Indeed, Chen hardly features in the book. As you might guess from the title, the star of the show this time is Zhu Irzh, the demon policeman from *Snake*

Agent who is currently exiled to the mortal world after having upset his masters in Hell by helping Chen out. Zhu Irzh now works for Chen in Singapore Three's police department, but while the Inspector, who has a demon for a wife, is happy to accept him, the rest of the precinct is much less happy.

It would have been easier in ways if he had been equally invisible to his human colleagues, but the police station was covered with revealing spells just in case something nasty decided to slip in and wreak havoc, and so Zhu Irzh stood out like a sore thumb once inside the walls of the precinct. The spells made him sneeze, to add insult to injury.

Fortunately all has been quiet in Singapore Three since Zhu Irzh's arrival, at least until now. Which perhaps makes it rather awkward that Chen chose to go on vacation just before a major murder case came in. The victim is Deveth Sardai: famously beautiful, famously wealthy, and famously lesbian. This is a crime that will be in all the papers, and which the police department cannot afford to fail to solve. Captain Sung would not have assigned Zhu Irzh to the case had he known in advance who the victim was, but her face had been savaged in the attack that killed her and it looked like a case of demon assault. As soon as he understood how high profile the case was, the Captain tried to take Zhu Irzh off it, but telling a demon what to do isn't always easy. Besides, Zhu Irzh has been picking up bad habits from Chen.

Not for the first time, Zhu Irzh had reason to deplore those unnerving elements within his own character that made him more human

than demon, yet less than human. Conscience, and affection, and a desire for someone else's respect. Perhaps he should look for a good therapist to eradicate these personal failings when he finally got back to Hell.

As the case develops it becomes clear that there is more to it than meets the eye. One of the obvious suspects is Robin Yuan, a mousy scientist who was Sardai's most recent lover. A more likely suspect is Robin's boss, the wealthy and eccentric industrialist, Jhai Tserai, who is also rumored to have been one of Sardai's lovers. But does the strange experiment that Robin is working on have anything to do with the case? Who is the young demon she is dosing with experimental drugs? And why does Jhai Tserai, an admittedly beautiful but human woman, exert such a strong sexual attraction on Zhu Irzh. He did, after all, work in the Vice Squad in Hell. There isn't much he hasn't seen.

At this point we discover that the book isn't really a murder mystery at all. About half way through we find out who done it. From then on the book turns into a roller coaster adventure as Zhu Irzh and a belatedly returned Chen (assisted as ever by his faithful badger) try to stop the bad guys from doing something truly awful; something that the Celestials really ought to have noticed, except that they are not paying attention.

"I don't think you understand how remote Heaven has become over the last century. As fewer and fewer people believe in it, so it withdraws itself. Celestials are starting to ask themselves why they bother with the affairs of the Human Realms, when they get so little thanks for it."

If *Snake Agent* was primarily about the cosmology of Hell, so *The Demon and the City* gives Williams an opportunity to explore the third realm. Heaven is a pretty dull place, filled with self-righteous and sanctimonious beings of such utter goodness and purity that you can't help but despise them. They do, after all, despise anyone less pure than themselves. For all the fun that Williams has with her demonic policeman, she's just as happy making pointed comments about religion and human society by drawing satirical portraits of her Chinese otherworlds. Consequently the Inspector Chen novels have something for both fans of amusing pulp fiction and lovers of sociological SF&F. Which is, of course, why I like them.

The Demon and the City - Liz Williams - Night Shade Books - publisher's proof

A Tale of Two Women

By Cheryl Morgan

The city of Deepgate hangs over the abyss, literally. The city itself is suspended on chains, hundreds of them. Beneath it is a hole, seemingly bottomless, that is the abode of the god Ulcis. Expelled from Heaven, he lurks at the bottom of the pit collecting the souls of the dead into a vast army with which he intends to reclaim his place on high. To be included in this army is the greatest honor that can befall a citizen of Deepgate. All you have to do is die, and make sure that the bulk of your blood is still in your body when you are cast into the pit. The blood, you must

understand, is the place where the soul resides.

The book, *Scar Night* by Alan Campbell, is the latest novel to be thrown into the ring as a contender for the latest and greatest piece of dark fantasy. The cover, although by Dominic Harman, recalls the turrets of New Crobuzon on Edward Miller's cover for *Perdido Street Station*. The blurb sent to reviewers includes an "in the best tradition of *Gormenghast*" comment. Yes, there is hype. But at the same time, books don't get hyped by accident.

Every fictional city takes some of its character from real world locations with which the author is familiar. Jeff VanderMeer has written about how Ambergris reflects the fecundity of his Florida home, where vegetation will take over barren ground seemingly overnight, and dangerous animals lurk in the waterways. New Crobuzon is, of course, a close cousin of London. Alan Campbell lives in Edinburgh, and consequently his fantasy city has more of a Scottish feel. There is a certain air of grimness to it. Where New Crobuzon is ruled by corrupt politicians and crime lords, Deepgate is ruled by sour-faced clergymen. There are no posy Socialist intellectuals in Deepgate. If revolution were ever plotted there, which it probably isn't, it would be by hard-muscled, uneducated men just released from a long day's work in the foundries.

But, as I said, it probably isn't. What is the point of rebelling against the Church when God lurks under your feet? Everyone knows that Ulcis, the fallen angel, is real. Angels are real. Two of them live in the city.

"I suppose you don't trust Carnival either."

"Damn right. Something unnatural about her."

A smile found its way to Fogwill's lips. "You think there's something unnatural about an immortal, scar-ravaged, blood-sucking angel who steals souls during the night of moondark? Whatever could be unnatural about that?"

The other angel is Dill, and he is the hero of our tale. Carnival, you see, is a renegade, and angel who doesn't follow Church orders but instead lives forever thanks to the blood (and therefore souls) that she steals. Citizens who die at Carnival's hands (or rather teeth) cannot have their souls given to Ulcis. That alone is enough to make her a heretic. Young Dill is a loyal servant of the Church, the last living descendant of the angel army that fell into the Abyss with Ulcis. As is traditional with the young heroes of multi-volume fantasy works (and I should warn you that *Scar Night* is merely volume one of *The Deepgate Codex*), he is terribly naïve and has no idea how to use what powers he has. Why, to make sure nothing bad ever happens to him, the priests have forbidden him to learn to fly.

By now you should be starting to see a plot peeking shyly from the layers of world building. The city is in decay. Only one angel left, and he a callow, ineffectual youth. Deepgate does have enemies – the savage Heshette who live in the barren Deadsands beyond the edge of the Abyss. The city survives mainly thanks to its massively superior technology (airships!) and to the unceasing efforts of the Chief Poisoner, Alexander Devon, to develop new and more horrific chemical weapons that can be dropped on the hapless Heshette from on high. Devon, unlike most of the people of Deepgate, doesn't

care about religion. He is a scientist, albeit a rather unhinged one.

Devon detested any deference to the supernatural. Were supernatural forces not simply natural forces yet to be explained? Blood contained energy which could be harvested to extend life. Gods, demons, devils and ghosts did not come into it. Everything had to be defined in terms Devon could comprehend. For a man of his brilliance, this was vital.

Enough. You'll be starting to see elements of the plot. And one thing that Campbell does very well is be parsimonious with information. The details of his world are released slowly, trickle by trickle, so that the reader is kept hooked as much by the desire to find out what the world is all about as she is by the plot. And, I am pleased to say, it is by no means all revealed by the end of the book. These multi-volume works need more than just a plot to keep people reading, especially as the endings tend to be so predictable.

Campbell does other things well too. You may have noticed a little wry humor in the quotes above. This holds even during the greatest possible disaster that Deepgate knows – the breaking of a major structural chain.

The Adjunct picked himself up, dusted himself down, and looked back.

Crossop's warehouse was gone. Half a block of the Depression was gone. Where moments ago there had been factories and foundries, there was nothing but a vast hole, veiled in dust and smoke.

Clay grunted. "There goes the neighbourhood."

Ultimately, however, *Scar Night* does not appear to be about any of these things. Dill might be presented as the center of attention, but for the first book at least all of the fascination lies with two women. The first is Carnival. She is over 2000 years old. She has killed at least once a month in that time, for only by stealing the souls of others can she stay alive. Her body is a mass of scars, but such a fearsome fighter is she that it is doubtful that many were inflicted by the Spine, the deadly assassins that the Church sends after her. Carnival's scars come from another source entirely.

The other woman is Rachel Hael, a Spine agent assigned to (rather belatedly) teach Dill about the real world. These days Rachel's main job is hunting Carnival, but that is only possible at moondark, *Scar Night*, when the renegade angel comes out to feed. That frees the rest of the month for Dill. Before all this, however...

"Before the Spine gave me to the rooftops, I hunted Heshette spies and informers, sometimes mercenaries and pilgrims who'd fled the city. In Hollowhill and Sandport and Shale Forest. I don't know how many – it frightens me to remember. But I murdered them because I was afraid not to. Once you are part of the Spine, you obey or become a threat yourself."

Did I say that this book was grim? Maybe I should leave the last word to Devon.

"Life is nothing but degrees of pain and hunger. Why cling to such suffering? Like everyone else, are you not simply waiting to die?"

The answer to Devon's question lies, of course, at the bottom of the Abyss. And that, dear reader, is where our naïve young angel and his deadly mentor must travel to seek the truth.

Campbell is not a stylist like China Miéville or Hal Duncan. His prose is simple and approachable. People will, I think, admire his world building, but they won't sit slack-jawed, or retch with disgust, at the way he writes. I don't see *Scar Night* causing the same sort of shock to the industry that *Perdido Street Station* or *Vellum* did. But his work is interesting, accessible, and pleasingly innovative in a field that is all too repetitive at times. He'll do well.

Scar Night - Alan Campbell - Tor UK - hardcover

People in Glass Houses

By Cheryl Morgan

Following up your first Hugo-nominated (and quite possibly Hugo-winning) novel is not an easy thing to do. Charlie Stross, mad impetuous fool that he is, has decided to approach this by doing something very brave. Quite what he has done I'll leave for a while. First here is the standard Stross novel background that you are all expecting.

Robin, the central character of *Glasshouse*, has lost his memory. Well, large portions of it anyway. He isn't quite sure how or why he lost it, but he suspects that he may have volunteered for the treatment. You see, he is currently living in a rehabilitation unit for war criminals. And he has these odd flashbacks that suggest that in a past life he may have been a

member of the notorious Linebarger Cats mercenaries.

Not that this is necessarily a bad thing. The Cats were in the forefront of the fight against Curious Yellow, a particularly nasty type of meme virus. In classic Stross style, this thing infected the transporter network, using humans as its transmission vector. Victims not only spread the virus to other gates, they also had their minds edited. If you want a parallel, think of something like The Unanimous Army from Raphael Carter's *The Fortunate Fall*. If you want to set up a totalitarian society, editing people's minds is a good way to make them happy about living there.

The story is set in a typically Strossian future full of what we are learning to call post-humans. These are people who switch bodies almost as carelessly as they switch clothes. Robin was a tank for a while during the war. His new girlfriend, Kay, has four arms. Some of his friends have more extreme mods.

Linn is wearing an orthohuman female body and is most of the way out of rehab; lately she's been getting interested in the history of fashion – clothing, cosmetics, tattoos, scarification, that sort of thing – and the idea of the study appeals to her. Vhora, in contrast, is wearing something like a kawaii pink-and-baby-blue centaurform mechabody: she's got huge black eyes, eyelashes to match, perfect breasts, and piebald skin covered in Keolar patches.

Robin's psychotherapist suggests to him that his recovery might be helped by participating in a sociological experiment. A group of scientists have set up a simulation of a Dark Ages society (that's the 20th and 21st Centuries, Earth time) and are looking for volunteers to live in it for a

few years. Participants will be able to earn a living whilst inside the simulation, and will also be well paid on the outside, leaving them nicely rich when they emerge.

It does sound like a good deal, especially as someone who presumably knew Robin before he had his memories wiped is currently trying to kill him. Inside the experiment he will be safe. So he signs up, but quickly discovers that the experiment is a good deal less wholesome than the psychotherapist made out. The sociologists running the project seem to have picked many of the least pleasant aspects of their target period to shape the dominant culture, and their motives for doing so gradually become more and more suspect.

"Obey the rules." Fiore smiles tightly. "The society you're going to be living in was formal and highly ritualized, with much attention paid to individual relationships and status often determined by random genetic chance. The core element in this society is something called the nuclear family. It is a heteromorphic structure based on a male and a female living in close quarters, usually with one of them engaging in semi-ritualized labor to raise currency and the other preoccupied with social and domestic chores and child rearing."

So much for the set-up, here's the brave bit. Stross has decided that he wants to write a novel about gender. Perhaps, like David Brin ten years ago (*Glory Season*), he has his eye on the Tiptree. Perhaps he just had something he wanted to say. So rather than just have Robin slotted neatly into a facsimile of 20th Century small-town America, he puts him in a woman's body as well. "Reeve", as Robin is now known,

is expected to choose a husband, obey him as God commanded, turn up at Church every Sunday to confess her sins, and inform upon the sins of her neighbors. Those who manage to live a God-fearing and sin-free life will earn more bonus points in the simulation, and hence get a bigger bonus when the experiment is over. (And by the way, being sin-free includes obeying that directive to go forth and multiply.)

OK, those of you who don't want to hear another Cheryl rant on gender issues, or who simply don't want too much spoilerage, can stop reading now.

The trouble with men writing about gender issues is that it really is like putting yourself in a glass house in the middle of a public park and inviting people to throw stones at you. If that isn't clear already, it should become so in the rest of this review. This is especially so for science fiction writers, because they are expected to pontificate not only on the sociology of gender, but also on its biological underpinnings (or lack thereof). Reviewers are not exactly safe from this either. I'm going to try hard to avoid making firm pronouncements myself, as I'll only be accused of political incorrectness, and have some earnest young feminist lecturing me about how I know nothing about what transgendered people think and feel and how dare I, etc., etc..

Nevertheless, issues there are, and most of them center around the philosophical concept of Essentialism. Broadly speaking, this simply means that things of a certain type are believed to exhibit certain characteristics because they are things of that type. Oranges are sweet, onions are not. But transfer that into sociology and you get things like this: men are strong,

forceful and brave; women are nurturing, irrational and emotional. Or indeed any other piece of 19th Century pseudo-science used to justify discrimination that you might wish to come up with.

Traditionally Feminism has been deeply suspicious of Essentialism. Simone de Beauvoir wrote, "One is not born a woman, but becomes one." (At least I hope she did, online quotation dictionaries are really bad about sourcing their material.) Even more controversially, Kate Millett in *Sexual Politics* (1972) wrote, "The image of woman as we know it is an image created by men and fashioned to suit their needs..." The standard Feminist position, then, at least as per 1970's Second Wave Feminism, is that the human baby is a *tabula rasa* on which the idea of manhood or womanhood is imposed by parents and society. Thus there are no essential features of "women" (other than the biologically obvious ones) and therefore no grounds for discrimination on the basis of gender.

The question that then arose was: how do you account for transsexuals? If there is no essential difference between men and women, how can one be "a woman trapped in a man's body" (or vice versa)? The first attempt at an answer was to simply declare that transsexuals did not exist. At best they were simply deluded, at worst they were a deliberate plot by evil male doctors to get rid of women altogether by brainwashing effeminate boys into believing that they are women. They would then truly be Millett's vision of women created by and for men. This argument was put forward by Janice Raymond in a book called *The Transsexual Empire* (1979). It was also enshrined in the canon of Feminist SF through Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* (1975).

As I mentioned in my blog entries from WisCon, Russ has since disavowed her hardline stance on transsexuals. In addition feminism in general has come up with a less rigid ideology which declares that changing gender is perfectly OK provided that you agree that doing so is merely a lifestyle choice and not the result of any sort of medical or psychological condition. Other Feminists have gone much further and are openly supportive of all forms of transgendered behavior. Nevertheless, there are still many Feminists who insist very firmly that men who change gender can never, ever become women because, well, they are men, aren't they? Some of you may have seen recent posts on Roz Kaveney and Kameron Hurley's blogs attacking this view.

Did you spot the Essentialist argument in that? Who ever said politics had to be philosophically consistent?

But how does all of this relate to *Glasshouse*? There are two main aspects of the book that beg to be considered in the light of such arguments (there's more, but I'm trying to limit the spoilers). Firstly, when the various participants join the experiment, all of the females except Reeve/Robin adapt quickly to their new lives. I've never watched *Desperate Housewives*, but the goings on in *Glasshouse* closely match my (probably jaundiced) pre-conceived notions about the show. There are lots of lunches, lots of expensive clothes, and there is an enormous amount of bitching.

Now, given that these women (and we appear to be expected to believe that these are all people who chose to present as female before joining the experiment) were all enlightened post-humans not so long ago, how come they slip so easily into

this new behavior? Are they under than much coercion? Or is Stross suggesting that they are "reverting to nature"? Knowing Stross as I do, I'm sure he meant to convey the former. But once books are published they are out of the author's control, and I'm sure many people will read the latter explanation into what happens. They will be encouraged in that belief by the fact that the book seems to suggest that the people who are best able to resist the social programming of the experimenters are people who are in the wrong body for their gender. Those in the right bodies more naturally fall into the roles expected of them.

The killer incident, however, is when Reeve is captured and brainwashed by the bad guys. Remember I was talking earlier on about meme viruses editing people brains? Well, Stross asks us to believe that you can edit a man's mind and turn him into a woman. (Or rather, perhaps, one of Raymond and Russ's "made women.")

How can this be? Maybe we need some science.

Political ideology notwithstanding, there is some research being done into differences between male and female brains. Apparently there are some, and the suspicion is that these are the result of differences in how the brain develops in the womb, not of social conditioning. That development would perhaps be different depending on the biochemical environment in male and female fetuses. It is controversial work, in some cases as viciously opposed by ideologues as evolutionary studies. It is also still used as justification for absurd extremes of gender discrimination. One or two people have claimed to have found evidence that the brains of male-to-female transsexuals are similar to those of people born female, but

those results are strongly disputed, especially by hardline Feminists.

Again it isn't exactly clear what Stross is asking us to believe. As a result of the mind-editing, Reeve's behavior changes dramatically. She develops a fascination with clothes, hairstyles and make-up. She becomes obsessed with domestic cleanliness. In addition she appears to become selfish, vain and inconsiderate, and she informs on her best friend to the parish priest. Is that what happens when a bad guy doctor replaces the "male" wiring in your brain with "female" wiring. I don't think so.

There are other possible explanations. There are men who have a psychological compulsion to dress and behave like women. This is sometimes tied up with sexual obsessions, and the "women" they ape tend to be porn magazine visions of what women should be like. Such people generally have no desire to live their day-to-day lives as ordinary women, and are therefore not classified as transsexuals. (They are usually classified as transvestites, although of course by no means all transvestites exhibit this behavior.) This might be an easier sort of editing to do, and it could explain much of Reeve's new behavior. Working off some sort of sexual compulsion might fit well with the overall punishment/reward system used by the experiment to coerce participants into the desired form of behavior. But there's nothing in the book to suggest that this is what has happened. What happens in the book is very much in line with the sort of brainwashing Janice Raymond claimed was being used to "create" transsexuals.

Probably the best explanation is that the brainwashing did not turn Reeve into "a woman", but into "a particular kind of

woman". Given the entire purpose of the experiment, that is actually quite legitimate. But the set-up, with Reeve first being a "man in a woman's body" and then becoming "a woman" does encourage the sort of reading that would appeal to your average redneck chauvinist.

I have a feeling that Stross has written himself into a corner here. Much of what he says about the idiocies of "traditional" sex roles and the iniquities that resulted from such beliefs is spot on. Here, for example:

For someone living in the dark ages Sam can be heartbreakingly naïve at times. "Sam, do you know what the word 'rape' means?"

"I've heard it," he says guardedly. "I thought it had to involve strangers, and usually killing. Do you think -"

On the other hand, he has also written a book that can easily be interpreted in ways that are very likely to cause Feminists to want to throw things at him. (Probably Le Creuset frying pans rather than stones, they are so much more effective.) I can imagine all sorts of heated debate in the Tiptree jury over this one. There may well be a *Glasshouse* panel at next year's WisCon too.

I really like Stross's work, and the future history that forms the backdrop to *Glasshouse* is up to his usual standard. As for the gender stuff, I guess I shall just shrug and put it down to Charlie being one of those weird alien creatures called men. I'm not sure I'll ever be able to understand them, they are so irrational...

Glasshouse - Charles Stross - Ace - hardcover

Butterflies on the Wheel

By Cheryl Morgan

And now, the end is near; and so they face the final curtain.

Time is up for the Rock 'n' Roll Reich. Gwyneth Jones has got to book five in the series (titled *Rainbow Bridge*). The end is not just nigh, it is a mere 360 pages or so away. Can peace, love and understanding save the world? Will Ax, Sage and Fiorinda find a way to guide the planet, or at least England, into some sort of sustainable future? Or are they just a bunch of dilettante rock stars playing at politics on a stage much too big for them?

You have to admit that things don't look good. At the end of *Band of Gypsies*, England was invaded by the Chinese. Gosh, yes, we'd forgotten about them. While most of the Western world was busy falling into economic and environmental chaos, closely followed by social collapse, they had experienced a few problems too. But being Chinese they had dealt with them and survived. OK, so it meant the loss of a few million citizens. There were plenty more where they came from. And now they are back on their feet again. They have nanotechnology. They are efficient and organized. Only one thing scares them: that pernicious Western technology called neuroscience (or "magic" by the ignorant masses). The one thing that could threaten Chinese world domination is the neurobomb. Fortunately the only people capable of creating one are genetic freaks, so all you have to do is seek them out and kill them.

Yes, it is another Fiorinda in peril story. It gets a little tiresome after a while. But then

how can she be anything else. Fiorinda can't help her parentage, or her powers, and if she uses them to defend herself then she's just as bad as her father, right?

Fortunately the Chinese are not quite sure who can do what. The danger could easily come from Sage and his Zen Self technology. He, after all, is the master of immix, the neurological immersion technology on which his band's success is, at least in part, based. Or indeed the Triumvirate might just be telling the truth. They could just be a bunch of dilettante rock stars.

Then again, what are the real motives of the Chinese conquerors? Do they really want to save the world from the evils America almost unleashed? Or are they really after their own neurobomb? Their own secret weapon. If Ax is going to deal with them, he needs to know.

So much for the set-up, but five volumes in what I suspect you readers really want to know is not what I think of this book, but what I think of the series as a whole. That's hard. Gwyneth Jones is, after all, not exactly the easiest writer to understand, even when she's mostly trying to be accessible as she is here. There will be academic essays written about this series. Perhaps even entire theses. And I've only had the chance to read the darn thing once. So what you are getting is a bunch of impressions.

Politics: for all of the starry-eyed optimism and radicalism of *Dissolution Summer*, Jones finally comes down firmly on the side of *Realpolitik*. Pragmatism is the name of the game. The old world was dying, and needed to be helped on its way. The new one will be formed through ruthlessness and compromise just the same. I opened this review by misquoting Frank Sinatra because one verse of "My

Way" is very appropriate for Ax. By this time he has a whole bundle of regrets — far too many to mention. But mostly he has done what he had to do, and seen it through. That's what successful leaders do.

Characters: As with any large series, there are lots of them. George Martin gets away with it by making sure that each of the major characters gets a storyline to themselves. They have whole chapters told from their viewpoint. The downside of this is a series of truly massive books. Jones spares us that, but as a result there are people I still feel I don't know. Rob Nelson and the Powerbabes? Chip and Verlaine? The Heads? I felt that I needed a *dramatis personae*.

Fanatics: Jones is only too aware how stupid and vicious human beings can get when in the grip of political or religious fanaticism. Even the most benign-sounding concepts can turn nasty. Here are some refugees telling Ax how they had lost their children.

"It's th' Gaians, they hate families, breeders they call us."

Save the planet, kill babies. Yeah, right.

More fanatics: Extreme right wing utopians with a fascination for John Ruskin and Tolkien? Yeah, I can believe it.

Truthiness: The Chinese run their empire largely through ruthless control of information, through controlling what people believe. There is no magic. There never was a neurobomb. It is true, I heard it on TV.

"When China imposed control over the internet, at the birth of this century, we were reviled as barbarians. I think you'll agree that events have proved we were simply ahead of the game. We were the first to understand that the media of the information age could be used as an impenetrable screen, on which any kind of picture could be projected."

*Don't believe I'm taken in
By stories I have heard
I just read the Daily News
And swear by every word.*

- Barrytown, Steely Dan

Research: Jones has kept up on the current state of Somerset cricket, and knows how to spell Bridgwater. I'm impressed. (Compare Vernor Vinge's faux pas over soccer, or Neal Stephenson's strange version of the Monmouth Rebellion.) Also, if you are going to write about China, Jonathan Clements is an invaluable resource.

Science Fiction: If there is one single thing you can say about the entire series, it is that it is a message of hope. No matter how messed up the world might be, while we have technology we still have a chance. Hugo Gernsback would be proud of Jones.

Gender: I still worry about Jones' attitude to the transgendered. There are echoes of 1970's feminism scattered here and there.

Invisible wind turbines? Nah! Then they really would be a danger to birds. No one would be taken in by that.

Rock 'n' Roll: It is meta-story, people. OK, so if you don't like music (or even just not as well listened as Jones) then things can go over your head. The same is true of movie references in a Kim Newman book. Of course if you despise rock stars then

you are reading the wrong books. But think of what you can do. You have this scene to write about a complex relationship issue. You can spend a lot of time having the girl agonize over her problems, or you can use shorthand. One quick mention of a midnight train to Georgia and the job is done. Thank you Gladys. Easy.

Overall, a fascinating series. If you are allergic to rock music, or can't fathom British culture, then you'll have a problem. If you don't like having to work a bit to follow the story you'll get very annoyed. But if you enjoy intelligent, well written, thought-provoking books that address the state of the modern world, viewed through a science-fictional lens, you can't ask for much better than Gwyneth Jones.

Rainbow Bridge - Gwyneth Jones - Gollancz - trade paperback

Swords and Skullduggery

By Cheryl Morgan

Once upon a time there were two lovers. He was a dashing swordsman, never beaten in a duel, a ruthless killer. And he was a dissolute young nobleman, seeking distraction in the less genteel parts of the city as a means of revenging himself upon his awful family. *Swordspoint*, Ellen Kushner's tale of intrigue, swordplay and gay love, was one of my favorite books from the 1980's. It has been a long time coming, but finally we can find out what happened to Alec and Richard.

I'm going to have to apologize to Kushner at this point because my copy of the *Swordspoint Second Edition* is back home in California. There too is my copy of *The Fall*

of the Kings. I can't remember all of the salient details of the books, in particular the short stories added to *Swordspoint* which intersect with the new book, *The Privilege of the Sword*. As a result I'm not going to review the new book as well as I ought to. Sorry. One of the many problems of my itinerant lifestyle.

If you took from that that you really need to have read *Swordspoint* in order to fully appreciate *The Privilege of the Sword* then you read my meaning correctly. You probably can enjoy the new book if you are entirely ignorant of Alec Campion, Richard St. Vier, the Duchess Tremontaine, Michael Godwin, Anthony Deverin and the rest of the crowd, but you certainly won't care as much about what happens to them. You will also have very little background about their world. But I have no problem with this. If you like the one book then you will certainly like the other, so why not buy both?

OK, time for a little plot. The years have moved on. Alec has been Duke Tremontaine for some time. Everyone thinks he is mad, which suits him just fine. It enables him to annoy anyone he likes more or less with impunity, and it allows him to indulge in every sort of debauchery under the sun. How better to drive away the knowledge that Richard is no longer with him?

Quite what possessed Alec to send for his young niece and have her trained as a swordsman is never explained. Perhaps it was a whim. Perhaps, in his eccentric way, Alec was trying to do her a favor. And perhaps he just assumed that she'd need rescuing from her mother the same way that he had at her age. Fortunately Katherine Talbert proves to have something of an aptitude for the sword, and is not too upset at being forced to

dress like a man. Just as well really, although the lifestyle isn't quite as dangerous as it was in Richard's day.

"Most challenges are fought as pure entertainment. Your swordsman gets a scratch, or his does, and you're done for the day. The two nobles who called challenge on each other know what the fight was about, and usually their friends do as well, and everyone respects the outcome. Nobody asks swordsmen to die anymore just to prove a point of honor."

At this point the reader is tempted to play guessing games. Will Kate discover that she enjoys masquerading as a boy, fall madly in love with the beautiful if tantrum-prone Artemesia Fitz-Levi? Will she discover instead that her first love is the sword, and become a professional duelist? Or will she turn her back on her uncle's mad schemes and settle down with a handsome young lad she meets half way through the book? To find out the answer you need to read the book. The point here is that you will find yourself asking such questions, and you'll probably come up with a few wrong answers.

In the meantime you get to read a very jolly comedy that takes the sharpness out of some astute complaints about social issues. You also get a bunch of fun asides about a book.

"Oh dear," sighed her mother, "it's that awful piece of trash about the swordsman lover, isn't it. My friends were mad for that book when we were young."

No, she's not talking about *Swordspoint*, she's talking about *The Swordsman Whose Name Was Not Death*, a much more period

novel. It has been about for a while, and has even been turned into a play. And guess how the fans of the book react to that...

"Lavinia says that Henry Sterling as Fabian is a pale and feeble joke, though Jane says she'd marry him in an instant. But Lavinia has hardly a good word to say for the piece; she's vexed that they've left out the entire bit about the hunting cats, though I can hardly see how they'd play that onstage. Jane says it doesn't matter, because Mangrove's repentance at the end is even more affecting than it is in the book. But Lavina thinks it is not true to the spirit of the novel."

Ah my, such a familiar story. I wonder what Lavina and Jane would have made of Orlando Bloom and Vigo Mortensen?

Still, what can you expect from a book with two fifteen-year-old girls as central characters? Fluff and giggles, of course. Good job Alec is there to add an air of seriousness to proceedings.

And actually there is a serious point being made. Much of the plot is about people being free to live their own lives. Alec always has, of course. Kate is stuck between her mother, who is desperate for her family to be normal and erase the stain of the Tremontaine connection, and Alec, who despises normal. Artemesia is blessed with parents who regard her as an asset to be married off to best advantage, regardless of how odious the prospective groom. Other characters too are owned in various ways.

Having got to the end, I was rather torn. There's no doubt that the book is great fun. Kushner's prose is fabulous and her characters vivid, though the book itself is far more charming than any of them. I

hate having to say this about a book, because it sounds like an insult, but it really would make great beach reading. On the other hand, it does have a serious point to make, and that point is, I think, rather more blunt than Kate's sword because of the fantasy/historical setting. Clearly our world is a lot more relaxed about social issues than Alec Campion's. But it is still a world in which many parents regard their children as their property. It is still a world in which families can castigate their offspring for the "shame" of being gay, transgendered, a science fiction fan or whatever. It probably takes more than an entertaining and amusing fantasy novel to drive that point home. But then again, we all have to start somewhere, and if the entertainment gets people reading the book then that will be a good thing.

[Note: A limited edition hardcover will be available from Small Beer Press in August.]

The Privilege of the Sword - Ellen Kushner - Bantam - publisher's proof

The Fall of Eden

By Victoria Hoyle

Sometimes, in fiction, we have to sidestep substandard writing — set it out of our minds, gloss over its inadequacies — and instead embrace plot, character or an ingenuity of world building. A novel with these qualities **and** strong writing is obviously preferable, but a novel with only the latter can still prove readable if we're willing to forgive its lack of surface beauty. Thus Brandon Sanderson's debut, *Elantris*: a traditional Fantasy novel replete

with a strong-headed princess, a prince in disguise, a medieval-esque kingdom in turmoil, and a battalion of warrior monks set on destroying a nation of unbelievers. Sanderson's prose, which is unappealing and sometimes even poor, overlays a well-formed world whose systems of governance and gender relations offer an alternate play on fantasy stereotypes, and whose politico-religious turmoil is intriguing, if finally unfulfilled.

Elantris was once a beautiful city of marble and light, a city of men and women who had become like Gods. With their white hair and silver skin, their apparent immortality, and their powers to heal and to endlessly provide through a form of rune magic called AonDor, they were considered divinities. Yet all of them had been human once, and had only received these powers through an inexplicable, and apparently arbitrary, force:

The Shaod, it was called. The Transformation. It struck randomly — usually at night, during the mysterious hours when life slowed to rest. The Shaod could take beggar, craftsman, noblemen, or warrior. When it came, the fortunate person's life ended and began anew; he would discard his old, mundane existence, and move to Elantris. Elantris, where he could live in bliss, rule in wisdom, and be worshipped for eternity.

The city stood on the coast of Arelon, the country from which nearly all Elantrians hailed and over which they maintained a reign of peace and prosperity without poverty. The humans of Arelon had no need to thrive commercially (although some of them did), or to worship material things (although, again, some of them

did), or even to take up arms for their own defense. Through their magics the Elantrians provided food and essentials for all citizens, a state of affairs that theoretically made each man's capacity for subsistence equal to the next. They also protected Arelene borders from the neighboring and warlike nation of Fjorden. It was a benevolently totalitarian Eden of a place.

But then, suddenly and without warning or reason, Elantris fell. A vast chasm cracked across Arelon and, in just days, the great city turned to decay, even its hard marble crumbling and rotting. The Elantrians themselves became monstrous: their silver skin turning grey, wrinkly and black-spotted and their white hair falling out leaving them bald. Their immortality, in turn, became a dreadful curse under which they could neither die nor truly live. No wound they received, not even a scrape or a bump, would heal, and although they did not need to eat to live their hunger consumed them. In horror the human people of Arelon rose up and destroyed the Elantrians in a terrible revolution, replacing their government with a "feudal" hierarchy whose distribution of power was based strictly upon wealth. The man who became King, Iadon, was also the richest of a new breed of striving Arelene merchants, while the men who became his barons had once been his colleagues. The poor were very quickly overcome and forced into a life of serf-like exploitation designed to further increase the income of the wealthy.

The Shoad, however, did not stop simply because Elantris was no more. But now, instead of a blessing, it was curse. Those it fell upon were summarily banished into the now destroyed city, where they were left to rot, without food but always hungry, slowly losing their minds from

pain. So when ten years later King Iadon's son, the Crown Prince Raoden, is taken with the Shoad there is no hesitation about what must be done with him. He is taken into Elantris and abandoned. His father announces his sudden death to cover the shame, and orchestrates a mock funeral. This state of affairs is not dissimilar to the fate of a leper in the Middle Ages (and indeed, the Shoad is not so different from leprosy): the sufferer is declared dead to the world.

Meanwhile Raoden's prospective bride, Princess Sarene of Teod, sails towards Arelon unaware of her fiancé's "death". When she arrives she discovers that, despite never having attended a wedding ceremony (and, indeed, never have met Raoden in the flesh), her engagement contract binds her to the union. She has become a widow in a strange land without ever having been married. Still, Sarene, strong-willed and not given to moping, sets out to engage fully in the politics of her adopted country. After all, the marriage alliance was always a political move meant to cement together Teod and the new Arelon against the ever threatening and empire-building Fjorden. There is no reason this shouldn't still hold true. And, indeed, no sooner has she arrived in Kae than she is confronted by one of Fjorden's most powerful men, the gyorn (or high priest) Hrathen. He has been sent to convert Arelon to Shu-Derethi, the militaristic religion that underlies Fjorden's power. He hopes to do it through his wit and political cunning – both qualities Sarene shares – but he is not averse to taking the country in blood and fire.

Thereafter the novel is about the survival of Arelon: the maintenance of its peace and holding back the Fjorden threat. While Sarene does her best to counteract

Hrathen's manoeuvres, Raoden seeks to understand the fall of Elantris. He hopes to find an explanation for the failure of the magic of AonDor, and an escape from his own cursed and ugly state. Along the way the action is heated, if slightly breathless. *Elantris* really does have something for everyone in the way of plot, what with its political machinations, its family feuds, its swords and sorcery, and its inevitable romance. The fact that it is also complete in and of itself can't help but be satisfying and pleasantly refreshing. Sanderson *has* set himself up for possible sequels in the same world - there is still a lot of mileage in the AonDor magic system, for example - but as a story *Elantris* is satisfactorily fulfilled. (*Mistborn*, due out in the US this month, is not an *Elantris* sequel.)

The potential is all there then, but, as I say, the writing is poor, occasionally wince-worthy. Sanderson is no poet: his prose and dialogue mean business and there is little room for nicety. (I should note that the writing picks up markedly in the last 30 pages - more recently written perhaps?) This is not necessarily such a bad thing, but it does tend to produce a lack of subtlety. His characters are forever explaining things to one another in bland conversations, while Sarene's engaging gender conflicts - her desire to be seen as feminine despite her "masculine" political activities - lead to an unconscionable number of pep talks and ego-rubs. Sometimes he takes the "show, don't tell" rule to heart, but at other times discards it completely, explaining his characters actions in an overly invasive manner.

Fortunately the characters *are* somewhat interesting which helps to negate bad narratorial habits. Sanderson shows unexpected deftness, for example, in drawing out Sarene and Gyorn Hrathen, who spends the novel engaged in a crisis

of disbelief. He also does a respectable job with otherwise stock characters like King Iadon, Captain Eondel and Baron Shuden. Perhaps the least convincing of the lot though, is Prince Raoden, whose extraordinary goodness, generosity and social optimism begin to grate. He is that most beloved thing of fantasy novelists: a sincerely noble leader of men. True, he *does* fear his own failures, and his struggles with being an Elantrian work, but his brand of idealism and its successes smack of... well... fantasy. Nobody solves social problems with such ease and aplomb; even great men aren't that great.

Which allows me to segue finally into *Elantris'* social themes. The idea of the great city and of the merchant-ruled Arelon that follows its fall is intriguing - it engages quite appropriately with different ideologies of leadership and government, juxtaposing a kind of extreme Utopianism with an equally extreme form of materialism. Arelon *was* a country in which the Elantrians, dictators of an eminently mild cast, provided for everyone but, consequently, controlled *all* basic resources and stifled human creativity. It *becomes* a country whose political philosophy is expressed entirely in terms of profit and return, and in which the divide between poor and rich is no longer just aesthetic. Both systems are socially and culturally problematic; neither is just and the problems issuing from each system are made manifold by the narrative. But Sanderson's fictional solution, a strange mixture between the two that stinks of charitable absolutism, is ultimately disappointing and fails to properly connect with the thematic issues of subsistence, competition and humanity at stake.

Brandon Sanderson ends up sounding like an advocate of John Ruskin, partially

hybridized with Thomas Carlyle and *Elantris* becomes the fantasy manifesto for the Victorian Arts and Crafts movement with a dash of *Heroes and Hero Worship* thrown in. Basically, Raoden's (and Sarene's) philosophy is Ruskin's: if you give people purpose and meaning in their work then they will be happy whatever they're doing. Each man or woman's gifts, once tapped into, guarantee a fulfilled and healthy lifestyle; and if individuals feel their work contributes, or makes a difference, to changing society for the better they *will* change society for the better. All the machine cogs should be made to feel like wheels. But also implicit in this is Carlyle's belief that all people need leaders and that some men (read=nobles, Kings and Elantrians in Sanderson's case) are natural leaders. They are the ones that dispense benevolent orders; they're the ones who work the machine.

Surely such a simple and enforced Utopia is too naïve to make a convincing conclusion?

Elantris - Brandon Sanderson - Tor - hardcover

Long Live the Empire

By Victoria Hoyle

"This is the Roman Empire NOW", screams the front cover of Sophia McDougall's debut novel, right above some crosses, replete with the crucified, silhouetted above a modern city skyline. No prizes, then, for guessing the central conceit of *Romanitas*. It is the 2757th year of the Roman Empire, the date counted *ab urbe condita* (i.e. from the founding of

Rome itself), in a world where the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution, as we know them, never happened. It is also a world in which Christianity foundered and died in its infancy, in which Islam never took hold, and in which Hinduism was Romanized; a world in which the Empire stretches across half of North America, China and Africa, and in which India and South America have been completely annexed.

The global map-scape is shared with only two other significant powers. The largest is Nionia, a Japanese-esque Empire that encompasses Australasia and the western seaboard of North America, as well as North and South Korea, and Thailand. Following an uneasy peace with Rome Nionia's North American territories are demarcated by a great wall, not unlike Hadrian's, streaking across the States in a diagonal just west of Arkansas. The second power is Sinoa, a China that subsumes Bangladesh, Burma and Vietnam to the south and Mongolia and swathes of Russia to the north. Only the southern tip of Africa remains independent of these three sprawling Empires.

However, despite the epic-ness of scope suggested by bare geography, *Romanitas* is not a novel on the large scale (although it is a lengthy 572 pages). It focuses primarily on events that take place in a small triangle of Roman Europe – in southern Gaul and northern Italy – and places three adolescents at its emotional centre. World-building and Empire politics are trusted to the reader's imagination, and to the map inserted before the acknowledgements.

Marcus Novius Faustus is sixteen years old, newly orphaned and the Imperial heir

presumptive. His father, Leo, brother to the current Emperor, and his mother Clodia, have recently died in a car accident. The novel opens with their state funeral. All around the Empire Romans watch Marcus, standing next to his parent's embalmed bodies, give his first state speech on public "longvision". They see an imperious, serious future Emperor, while Marcus, for his own part, feels sick and wooden.

Miles away in London a young slave girl, Una, wearing stolen clothes and fresh bruises, glances up at a public longvision screen. Seeing Marcus, she reviles the emptiness of his official sentiments. She is on her way to rescue her older brother, Sulien, who is due to be crucified the next day having been accused of raping the daughter of his owner. Gathering together all her outrage at being unfree, and using her preternatural ability to read minds and influence thoughts, she means to walk straight past the guards, collect the key to her brother's cell and escape with him to Gaul as runaways. And, powered by anger and determination, somehow she succeeds.

Marcus, meanwhile, is also destined for a life as a fugitive. The Rome of now, like ancient Rome, is riven with ambition and corruption. Only days after his parent's funeral, Marcus's secretary, Varius, voices his suspicion that Leo and Clodia were murdered because of their subversive, potentially world-changing views. Both had believed that slavery, the hereditary bondage on which the industry, economy and comfort of the modern Empire is founded, should be abolished, and that all human beings should have an inalienable right to their liberty. Once he became Emperor, Leo had intended to free the slaves and institute a fair and waged economy. Varius believes that Marcus,

who shares his parent's ideals, will inevitably be the next target. Too many people have a vested interest in being the masters of the unfree, and thus in changing the course of Imperial succession.

Only hours later, an attempt is made on Marcus' life. With the help of Varius, he flees Rome in disguise, intending to take refuge in a mountain hide-away for escaped slaves (which his parents had sponsored) and wait until the source of the murderous plot can be revealed. Una and Sulien, hounded across Europe by vigiles, make slow progress towards the same place...

From there onwards the plot is pretty thin on the ground; for a novel of *Romanitas'* length very little unexpected happens. The promise of intrigue in Rome is only barely fulfilled (the full deviousness of the conspiracy against Marcus being hurriedly tacked on in the final twenty pages). Far more emphasis is placed on the interminable journeying and escaping of the three teen protagonists. As is inevitable they soon meet up and struggle forward together over the obstacles along the way – the patrols, their hunger, their visibility, especially given Marcus's internationally recognizable face. Certainly, there is good tension in all this, but the snail's pace negates any real breathlessness or excitement. The middle part of the novel barely plods along. It wouldn't be unfair to say that the beginning and the end, both well paced, bracket a sizeable dumpling of plot-stodge in the middle.

However, McDougall does make up for the lack of exterior action with a fine, mature eye for interiority. Una, Sulien and Marcus are all well-realized, as is Varius. Even the relatively infrequent

appearances of the Imperial family manage to convey a strong sense of individual personality. She feels free to dip in and out of her character's consciousnesses, using her omnipotent third-person to its proper effect. Una especially, with her stubborn desperation and her repressed emotions, is a living creature. Her strength and her youth sit uneasily and precariously in her, even as her never-revealed but abused past hulks forward, threatening to destroy her.

Adjoining this flair for interiority is McDougall's sense of prose: she writes well and the novel is full of pleasant similes and constructions. Take for example these three different ways of describing the crowd from the opening page:

But the glaring buildings and statues seemed planted deep in a heavy soil of black-dressed people, weighed down, wading. From above, the buildings and the people would look like one static mat, so densely and so nearly motionlessly were the streets filled. The Sacred Way, cleared for the procession to pass, closed inexorably behind it, like a syringe filling with black ink.

While the images compete, somewhat confusedly with one another, the descriptive effect remains tactile and suited to the perplexity of the eye falling on a multitude of people. *Romanitas* maintains this consciously poetic timbre throughout, invoking, as it does literally on several occasions, Virgil. This alone makes it feel like an ambitious book, even in the absence of grand plotting. It is strange in this way: as though it should be epic, as though its language is striving for epic (perhaps overmuch at times), and yet

it remains constrained. It feels in one sense like a set-up novel, aching for bigger and better things, and in another like a character novel only fit for purpose.

But is it good alternate history? Well, no, I'm not really sure it is. McDougall's Roman Empire is nothing more than a mixed reality, taking, as it does, vital, iconic characteristics from ancient Rome – Emperors, slavery, crucifixion – and some technologies of our own – television, telephones, trains, cars, air travel – and muddling them up together. In McDougall's vision a single event changes the course of the Empire and ensures its survival along her trajectory (and she does give an extensive timeline in the appendix of the book). In our world, Publius Helvius Pertinax, the reformer who succeeded Emperor Commodus, was assassinated only weeks into his reign. In the world of the novel, however, he lived to rule for 12 years and undertook significant reforms to taxation and the army, and restored power to the Senate. His temperate reign set the Empire on a sounder base and determined its longevity. All of which is well and good – single events do cause historical landslides – and McDougall's research seems thorough enough.

But after the event that caused the landslide, *Romanitas* doesn't imagine any other great change – Rome's system of government and governance remains basically the same, although the Imperial family does change with a realistic regularity. Its technological advances basically mirror our reality, and McDougall puts the onset of its technological age – the invention of cars and air travel for example – squarely around the time of our own. The development of flight only occurs in their equivalent to the early 20th century. This

leaves a good number of “dead years” in her Roman history. Surely in the years that our Europe was recovering from the fall of the Empire we know, splintering off into nation states, repelling invasive forces, like the Vikings and Magyars, McDougall’s Rome would have been advancing technologically in tandem with its rapid expansion. Surely it would have been seeking speedier methods of travel and more convenient modes of communication to cover its vast land holdings and ensure economic growth.

Further, McDougall’s Roman technologies are really no different from our own. Their trains run on cables rather than rails and their cars on electricity rather than fossil fuels but nothing else in design or purpose is significantly different.

The fact of the matter is that *Romanitas* doesn’t try hard enough at being an alternate history: it wants to be a character story and manages it tolerably well, but in doing so it leaves its central conceit to flounder. Any re-envisioning of our present is mostly aesthetic, a ruse to make the narrative feel more exciting and alien than it actually is. It is just not enough. Other speculative authors manage to do both world-building and character. It puts McDougall behind in the game and it makes me think she doesn’t really know her chosen sub-section of genre very well. Still, this book is the first of a projected trilogy – the second, *Rome Burning*, being due sometime in 2007 – and further installments promise to vastly expand the geographic and political scope of the first novel. I’m willing to reserve my judgment as to McDougall’s alternate history credentials till then.

Romanitas - Sophia McDougall - Orion - hardcover

Living with Wolves

By Juliet E. McKenna

Benighted (published as *Bareback* in the UK) by Kit Whitfield is another addition to the ranks of supernatural/paranormal fiction dealing with classic monsters: in this case werewolves. Only it’s being promoted as “a literary thriller that transcends the bounds of genre.” That’s always interesting to see. Every so often a fabulously original fantasy book will achieve widespread recognition and deserved best-seller status, confounding the prejudices of people who don’t usually read “that sort of thing”, at least until they can find reasons to explain why it isn’t really fantasy after all.

On the other hand, all too often, a book is promoted by mainstream bookselling and publishing as something remarkable and startlingly original because it focuses on, say, time travel, or Hitler winning the Second World War. Most SF&F fans can rattle off a list of books on similar themes that these mainstream people just aren’t aware of. When the author of the supposedly original book is equally unaware of what’s already been written around their chosen idea, the results are frequently disappointing. So I’m interested to see which side of this divide Kit Whitfield’s debut novel should be shelved on.

The opening premise is encouraging. Given the proliferation of these supernatural/paranormal books lately, any new author must find an original perspective. Whitfield does this by making lycanthropy the normal condition of humankind. Fewer than one percent of the population are anmorphic – not subject to

change on the night of the full moon. They're marked out by their smooth hands, not calloused by monthly padding around on paws, and by their scars, untouched by the regular transformation that heals all but the most appalling injuries. A visible minority, disdained as disabled, they suffer discrimination and abuse from early childhood onwards when they're thrown into moon night crèches where the laws of the jungle apply. Why offer anything more than basic further education to a "bareback" whose only career option is working for DORLA, the Department for Ongoing Regulation of Lycanthropic Affairs.

What does DORLA do? This is where the book becomes more complicated and, for the reader, more intriguing. When ninety-nine percent of the population becomes mindless ravening animals once a month, who will protect the children, the old and vulnerable; more prosaically, the livestock? The lycos need the barebacks to stay sentient and capable; otherwise their comfortable society will disintegrate into chaos. Whitfield has thought this all through, deftly sliding in bits and pieces of history to explain how the current state of affairs developed. Draconian laws compel a moon night curfew for lunes, as lycos in their transformed state are known. DORLA operatives enforce those laws, under-resourced, risking life and limb, not through choice but because they have no other option. Only they're castigated for their failures and resented for their successes. So while overall, the system works, it is hardly a healthy state of affairs when once a month, the oppressed can become the oppressors. Any lune caught outside on a moon night can be imprisoned in a straw-filled cell, beaten under the guise of interrogation, and denied access to lawyers just as long as

DORLA wants.

Lola May Galley is a DORLA operative simply trying to get through each day. She's doing her best to maintain a relationship with her lyco sister, pregnant after an unwanted sexual encounter on a moon night. Becca is terrified that her baby will be born head first, something tradition says will make it a bareback. At work, Lola's responsibilities include legal defence work. She has to represent an unrepentant prowler, Richard Ellaway, a rich, well-connected lyco who sees nothing wrong in ignoring curfew. In his defense, he claims he was just too far from a government shelter when he started furring up. No one at DORLA is inclined to believe him, not least because he bit a hand off Johnny Marcos, the operative trying to catch him. Lola has more sympathy for one of her return clients, Jerry, an alcoholic vagrant who ends up in trouble simply for being too drunk to realize when he's about to change.

Lola is an outstandingly well-realized central character. We get right inside her head, feeling all her emotions vividly, good and bad. We live with her sense of injustice at the life she's done nothing to deserve, and wilt with her weariness at fighting unwinnable battles. The book is written in the first person and in continuous present tense, an unusual choice where more authors fail spectacularly than succeed. Kit Whitfield has certainly mastered the style, denying the reader the implicit certainty of reported events. If we're reading someone saying "I did this and then I did that," there's a broad hint that they survived to tell the tale. Lola's story offers no such assurances. This uncertainty all too accurately reflects a bareback's life, where workmates become friends because there's no one else who understands, but you

never become too close because workmates and friends are so frequently killed and injured by marauding lunes.

Soon Lola's life is looking up, as far as her modest expectations allow. Becca's son is born feet first and Lola likes being an aunt, at least for as long as baby Leo is too young to ask questions about why she's different and to learn the societal prejudices that start in the playground. She finds Paul, the lyco social worker representing Jerry, is unexpectedly sympathetic both to Jerry and to her. Can barebacks and lycos find romance? It's been known. Lasting love is more tricky. How can barebacks and lycos truly relate, when so much divides them? How can barebacks ever love, when so much of their life is scarred by isolation and resentment? How much truth is there in popular lyco belief that bareback women are either sluts or frigid?

Meanwhile, in her professional life, the Ellaway case continues to present Lola with problems. He turns out to have links with lunes who advocate free-ranging: changing under an open sky instead of locked in a security room. They're desperate to learn more about their dual nature, to remember something other than confused, fleeting glimpses of their moon nights. But where's the line between free-ranging and prowling? Are these people somehow connected to a group of prowlers who seem to be actively preying on DORLA operatives? How does their prime suspect, Darryl Seligmann, escape from hospital? How can DORLA manage, if the very lycos they're supposed to be protecting can't be relied on to help enforce the laws? What does it mean when operatives are shot with their own silver bullets?

Lola investigates, because that's her job.

As she uncovers things she'd really rather not know, at a personal cost she'd never have chosen to pay, she investigates still further because now there's nothing else she can do. She uncovers conspiracy on the one hand. On the other, she learns that far more unites lycos and barebacks than divides them. No one is innocent and everyone is corrupted by the lives they lead, through no fault of their own, and by those deliberate choices they make in full knowledge of the consequences. Ultimately Lola must decide what degree of compromise she can live with.

This book has a great deal to say about discrimination and its effects on all those involved. In focusing on this inversion of the werewolf myth, Whitfield avoids the pitfalls of trying to tackle issues of racial, health, sexual or any other kind of real-world discrimination. Consequently the exploration is all the more hard-hitting. But primarily this is a book about people, crucially about one person, Lola May. In stepping inside her head, seeing her world through her eyes, we can gain a new perspective on our own lives. Time and again, famous thinkers have insisted the highest purpose of fiction is commenting on the human condition. So in that sense, yes, this certainly is a literary thriller that transcends the bounds of genre. That doesn't mean it's not also a splendidly entertaining genre book, giving an audacious twist to the werewolf mythos. That talented SF&F writers can manage both things at once may come as a surprise to mainstream critics, but it will hardly be news to genre fans.

Benighted - Kit Whitfield - Del Rey - publisher's proof

A Changed Life

By Lucy Kemnitzer

I can't find an antonym for nostalgia, but if there were one it would describe *The Stolen Child*. The past here demands our attention, but the neither the author nor the characters yearn for it. Rather, the past lurks, destructive in its capabilities, and the characters are divided on whether the best tactic is to forget it or to remember every detail.

I've always thought that something really compelling could be done with the changeling story seed, and here it is. *The Stolen Child* is written as a double autobiography of a stolen child and the changeling that takes his place. Each tale, told in alternation, is moving and troubling and elegant (too elegant, I thought for a while part way through, but further along the elegance is justified). The fantastic element is limited. The changelings have little magic beyond what changes them from children into neotenous, long-lived creatures of the forest and back again. Their everyday existence as foragers at the edge of civilization depends upon the normal facts of life.

There's nothing glamorous about these changelings. They're dirty, they squabble and play and fret like the trapped, bored and fearful children they are. And they yearn, every one of them, for the day they will take their turn to leave and become real children again. Mostly they've forgotten their former lives. It's the advice they give each other: forget, live in the present and for the future. About once every ten to twenty years the group finds a child to grab so that the oldest in the group can take his place. It works out so

that an individual remains a changeling for a century and more, sometimes two.

I wondered, sometimes, how this life cycle came to be. What was the origin of the changelings? The changelings themselves don't even have a guess. But, being a modern author, Keith Donohue is interested in time's arrow as well as time's cycle, and he introduces us to the changeling lifestyle as it is just about to change forever.

The changelings depend on the proximity of wild land and human land. They need enough land to roam in, to supply enough plants and small animals for their food. They need to be able to move their burrows away from human activity. And at the same time they need to be close enough to human habitation that they can steal clothing and matches and manufactured food. When the oldest of the crew is ready, they need convenient access to an unhappy child.

The particular group of changelings featured in the book lives near a small Pennsylvania town, in a rural tract which is becoming suburban. The child who is taken is a spoiled boy who resents his twin baby sisters and runs away because he is asked to watch over them. The changeling who is found in his hiding place is a musical genius who sings for his sisters. The sudden change in the son is not unnoticed by the parents: the father's life is embittered and made strange by the uncanny knowledge that his son is not his son, while the mother goes overboard to make the little stranger welcome in her heart.

Forget what you were before, and be only what you are now, is the advice the changelings give each other when they change over to their new lives. But our musical boy can't. He lives in constant fear

of being exposed by the changelings in the forest, even as he grows up. By the time he becomes a father he's haunted by fear that his own son will be stolen, or that his son's features — true to his real genetic legacy rather than the legacy of his father's stolen family — will give him away somehow.

Nor can the stolen boy forget as he is supposed to. Instead, he becomes determined to record and archive everything of his life and origins. He loses his efforts more than once and has to start over again, using notebooks and scrap paper foraged from the trash of the human town and stubs of pencils. As their lives progress and glance off from each other, each must come to terms with what he's lost and what he must accept as the conditions of his life.

The musical boy becomes fascinated with his true beginnings. He digs through the history of his wife's former boyfriend's family, which she ascribes to jealousy. He makes a pilgrimage to a town in Europe where he discovers the music of his real father, and the story of his birth and emigration. In Europe, the songs and games of ordinary children startle him into thinking he has been caught out by the changelings, while his wife is worried about the more mundane dangers connected with illicit border crossings.

This book is full of modern uncertainties and insecurities. A person's identity is not guaranteed, nor his parentage, his physiology or his thoughts. You might long for the mysterious and dangerous treasure of the past, but the path to it can never be found: only a place here and there from which it can be viewed. The future is a shifting landscape and trying to pick your way through it is a risky proposition. Other people may not be who they say they are, or who they seem to be,

or even who they think they are. There is that modern environmental concern, too. This little gang of fae doesn't just flit through the forest. The changelings have a life cycle and relationships to the land and to the regular human population. When something changes in human society or in the shape of the land, the changelings must change too. Other modern attitudes shape the acceptance of death as real and permanent, with no afterlife reprieve.

I can't convey how lovely the book is. There is no mawkishness, no cuteness, and certainly nothing coy about it. Glimpses of beauty in the course of the book are like glimpses of beauty in the course of any hard, anxious, sometimes grim life. Both of the boys are sympathetic. Neither is a pillar of virtue, though they both try to do the right thing for their circumstances. The stink of life lies on the page. When terrible things happen — and they do — they are real and hard and consequential. And yet there is nothing raw about this *The Stolen Child*. I'd put it on a shelf with Sean Stewart's *Mockingbird* or *Perfect Circle* and Octavia Butler's *Kindred*.

The Stolen Child - Keith Donohue - Nan A. Talese (Doubleday) - hardcover

Alice in Movieland

By Lucy Kemnitzer

In *The Looking Glass Wars* Frank Beddor takes an Ozian approach to Wonderland, only bloodier and less delicate. Where Lewis Carroll has an underpinning of mathematics and philosophy to his whimsy, Beddor has nothing down there but an urge for spectacle. There's a heavy but inconsistent dose of solipsism, but it's

not the troubled, examined solipsism of Philip K. Dick (thankfully: that would have been so out of place here), but something else – I'm afraid even the solipsism is just a piece of machinery to help justify the spectacle.

In this Wonderland, Alice is Alyss, the daughter of the White Queen. She has inherited, as apparently all the royal women of a particular line have, a miraculous power of imagination. She is the Princess of Solipsy. No, that's not what the Beddor calls her, that's just what she is. (Lewis Carroll's Wonderland is full of what-is-it-called, what-is-its-name, what-is-it conversations, but *The Looking Glass Wars* is devoid of them.) As her mother tells her with her post-mortem breath, it's all in her head. Which leads me, but apparently nobody in the book, to wonder why any of the ensuing grue has to happen at all.

Just about all the signature oddities of Lewis Carroll's Wonderland are in this book, only turned inside out and given grim stories of their own. One of the more successful is Hatter Madigan, who is the head of the Queen's security and is equipped with lethal haberdashery and stern loyalty. Less successful is the Cat, who is apparently something like a golem or a robot assassin, created by the White Queen's rival, sister, and murderer, the evil Redd.

Much of this would work well as anime. There's a lot of visual flair and swooping movement. It makes about as much sense as the goofier animes, though, and that doesn't work so well for a novel. No, let me be blunt: I only finished this book because I promised to write a review of it. There was too much to balk at.

Wonderland did not work for me as a magical world. It was more like a magical

Christmas department store display: glittery, fanciful, active, but not moving in the emotional sense. The good guys apparently don't have to do any kindnesses or uphold any particular values to earn their status as good guys, because they are opposed by an enemy who is evil by auctorial decree, and whose actions are only justified by the desire to do evil. Redd doesn't seize the throne because she wants to run the empire, or because she wants wealth: she seizes it so that she can be more evil. This is one place the Ozian sensibility kicks in – recall the green Wicked Witch as she dies, lamenting the loss of her lovely wickedness? The physical descriptions of Redd are evocative of old Westie, in an effective way, except that – something's missing. Humor? For myself, I liked Carroll's characterization of the Red Queen better: a harridan, who thinks she has answers for everybody, not evil incarnate.

The book is chock-a-block with ideas, all right: some of them attractive. Some of the business with the Looking Glass Continuum counts as Cool Bits. Since the binder in the soufflé is "imagination," I suppose that is appropriate. But they're just ideas, and too many of them are frankly kind of dumb, like the myriad of things with names like gwormmies. (As far as I can figure these are ordinary earthworms, or maybe special Technicolor Wonderland ones.) Or they are irritating, like the spirit-danes, a kind of riding animal which a person who has been living in the mundane world would attempt to ride backwards (remember the White Knight?). General Doppelganger, who splits into two (General Doppel and General Ganger) whenever there's the slightest call to do so – you wonder why he bothers ever being one person – is irritating, but less so than the spirit-danes.

I imagine some people will find him charming, again in an Ozian way, like the Tick-Tock Man or the Nome King.

A couple of the ideas, but not many, are vaguely offensive: Jack of Diamonds, who ought to be a lean, saturnine, conniving sort of fellow, is only a fat, conniving buffoon, maybe good for a slapstick giggle when he gets his butt stuck in a chair. But as with Redd and the Cat, I'm rubbed the wrong way when I come up against unconvincing evil. When an author informs me that a character is evil and doesn't win me over to that opinion I tend to want to argue with the author. Piling unconvincing and unmoving atrocities up doesn't do the convincing either, especially when the good guys are basically doing the same thing. You have to win me over.

And — well, I've been giving this lecture a lot lately — there's frankly too much inconsequential violence in the book for my taste. The vast armies which are cut down in moments are only playing cards and chess pieces, of course, so we aren't to feel badly for them, and honestly I resent that. If the ground is going to be littered with corpses, I want to care about it. I don't want decapitations of major second-tier characters to come and go in a flash. I keep having the feeling with respect to this book that my attention is being misdirected.

When I think of the book as a treatment for a movie, which it clearly is to a degree, it works much better than it does as a novel. The front matter says Frank Beddor is currently working on *Seeing Redd* (you guessed it, the second book in the trilogy), and a "screenplay for a full-length feature film". Frank Beddor is also the producer of *There's Something About Mary* so you know he's comfortable with sight gags, and of

Wicked, so you know he likes mixing up ideas from old stories. I'm wondering if it may not have been a mistake to release the book ahead of the movie, actually, since the people who enjoy this book the most will be the ones who have seen and enjoyed the movie: people who like their entertainment very loud and fast and glittery, and are not bothered by small things like plot logic and characterization. I'm surprised, really. The back cover of my reviewer's copy explains the marketing support that this book is going to get, which is the full works, not stopping short of a "bookseller tea party tour" and "viral marketing" (I assume this will include Flash games involving crashing through looking glasses and YouTube videos of Hatter Madigan and the Cat fighting it out in ruined landscapes). I'd have thought they'd have made all this coincide with the movie's release. Or maybe the movie will come out at the time of the second or third book.

The Looking Glass Wars is marketed as a YA (young adults) book. When the movie comes to be, if it is good enough, it will be a good hook for the kind of kid who likes to read what they just saw on the screen. Even better would be a console or PC game based on the adventures of Hatter Madigan, or the young warriors Dodge Anders (Alyss' childhood sweetheart) and Homburg Molly (who reads like a very cool special effect herself, though her character is suddenly burdened with a peculiar social prejudice which arises out of nowhere and recedes to nowhere for no reason).

Do I understand myself correctly here? Am I saying that this book is unattractive as a novel, but it would be pretty dandy as an adjunct in a marketing campaign for a video game and/or a movie (preferably executed by someone like Hayao

Miyazaki, the fellow who did *Princess Mononoke* and *Spirited Away*, and not live action or CG)? I think I am.

The Looking Glass Wars - Frank Beddor - Dial Books - hardcover

Are You Feeling Strange?

By Mario Guslandi

If you're already familiar with the term "slipstream", that's good. If not, please don't expect me to be able to define this genre (or non-genre?) for you. I've twice read the Introduction to *Feeling Very Strange: The Slipstream Anthology* by the editors, James Patrick Kelly and John Kessel, and I've finished the book itself, without fully grasping the meaning of that term. I'm not a literary critic, just a reviewer, but I've never been considered a moron. Yet I still don't get it. "Visionary strangeness" and "cognitive dissonance" are fascinating expressions, but do they mean something so definite and specific as to identify a given type of fiction? Again, I don't know.

With the present anthology the editors have tried to select a canon, by picking up stories from various sources (magazines and books), published in the last twenty years or so, which may represent outstanding examples of the "slipstream" genre. Do the selected stories really exhibit a common ground? Do they share an element (theme, style etc) which may make them recognizable as pieces of fiction belonging to the same genre? I think not, unless you accept that their all being "strange" is sufficient basis from which to state that the stories have similar roots.

But how do we define what is "strange" and what is not? SF may appear strange to the reader used to mainstream fiction. Fantasy and alternate history are strange to people who want to read about fictional events taking place in the real world they know and inhabit. So what? Moreover, to be frank, I didn't find the stories included in this book more weird or offbeat than the stuff I usually read. A few may sound a bit strange, but most don't.

But enough of this. Let's talk about quality, instead. Sadly, only a few stories in the anthology are good (actually, very good). The rest are just ordinary, forgettable material that could have easily remained buried within the yellowed pages of old magazines. One of the most accomplished stories is "The Little Magic Shop" by Bruce Sterling, the very man who created the term "slipstream". Ironically the tale — a delightful yarn with a supernatural undercurrent, describing a peculiar deal carried on through the centuries — has a very traditional structure and doesn't appear to break any new ground.

Another excellent story is Jonathan Lethem's "Light and the Sufferer" a cruel (and strange!) piece set in the Manhattan world of pushers, addicts and petty criminals, portraying the fate of a young man haunted by an undecipherable alien, a kind of atypical guardian angel.

Jeff VanderMeer contributes "Exhibit H: Torn Pages Discovered in the Vest Pocket of an Unidentified Tourist", an enjoyable but, alas, all too brief fragment of his Ambergris saga.

"Hell is the Absence of God", by Ted Chiang, is a compelling, outstanding piece offering a bitter view of the presence of God (and of His angels) in human life. An unusual theological puzzle, the story

pinpoints the subjective aspect of any religious belief by reporting the paradigmatic fortunes of three different people.

In Michael Chabon's "The God of Dark Laughter", an atypical whodunit investigating the ritual murder of a clown living in a cave with a baboon, we discover an unexpected truth: strange indeed. On the other hand, "The Rose in Twelve Petals" by Theodora Goss doesn't seem strange at all. It is simply an excellent, very enjoyable, fairy tale featuring a doomed princess: a typical fantasy tale.

In short, if you're a nut for literary debates go ahead, buy this volume and try to solve the "slipstream" puzzle. If you're just a layman, looking for something good to read you're warned: you'll find some excellent stuff in there, but not as much as you'd want.

Feeling Very Strange: The Slipstream Anthology - James Patrick Kelly and John Kessel (eds.) - Tachyon Publications - trade paperback

Short Fiction

By Nic Clarke

The problem, as I'm sure you're all aware, is that there are simply too many things to read and not enough time. With every month that passes wherein I fail to get through the pile of Great Unread, another rolls around in which still *more* books and magazines are published and must be added to the by-now towering pile. ('Pile' is no longer strictly accurate; in fact, I have several dedicated to-be-read shelves these days, owing to the fact that the pile — had I maintained it as such — would have

grown somewhat taller than my house. Or indeed, than Everest...)

The only solution to this (frankly all-consuming) issue, it seems to me, is to give up sleeping. That, or sample as widely as possible.

In light of this, I tried out two magazines new to me this month. The first was the August issue of genre stalwart *Fantasy & Science Fiction* <<http://www.sfsite.com/fsf/>>. I found the stories on offer to be solidly entertaining, but — on the whole — hardly groundbreaking. One that truly captured my imagination, however, was "Another Word for Map is Faith", by Christopher Rowe. In a future, insular North America, a host of Christian sects maintain an uneasy coexistence, each trying to remake the world in their own (perfect, naturally) image. The narrative follows one group of devotees seeking out — and correcting — error in Kentucky, a scenario made all the more disturbing by the unflinching conviction of the characters.

The fictive faith is both amusingly absurd and disquietingly plausible. It mixes medieval-esque cultic devotion to facets of Christ (the Sower, Jesus-in-the-Trees) with elements all-too-evident in sections of US life today — blind fidelity to ideas received, rather than personally explored, and an evangelism that requires frequent demonstrations of piety from its believers, and creates its own 'enemies':

"Christians, there is error here. There is error right before our eyes!" Her own students weren't a difficult congregation to hook, but she was gratified nonetheless by the gleam she caught in most of their eyes, the calls, louder now, of "Yes!" and "I see it! I see the lie!"

"I laid down my protractor, friends, I know exactly how far off north Jesus mapped this ridge line to lay," she said, sweeping her arm in a great arc, taking in the whole horizon, "And that ridge line sins by two degrees!"

"May as well be two hundred!" said Carmen, righteous.

"Penultima Thule", by Chris Willrich, picks up the story of two characters who, I understand, have featured in *F&SF* before: thief Persimmon Gaunt, and poet Imago Bone. Despite the missing backstory, I found the world accessible (if a touch generic) and the characters perfectly engaging. Willrich crafts an effective horror-fantasy around Gaunt and Bone's illicit possession of a book whose words can kill (in entertainingly bizarre ways reminiscent of *Final Destination*). While the plot is relatively standard high fantasy fare — a quest to save the world by destroying said magical artifact — it plays effectively upon the relationship between the characters for emotional resonance. I was on less certain ground over the humor, however. Bantering dialogue I can enjoy, but touches such as calling the deadly book *Mashed Rags Bound in Dead Cow*, while undoubtedly amusing as a throwaway joke, seemed to me a step too far and risked undermining the ominous tone of the rest — at least for this reader.

Very small-press zine, *Zahir*, <<http://www.zahirtales.com/>> aims to publish material that, its editor says, transcends subdivisions of speculative fiction. Most of the stories in #10 probably come down on the literary/experimental end of the spectrum, however, their fantastical elements understated. The results are, on the whole, quietly impressive, although I felt David Rawson's "Given up For Found" to be

overly 'fluffy' in its premise, and clumsy in its execution (it perhaps could have benefited from a re-read to get rid of dangling qualifiers and occasional pronoun confusion).

Manuel Ramos Montes' "The Soldier" is a simple, short, but very moving take on the old tale of the son returning home from war, with a devastatingly effective point-of-view switch part-way through. The legacy of conflict turns up again in the nightmarish "Agony of the Forgotten", by Jeff P. Jones. The structure here is more experimental — it can't really be said to have a plot — and the psychological damage is explored more viscerally, through a sharp depiction of physical torment.

Face a plate of meat. Arms the color of chalk peep out from under the blanket. A magnificently swollen wrist. It throbs, grows larger with each slow heartbeat. A crack in the skin at the base of his hand oozes a gouty substance that spills like finely sifted flour over the blanket.

Again, the setting, purpose and time period of the war are left unstated, making the soldiers archetypal and letting the significance of their suffering reside solely in their humanity. At the same time, however, there is perhaps less for the reader to relate to in Jones' story than in Montes'. Whereas the latter anchors his protagonists' emotional dislocation in their relationship to each other, Jones' "forgotten" men are as rootless as their location is mysterious. The response is thus more one of horror than pity.

Finally, Rob McClure Smith provides a complete change in tone with "The Clam", a gloriously silly two-page snippet about a

talking Scottish clam that – in the words of the woman who finds it – “sounds like [it’s] been drinking”.

The most interesting of the stories at *Strange Horizons*

<<http://www.strangehorizons.com/>> this month was “My Termen”, by Eliot Fintushel (19th June). It is an SFnal take on the ‘secret’ purpose of the theremin, that electronic mainstay of many a soundtrack of visual SF. The story is told by Mikhail, an ageing (and, I assume, fictional) associate of the instrument’s designer, Lev Sergeyevich Termen. Where the piece really stood out, for me, was in its very distinctive narrative voice, capturing the rhythms of Mikhail’s broken English:

Men know him my Termen even today by reason of one’s Beach Boys. My baby has it good vibrations. She giving to me excitations. Also, has one not heard such theremin in multiple science fictional movies them? For examples, “Klaatu barada nikto.” Woo woo, so forth. Here is one’s theremin. Such theremin is making in all cases this ethereal sound.

These are the scattered recollections of an old man, shaped by the painful dichotomy of his deep affection and respect for Termen on the one hand, and his former duty to spy on him for KGB on the other. The structure is, accordingly, far from linear. The emphasis is squarely upon the personal, emotional significance of Mikhail’s interaction with Termen, and much of the underlying meaning of the events alluded to emerges only by inference – leaving the outcome (suitably) ambiguous.

The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction (August 2006) – Gordon Van Gelder (ed.) – Spilogale Inc. - electronic proof

Zahir: Unforgettable Tales #10 – Sheryl Tempchin (ed.) – Zahir Publishing – digest magazine

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

Short and Sweet

By John Hertz

Niven is short. Brief. With his brush he touches-in bright colored points. We see the people and the landscape. He has an eye for the telling detail.

The Draco Tavern is two dozen stories, the most recent from this year (2006), the earliest from the 1970’s, some anthologized before.

In the near future – “say two years from whenever you’re reading any given story,” offers his introduction – star-traveling aliens take up orbit round the Moon, and set up a spaceport in Siberia. Rick Schumann builds an interspecies tavern. (Incidentally, it rhymes with “wacko”; I’ve heard Niven say it.)

Now and then humans arrive. Look at Alan Webber:

Some customers wear a slack and gaping grin the whole time they’re here, like everything they see is new and different. He wore that grin as if sketched by a drunken artist with a shaky hand. “Offered me a wish.”

Even if I don't quote a word more, you know what kind of story this is, don't you?

Niven gives good alien names. Schumann the human meets a Joker, recognizing the *Batman* reference: tall, spindly, with dead-white skin, a triangular manlike face and a permanent grin, voice like someone dancing on a bagful of walnuts. There are also Warblers, Low Jumbos, and the Wayward Child.

Some aliens don't take names in our language. This one, being tested by a female to see if he's worth mating with, is a Pazensh; he explains accepting help with the test:

If I can trust a companion, it speaks for my intelligence. If I choose one who will mock me, or a fool who will lead me astray, that speaks too.

Niven is a comedian. I'm not sure whether that comes with deftness. Shakespeare is a comedian, and Nabokov, and Issa – I use the literary present tense, their work is alive, like any classic. Sometimes Niven makes you laugh. Sometimes in a tense moment you have enough breath to smile. Here's Schumann:

We must be a common thing to the Chirpsithra. A civilization is only beginning to learn the structure of the universe, when interstellar liners appear and alien intelligences blurt out all the undiscovered secrets.

The Chirps have been civilized, capable of space travel, for billions of years. They run

the liners. We only meet the officers – almost – who are all female.

One piece in the collection was a Masquerade entry at the 1984 World Science Fiction Convention. Decades ago the Masquerade was a costume party. Since the late 1960's it's been an on-stage competition, with lights and sound, judges, a big audience. I've judged them. Marvels appear.

For "One Night at the Draco Tavern" costumer Kathy Sanders built a dozen Niven creatures, some not seen in the Draco Tavern world but Niven wrote the script. He put himself in as a helpless "Larry" who never quite understood what was going on. A four-foot-high telepathic monster from Niven's first novel controlled Schumann and got Niven's drink. They won Most Humorous, Master class.

Another story was first published in *Playboy*. Niven's work is a big tent.

Here's a Gray Mourner:

We think the Old Mind almost stopped manufacturing new elements, long ago, and we think we know why. It would have become the dominant natural force in the universe. Nothing interesting could happen after that.

Three-fifths into the book Niven has this creature ask, "Have you ever wondered if there are entities older than Chirpsithra?" The Old Mind may have been alive for ten billion years. Sometimes it converges. The Gray Mourner ship, *Chimes in Harmony*, is going to look. Don't let me forget to mention the Arthur Clarke joke.

A lesser author would have quit "The Convergence of the Old Mind" at the climax – it's quite good enough – and

left off the last four paragraphs. Niven put them in. They're worth it, they tell a lot about Rick Schumann, and you'll need them a hundred pages later.

Along the way another creature says something surprising and Niven has Schumann tell us *the word sat in my head like a time bomb*. Of course it did. That's almost the end of a story too. Now and then Niven waves at us as we go by. He's a big-hearted man and a good host. Some of us who know him in person have been party guests in his house. He treats his readers likewise.

You can hear, and sometimes you can buy, peculiar nightmares in the Draco Tavern.

Nightmares for guests? Well, a barkeep does ask, "What'll you have?" We want tales and meetings in a tavern. Niven serves them. Fiction writers do interesting things with reality. Nabokov used to say that calling a story true is an insult to truth and to story. *The Chirpsithra could be the greatest liars in the universe, and how would we ever know?* There's Niven waving again.

The time bomb and the nightmares are in "Storm Front". It isn't the only storm, or the only front — or the only contagion, I mention in case you've read *Draco Tavern* already and are here to see how I manage, a time-honored motive for following a review. The book is wonderfully integrated, a feat in itself when you consider the making.

The visitor rolled in like a big lamp, a five-foot-tall sphere glowing yellow-white.... That glow must be riding-lights, I thought... the refugee gestured at the nova in Earth's sky.

The gesture is with a tendril of light.

The Chirp was amused. She asked me, "Did you think the steady weather in your star was an accident?"

[Schumann has more to ask in return.] *But the Chirpsithra officer and her fiery refugee had gone off to another table.*

There's plenty of depth in these stories. That can be done in few words. An artist chooses. Perhaps I may say they're sweet like Irish coffee, richness you drink through, touched with sour and bitter, a jolt to change your viewpoint.

And the opening story is called "The Subject is Closed". He's a comedian.

The Draco Tavern - Larry Niven - Tor - hardcover

King of Crooks and The Vanishing Man

By Pádraig Ó Méalóid

Towards the end of 2005, Titan Books published two volumes of classic comics. The first, *The Spider: King of Crooks*, appeared in October and the second, *The Steel Claw: The Vanishing Man*, in December. They both reprint well-remembered and much loved old stories from classic UK comics, coming from *Lion* and *Valiant* respectively. Despite the popularity of the move amongst comics aficionados, the road to getting them published wasn't as smooth as everyone thought it would be.

Certainly the time seems right to publish reprints of old UK comics stories. DC Comics, through its WildStorm imprint, is publishing a six-part comic called *Albion* in the US market. This features a huge array of old, out-of-print UK characters from the IPC/Fleetway comics stable. The whole thing is plotted by comics genius Alan Moore, and written by his daughter Leah Moore and her husband John Reppion. Sales of *Albion* seem to be strong, proving that perhaps there is interest in these characters. The WildStorm comics and the Titan books carry mutual advertising, one for the other, as the two projects, the republication of old stories on one hand, and the reinvention of the old characters on the other, go hand-in-hand.

It's not just the success of *Albion*, either, that shows a renewed interest in old UK comics and their characters. Christmas 2005 saw two books catering to various ends of UK comics nostalgia. On one hand, there was *The Best of Jackie*, a collection of articles and features from one of the most popular of the UK's teenage girls' magazines of the 1970's. On the other hand, there was Graham Kibble-White's extremely informative and useful *The Ultimate Book of British Comics*, a book packed full of information about UK comics. These will soon be joined by Paul Gravett and Peter Stanbury's *Great British Comics: Celebrating a Century of Ripping Yarns and Wizard Wheezes* (Aurum, October 2006).

One possible explanation for this fascination with the past is the fact that, out of what were, if not hundreds, at least many dozens of titles being published on a weekly or monthly basis in the UK up to the 1970's, only four titles still survive. These are *2000AD*, *The Beano*, *Commando*, and *The Dandy*, with a fifth title, *Judge Dredd Magazine*, making up the five comics

titles currently being produced in the UK. Times change, but perhaps the time is right for what was lost to be found again. Further hopeful pointers can be found in nostalgia-inspired UK comics' small press titles like *Solar Wind*, *Pony School* and *Spaceship Away*, all well worth seeking out.

As I said above, getting these volumes published wasn't as simple as was originally envisaged. Titan Books had lost the rights to do reprints of old *2000AD* strips, as Rebellion were now doing these themselves. Titan was looking for something to fill the gap, so they decided to do reprints of old Fleetway/IPC strips. First, though, Titan had to find the original material. Apparently this wasn't available in an archive at IPC so, around the middle of 2004, they started to put the word out through the Internet that they were looking for collectors of old UK comics who would be prepared to allow them to scan their comics for the forthcoming collections. A lot of the material in *The Spider: King of Crooks* was sourced from the collection of a friend of mine, David McDonald. David was so inspired by the fact that Titan were doing these collections that he went out and got the rights to reprint an old favorite of his, the strip *Doomlord*, which ran in *Eagle*. The quality of the material in both Titan reprints was still not perfect, however, and both books have this imprimatur on the bottom of the indicia page: *Much of the comic strip material used by Titan in this edition is exceedingly rare. As such, we hope that readers appreciate that the quality of the material can be variable.* To make matters more complex, there was another character called The Spider registered in the US and, although there was no problem about calling the book after the title character in the UK, they had to redesign the cover of the book for both markets, which is why

this character's book is simply called *King of Crooks*, at least on the cover, and only identified as being about The Spider inside. All this delayed the production of the book, which was originally meant to be released in June 2005 to coincide with the fortieth anniversary of the character.

All of this background information is all well and good, I imagine you're thinking, but are the books any good? Does the material stand the test of time in any way? Fair enough, I've put it off long enough, so here's the plain unvarnished truth: not really. Having said that small but unpalatable mouthful, there's still a lot to be said for these books, but unfortunately the original stories aren't really that good, and with that flaw all the rest is just trimming. So, here's a brief description of both books, with the good point and bad points.

The Spider: King of Crooks tells the story of the eponymous character, who wears an armored exosuit which allows him to do all sorts of amazing things. He sets out to become the greatest criminal the world has ever known. He puts together his little army of crime in the first few installments of the story, and then attempts various outrageous crimes, only to be thwarted at the last minute by the authorities. All this is accompanied by much in the way of megalomaniacal pronouncements and general mad cackling, and very little character development. The storylines are, frankly, unlikely, even given that we should be suspending our disbelief. Although when Jerry Siegel, co-creator of Superman, takes over the scripting from Ted Cowan for the third story in the book, it all starts to flow a bit more freely and the action becomes slicker and faster-paced. The book comes complete with useful biographical essays about both the character and the creators, and a

chronology of all the appearances of *The Spider* from 1965 to the present, all courtesy of the extremely knowledgeable Steve Holland, author of *The Fleetway Companion*. Some of the page reproductions are quite poor, and, although I understand the desire to show the material in its original state, a little touching up for the sake of clarity wouldn't have gone astray.

The Steel Claw is a lot better for all sorts of reasons. The artwork, by Jesús Blasco, is beautiful. The title character, Louis Crandell, is presented as a well-developed human being, with doubts to go with his powers. Even the reproduction is clearer and more consistent. Crandall, who lost a hand due to a laboratory accident, finds himself involved in another accident, this time involving large doses of electricity. This causes him to become invisible, except for his steel hand. He originally decides to use his newfound ability to commit crimes, but seems to be in a moral dilemma about this as the book goes along, and more and more finds himself helping people rather than doing evil. The storylines, written by SF writer Kenneth Bulmer, are generally better than the other book, perhaps because the character allows more leeway, and because the creative team in general were better. The book also comes with biographical essays by Steve Holland, and a character chronology. It features a cover by Brian Bolland. Minus several points to the editorial team, however, for managing to move around or else completely lose the diacritical mark on artist Jesús Blasco's first name at various places in the book.

Even though *The Steel Claw* is the better book of the two, it still wouldn't stand up in today's comic-book market place. There are several reasons for this, most of which are to do with the way these stories were

presented at the time. In both cases, the stories were told in installments of only two pages a week, meaning that there was virtually no room for any kind of complex storytelling. The writer and artist had to resolve the previous week's cliff-hanger ending, move the story forward, and then set up another cliff-hanger, all in the span of maybe twelve or fifteen panels. Certainly this must have been an ongoing challenge, with full forward action often being an easier solution than any sort of complex storyline. Any character interaction beyond the most basic was simply out of the question. You also have to remember that the target market for these stories was British boys between the ages of eight and twelve, or thereabouts, who were living in a fairly uncritical and uncynical time. They would lap up pretty much whatever was put in front of them.

Despite all of the above, I'm firmly in favor of these books, and many more like them, hopefully, being produced by Titan Books. These stories are valuable pieces of UK comics history, and certainly hold a very treasured place in the memories of many people. All the additional material is useful and informative and, reservations about the quality of the reproductions of some pages aside, the production values on both these books are sky high. Also I can't help thinking that my own critical opinion is going to be of no interest whatsoever to someone who simply wants to re-read the stories he read as a child; and this is absolutely as it should be. It's entirely unfair of me to try to judge these books in terms of what is being written today, where they will necessarily fall short. As well-presented archival material, and as collections of once-loved characters rescued from undeserved obscurity, these books are treasures, and it is as such that I'll be keeping them, and hopefully adding

to them, if Titan finds it in their hearts to continue with the series of IPC reprints.

[I note in passing that no self-respecting teenage girl I knew would be seen dead reading *Jackie*. The sorts of magazines I bought at that age were Cosmo-for-teens publications with names like *Just Seventeen* (which appears to be still going!). The trick was never to buy a magazine that appeared to be aimed at girls younger than you, which is why they tended to have ages in their titles. *Jackie* was what you read when you were young enough to have crushes on David Cassidy and Donny Osmond rather than on David Bowie and Bryan Ferry. – Cheryl]

King of Crooks – Jerry Siegel and others – Titan Books – A4 hardcover graphic novel

The Steel Claw – Ken Bulmer and others – Titan Books – A4 hardcover graphic novel

The Best of Jackie – various authors – Prion Books – hardcover

The Ultimate Book of British Comics – Graham Kibble-White – Allison & Busby – hardcover

Bizarro Returns!

By Stuart Carter

Ever wondered what the world of superhero comics might have been like if, instead of adjectivized guys like 'Smilin' Stan Lee, 'Giant' Jack Kirby and 'Stupendous' Steve Ditko, they had been produced by, say, 'Calamitous' Kyle Baker, 'Prodigious' Paul Grist or 'Geronimo' James Kochalka?

And instead of battling super-duper mega perils and saving the world every third Tuesday, what if superheroes were a bit more normal, or at least a bit less

untouchably 'super'? Well, then we might be in the bizarre world of, er, *Bizarro World*, a comics anthology in which the pantheon of the DC Universe (that's the likes of Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, Flash — and not forgetting the Red Bee!) are gingerly handed over to "the greatest alternative cartoonists of our time" for a bit of that crazy-ass "indie" treatment.

"Indie treatment?" you say, "indie treatment?! What's indie?" Well, it's folks who don't work for Marvel or DC, the two big noises in the English-speaking comics world, and probably don't write superhero comics, because — certainly in the English-speaking world — most of the people who make a living writing comics write superhero comics. But this isn't true in the rest of the world, where the outrageous conspiracy of geeks, nerds and smelly comic shop guys to shoehorn comics into a single, slightly silly, genre, was defeated by an alliance of science fiction writers, horror writers, romance writers, nurse writers and, hell, every-other-genre writers. There remains a heroic underground of non-superhero comic writers in the English-speaking world, but it is a small and mostly badly-paid one (if it is paid at all).

The flame of indie comics is mostly kept alive by the likes of *Maus*, *Palestine* and *Persepolis* — all fine works, and recognised as 'worthy' even by those who think the name for a book with pictures in is an 'atlas' — and they're only the ones who the serious press have decided to recognize. Lots of perfectly sane and really quite talented grown-ups write comic books about anything you care to mention (anything except superheroes), exactly the same as writers do in the mundane world, where books don't have pictures in unless

they're kept in the glove compartment of your car.

In some kind of messed up exception-that-proves-the-rule scenario, however, *Bizarro World* sees all of these fine and decent folks throw their indie principles out the window and go to work for The Man at DC Comics (except Kyle Baker — who 'sold out' already and wrote a whole DC book, the gloriously Looney Tunes-like *Plastic Man*, since cancelled for making everyone else look bad).

"So it's just a 21st century update of Gissing's *New Grub Street*," I hear you wail, "they all surrender in the end!" But, you know, whilst a certain residual amount of knowledge about the DC pantheon is presupposed, this is mostly a good-natured subversion of those same 'sacred' characters by some people who do subversion and humor particularly well.

My own favorites amongst the 35 very fine strips offered here include Eric Drysdale and Tim Lane's "The Break", a so-ironic-it's-almost-beyond-irony look at a day off in the life of the Justice League of America, in which Green Lantern concludes, "You know, we should all just 'hang out' more". There's Dupuy Berberian's very French "Monsieur Batman", who puts so-called "millionaire socialite Bruce Wayne" to utterly proper shame. There's some classic Kyle Baker (with Elizabeth Glass) in "Personal Shopper", in which Batman's faithful old retainer, Alfred, tries to order a new Batmobile in secret. "Super-Dumped", by Johnny Ryan and Dave Cooper, I liked mostly because Dave's versions of Wonder Woman and Supergirl are just sooo cute — you can't help but love the whole story.

Let's just stop there because, to be honest, I could pretty much pick out every story in this anthology for one reason or another.

This is such a quirky, fun-loving and utterly unpredictable book. It is a book that, as well as hilariously satirizing so many aspects of conventional superhero comics, also gives a fleeting glimpse into the great swarm of talented storytellers clinging by their bloody ink-stained fingernails to the under-exploited underbelly of the modern comics scene; a scene whose super-powered mainstays are becoming increasingly moribund and insular despite all the efforts of the industry giants.

Congratulations should go to DC for producing this book and for giving all these writers and artists a chance to be seen. Shame on you if you consider yourself a comics fan and you don't buy this, because that will be yet another tiny triumph for the outrageous conspiracy of geeks, nerds and smelly comic shop guys over the forces of creativity and talent, and another affirmation for the 'serious literature' beard-strokers that comics are not worthy of anyone's consideration.

[Footnote: Bizarro was a copy of Superman made by Lex Luthor using a duplicator ray (obviously!). However, he turned out to be somewhat 'damaged', to say the least, and ended up just hanging around the DC Universe like some kind of super-powered 1960's acid casualty, eventually going to live on a cube-shaped duplicate of Earth (called Htrae) with a lot of other bizarro duplicates of Superman's friends. Bizarro does pop up in this anthology, but for the most part the title simply refers to the fact that the world of indie comics is an imperfect one, much like our own.]

Bizarro World - various authors - DC Comics - graphic novel

All the World's a Jungle Gym

By Peter Wong

Unless one was fortunate enough to see Luc Besson's *Yamakasi – The Modern Day Samurais*, or the documentary *Jump London*, probably the closest exposure an American fan could have got to viewing parkour in action would be an issue of the Warren Ellis-scripted comic *Global Frequency*. Now American mass audiences can see this amazing philosophy/urban sport in practice courtesy of the new French action import, *District B13*.

The year is 2010. Spiraling crime rates in certain Paris districts spur the French government to literally wall those troubled districts off from the less crime-prone areas of town. Behind one such wall is District B13. Leito is a vigilante living in the walled-in district. He incurs the wrath of Taha, the local drug kingpin, when he steals the narcotics peddler's million euro drug shipment and destroys it. A gang of Taha's enforcers, led by chief thug K2, fail to capture him thanks to the vigilante's amazing display of parkour skills.

Taha retaliates by having Leito's sister, Lola, kidnapped and held hostage. The parkour warrior manages to rescue his sister and take the drug kingpin hostage in turn. But Leito's dramatic escape ultimately fails, and he winds up rotting in jail. Lola becomes Taha's junkie plaything.

Flash forward six months. Undercover cop Damien uses his martial arts skills to bust an illegal casino operation. Rather than rewarding the cop with down time, his superior gives him rush orders to undertake a time-sensitive operation for the Ministry of Defense. An experimental

neutron bomb has fallen into Taha's hands, and the bomb's 24-hour timer has accidentally been engaged. Unless Damien can defuse the explosive device in time, its detonation will kill 2 million Parisians, beginning with the inhabitants of District B13.

The big stumbling block is the cop's unfamiliarity with both District B13 and the layout of Taha's fortress. Fortunately, the imprisoned Leito knows both these things. The cop wants the justifiably distrustful B13 resident to cooperate. The concerned brother just wants to rescue his sister and exact payback against Taha. But even as both men realize cooperation is mutually beneficial, some unwanted surprises complicate completion of their missions.

Despite its appearance on the art house circuit, *District B13's* target audience is the action film crowd. It is the action scenes, particularly the parkour sequences, that provide the real heart of the film.

What is parkour? A flippant way of describing this physical art would be "something that turns the human body into a graceful all-terrain vehicle." The simple explanation begins with the source of the term. Parkour comes from "parcours," the French word for course. Indeed, it was a group of Frenchmen who linked together various ways of moving the human body into what eventually became parkour. To one skilled in this sport, the sheer walls, graveled rooftops, and moving cars of a modern city do not become obstacles to the body's movement. An ordinary person would see a transom as a very tiny window. But to a master of this urban gymnastic art, that window becomes a tiny exit that can be utilized at a moment's notice. If parkour sounds slightly like the sports equivalent of

improvisational theater, that's because both art forms treasure the reliance on a practitioner's natural instincts, free movement through space, and individual expression. The physical urban art, though, also emphasizes efficiency and speed.

District B13 eschews the philosophical aspects of parkour in favor of using the sport to pump the viewer's adrenaline. What keeps its jaw-dropping urban leaping and bounding sequences credible is the presence of David Belle, who plays Leito. Belle happens to be one of the creators of parkour.

The sight of Belle doing tic tacs or gap jumps doesn't provide the only visual excitement in the film. There are also martial arts sequences, shootouts, and car chases. Pierre Morel, *District B13's* director, admitted that his film was greatly influenced by Jackie Chan's action/comedy films. While Chan's Hong Kong action films provide a good template for overseas directors, the action scenes in the French film don't quite measure up to some of Chan's best action sequences. There is no insanely excessive martial arts battle to rival the climactic shopping mall struggle in *Police Story*. Instead, the casino shootout and hand-to-hand fight have the remembrance of lost punch-outs past about them.

These thoughts should not be taken as a call for requiring a stunt person to risk life or limb to thrill an audience. Knowing that one stunt in *Armor of God* led to Chan suffering a skull fracture killed the escapism value of that particular film.

District B13's partial escapism killer is its nearly non-existent near-future speculation. The film is unwisely set in the specific year of 2010 instead of some vague future "a few minutes from now."

Despite the presence of the wall, societal attitudes and mores have not significantly changed. B13 may have more junkies and graffiti-laden buildings, but that's it. Nor has this near-future French society seen any technological advancement, even with the prototype neutron bomb.

This lack of speculation ignores the unfortunate current relevance of the film's central concept. A physical barrier such as a wall shields a society from having to deal with the causes behind a social problem. For example, the proposed barrier between the U.S. and Mexico doesn't address the economic or political desperation that forces Central Americans to make the risky trip to El Norte.

As a result, many of *District B13's* political stances feel trite. How revolutionary is the film's insight that a tremendous gap exists between believing in the law and delivering on the promise of the law? There is one ironic point that doesn't receive due consideration. Despite Leito's impressive skills in freely moving along walls and building exteriors, they will never be great enough to overcome the social barrier of living in a high crime area.

In character treatment, the French film remains a boy's adventure movie rather than a female empowerment film. Female criminals appear non-existent inside the walled district. In fact, the sole female character in *District B13* is Leito's sister. Though she's assertive enough to exact payback against a thug who pinches her behind, Lola spends much of the film being held hostage by Taha.

Sly bits of humor keep *District B13* entertaining instead of pretentious. K2 and his goons look for Leito's apartment, yet Leito has written his name across his apartment's front door. Taha reacts to the sight of the neutron bomb's active

countdown timer by deciding to look for a buyer before the bomb goes off.

By all rights, *District B13* should be thrilling typical American multiplex audiences. Even its more familiar action sequences compare well with those in Hollywood films. A bopping hip-hop soundtrack keeps audiences cued for the film's next fight. Multiplexes aren't automatically hostile to films with foreign dialogue and English subtitles, as they've screened *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *Ong Bak – Muay Thai Warrior*.

Did distributor Magnolia Pictures not have access to the multiplex markets? Or did it fear the tremendously idiotic unpopularity of French people and French culture would doom the film's commercial chances with mainstream America? Whatever the reason for *District B13's* consignment to the art house theatres, open-minded American action film fans need to check out the film for a taste of parkour's elan. If such fans are then inspired to learn more about free running, they should check out www.urbanfreeflow.com.

District B13 - Pierre Morel - Magnolia Pictures
- theatrical release

The Coming of the Martians

By Cheryl Morgan

Edge is a Canadian small press whose books I keep meaning to review and never quite got round to. Finally I have found a space in the schedule for the debut novel of Rebecca K. Rowe. *Forbidden Cargo* appears on the surface to be cyberpunk, but actually it is yet another twist on the

Frankenstein theme. Let me explain what I mean.

We begin on Mars, where mankind and the planet are getting to know each other. On the one hand, terraforming is making the red planet more habitable. On the other, genetic engineering is being used to develop humans more suited to their new environment. The first generation of Imagofas is entering adulthood and the kids are looking forward to doing some serious work.

Unfortunately, genetic engineering of humans is illegal. The Interplanetary Council banned it years ago. Reactionary Councilors such as Joli Xerkler are afraid that messing with human evolution will create a race of supermen who will destroy or enslave ordinary humans. On learning that the Order, a powerful scientific research organization, is developing the Imagofas, Xerkler arranges to have one kidnapped and brought to Earth for a show trial.

That's the set-up, and Rowe does a good job of making things nicely complicated. Other players enter the game. Commercial organizations such as Domus Aqua want the Imagofas for the scientific secrets behind the development. Angel, the crime lord hired by Xerkler to make the snatch, bags two Imagofas girls, hoping to sell one of them. And the Order, desperate not to be exposed, tries to destroy Angel's ship, resulting in an explosion at the spaceport, and both Imagofas separately ending up loose on Earth with no friends and running for their lives. The Cadet, a "gamer" (effectively a professional gladiator) ends up being hired by both Xerkler and Domus Aqua to find the Imagofas, both of them thinking only one is to be had. This would have been the

deal of a lifetime if he hadn't fallen in love with one of the beautiful fugitives.

There's more too. For example, the religious cult based around prophecies of a new race of humans, or the political organization dedicated to freeing cyberspace from commercial control. Most interestingly, Joli Xerkler's husband, Creid, is a former Order chief scientist. He knows all about the Imagofas, but has been afraid to tell his bigoted wife. What's more, he has an even more explosive project of his own. The personal complications for Joli, being forced to choose between her husband and a political career based on extreme speciesism, makes for a potentially powerful novel.

Unfortunately the book is a first novel, and Rowe isn't quite up to carrying off the power of her ideas. There are a lot of sections where she tells you what characters are thinking and feeling. Some of the dialog feels stilted. And there are some odd-looking sentences. The book could have done with a good copy editor. We all lose our grip on grammar occasionally and write things that just don't parse. I have Anne to put me right when that happens. It looks like Rowe didn't have anyone.

This is a real shame. The complexity of the plot shows that Rowe has a lot of promise as a novelist. She has also managed to wrap everything up without a cataclysmic final shoot-out, which I rather like. If her next book has the same quality of the plot and an improvement in the writing she'll be on her way to a successful career.

Forbidden Cargo - Rebecca Rowe - Edge - trade paperback

Oceans of Sadness

By Cheryl Morgan

While most of the books reviewed in *Emerald City* these days are supplied to us by publishers, there are still the odd few that I buy. Subterranean, for example, produce high quality, limited edition collectables. It isn't surprising that they don't send review copies to the likes of me. But one of their latest books is by William Browning Spencer, an author whose previous works I very much enjoyed. So I bought a copy, and I'm glad I did, even if it isn't very comfortable reading at times.

The book is a collection titled *The Ocean and All Its Devices*, after the opening story which very much sets the scene for what follows. If you are looking for something more like *Resume with Monsters* than I'm afraid you have come to the wrong book. You won't find any Great Old Ones lurking behind the photocopiers here. What you will find instead is sadness, lots of it.

The title story is about a gloomy family with a sickly daughter who visit the same run-down seaside town at the end of the season every year. The hotel owner can't understand why they come, unless they have some sort of mysterious assignation with the ocean. This is followed by "The Oddskeeper's Daughter", in which a young couple discover that their good fortune cannot last, and by "The Death of the Novel", in which a college professor comes to regret a casual affair with a pretty student.

And so it goes on. The stories are beautifully crafted, but you get the impression that life is cruel and fickle, and that it will catch up with us in the end. "Your Faithful Servant" speaks of one

such end, in which Masters and Butlers are finally united in death. "The Foster Child" tells of a young girl who suffered brain damage when she almost drowned and can now communicate only by reciting poetry. She apparently knows all of the classics by heart, but has never read any of them.

Hope, however, is not entirely absent. In "The Halfway House at the Heart of Darkness" an addict cures herself by finding pleasure in helping others. In "The Lights of Armageddon" the characters almost save the world. Almost. And then, finally, we have "The Essayist in the Wilderness", a story that is both silly and horrific at the same time, a combination that Spencer manages so well.

The hero is a retired literature professor who has bought a house in the country where he plans to write his masterpiece. After much indecision he decides to work on essays about nature, despite the fact that, as his wife points out, he has scarcely gone outside all his life, save to drive from home to work or shops, and can barely name three types of tree. He becomes fascinated with a small colony of creatures that he takes to be crayfish, but which anyone with the slightest knowledge of such creatures will soon identify as something much more sinister. They are, of course, aliens bent on taking over our world, and we get to watch while our hero slowly finds this out for himself. It is classic Spencer, and well worth the wait.

I don't know if whoever put together this collection (Spencer or his editor at Subterranean) deliberately organized the stories to be in decreasing order of despair, but if they did so then they made a pretty good job of it. So not only do you get to read some really good, if rather depressing, tales, you come out feeling

good at the end. And you feel this way despite the fact that in the final story mankind is clearly doomed. We are, it seems, ridiculous creatures, and perhaps being doomed is an entirely appropriate fate.

The Ocean and All Its Devices - William Browning Spencer - Subterranean - hardcover

Aliens in a Man's World

By Cheryl Morgan

As regular readers will know, it takes a lot to get me to review an anthology these days. However, *Daughters of Earth*, edited by Justine Larbalestier, is not your average anthology. It is more of a collection of academic essays built around an anthology. The stories are all examples of feminist science fiction. They date from 1927 to 2002, and each one is accompanied by an essay by a feminist academic that reflects on the themes addressed by the story, and attempts to put it in context.

Despite my interest in the subject, I had only read two of the stories before: "The Heat Death of the Universe" by Pamela Zoline, and "What I Didn't See" by Karen Joy Fowler. The rest, as you might expect from an anthology, is a mixed bag. Clare Winger Harris's "The Fate of the Poseidonia", dating from 1927, reminds us that it wasn't only H.P. Lovecraft who wrote horribly stilted prose in the early years of the 20th Century. Thankfully by 1931 we have Leslie F. Stone whose "The Conquest of Gola" is much more readable, and actually very subtle. Eventually you work out that she's talking about an attempt by Earth to conquer Venus, but as the story is related by one of the alien (and

matriarchal) Venusians it takes a while before everything clicks. By 1955 we have "Created He Them" by Alice Eleanor Jones, which is good enough to stand proud today's much more competitive SF market. It is about a traditional (1950's) American couple who hate each other but are bound together because, in a post-nuclear war world, they are amongst the few people lucky enough to be able to breed healthy children.

Other stories include works by Kate Wilhelm, James Tiptree Jr. and Gwyneth Jones, but the two I was really impressed by were "Rachel in Love" by Pat Murphy and "The Evening and the Morning and the Night" by Octavia Butler. The former is a tale of a young girl whose father, after she died in a car crash, implanted her recorded mind into that of a young chimp. When the father dies, Rachel has to deal with the outside world herself, and of course all they can see is her chimp body. Butler's story is about people who suffer from a rare disease that, when it takes hold, makes them abnormally violent and destructive. These two, and Fowler's now hugely famous story, are remarkably intelligent and thought-provoking pieces that are worth the price of the book all by themselves.

As with the fiction, the academic essays are varied in quality and level of interest. Some rescue an otherwise poor story. Jane Donaweth clearly knows her pulp SF history well, and is good at highlighting the difficulties of studying even such a recent era. I was initially impressed by Harris' use of television long before it was generally available to the public. But Donawerth points out that Hugo Gernsback was an expert on such technology and, because he was such a proactive editor, we can't be sure whether

Harris came up with the idea herself or was asked to include it by Gernsback.

Some of the essays about the earlier stories touch on the controversy surrounding "Housewife Heroine" SF. This is particularly the case in Lisa Yasek's comments on the Alice Eleanor Jones story. This type of fiction, which features women as central characters but has them behaving as early 20th Century women were expected to behave, has been getting shot at from all sides. When it was originally published, male SF fans objected to their reading being polluted by all this emotional, domestic nonsense. Later, during the first flowering of feminist SF in the 1960's and 70's, it was attacked for not being radical enough. Yasek and other feminist academics have since pointed out that a) the stories would never have been published had they not conformed to expected social norms, and b) that they are often much more subtle and subversive than they might look.

Some of the stories don't have a lot of feminist content, and the academics have to stretch their subject matter somewhat to make a reasonable-sized essay. Wendy Pearson, in her discussion of the Tiptree story, spends a lot of time engaging with Adam Roberts' analysis of the work as a Postcolonial fable. Pearson champions the recognition of its feminist content. The trouble is that the reading of the story as Postcolonial is screamingly obvious, whereas the feminist aspects that Pearson wants to foreground are much more subtle. As a consequence Pearson comes over as unnecessarily aggressive towards Roberts.

Veronica Hollinger has, I think, made an unwise choice of story to tackle. I can see why she did it. It is hard to imagine an anthology of feminist SF that doesn't

contain a story by Gwyneth Jones. But Jones hasn't written a lot of short fiction. The example chosen, "Balinese Dancer", seems to have been created as a taster to get publishers interested in *Life* (an objective that it presumably failed to achieve, as *Life* wasn't published until years later when Timmi Duchamp founded Aqueduct Press specifically to publish feminist SF). The story does actually work well as a stand-alone (Gardner Dozois bought it for *Asimov's*), but to anyone who has read *Life*, Hollinger's analysis of "Balinese Dancer" is inevitably thin. Indeed, she has to include a lot of material about the Aleutian Trilogy as well to bulk out the essay, making it more of a piece about Jones than one about the story. Rather than trying to discuss "Balinese Dancer" as a story in its own right, Hollinger might have done better to expand on the themes of *Life* and concentrate on that book. But then maybe she wrote the article before *Life* was published. I don't know.

Finally we get "What I Didn't See". Timmi Duchamp's analysis of that story has further increased my admiration for its cleverness (and you do have to work hard to understand just how good it is). She does a good job of making a case for it being SF, which centers around the fact that you can't actually understand it properly (or at least as Fowler wrote it) without knowing the context of feminist SF from which it came. That could, of course, be a flaw in the story, but it is worth making the effort. What I want to do now is watch Peter Jackson's *King Kong*, and then read a Fowler analysis of the film. I have no idea if she has written one, but you know how hard it is to get me to want to watch a movie, which should tell you something about how fascinating "What I Didn't See" is.

Daughters of Eath: Feminist Science Fiction in the Twentieth Century – Justine Larbalestier (ed.) – Wesleyan University Press – trade paperback

Fantasy on the Greens

By Farah Mendlesohn

If you've heard me talk about Andrew Greig it will have been in terms of "triangulation". He's an old school friend of Iain M. Banks and Ken MacLeod. That's important mostly because it was MacLeod who introduced me to Andrew Greig's work with his third novel, *When They Lay Bare*, and I've been a bit of a fan ever since.

Greig's work hovers on the borderlands of fantasy, but as it is very much approaching fantasy from "the mainstream" I would be reluctant to describe it as "slipstream". Greig's work lacks the artifice of a Mitchell or a Winterson. Instead, his work is lyrical, a little elegiac – he says himself in *Preferred Lies* that his themes are love, sex and death (not necessarily in that order) – and dreamy. *Electric Brae* was about mountain climbing and mountain climbers (he has written two non-fiction books about mountain climbing as well). *When they Lay Bare* is a family saga of misdirected love structured around willow pattern plates. *That Summer* was a love story of the Second World War, eventually broadcast as a radio play on Radio 4; and there are others. If I were to look for a writer to compare to Greig, and he's a writer for whom that feels inappropriate, it would be as a milder M. John Harrison, with all Harrison's precision and intensity, but taking the world more gently, waiting for it to come to him.

Preferred Lies, Greig's newest book, is non-fiction. It's his memoir of re-exploring golf after an illness so severe that he nearly died. I'm not a golfer. I don't think I've ever watched more than a few minutes of the game on television, but the book captivated me. As Greig described the golf courses of Scotland – rough, egalitarian, eccentric – I realized that this was not the golf of England, a much more middle class and manicured game by far. The golf that Greig grew up with was the equivalent of street football, what you did after work or after school on grounds that had sometimes four hundred years of history, and which frequently belonged to the local community. Several of the courses on which he plays are maintained by volunteers. Details of the development of the game, from feathered balls, to *gutta percha* to the modern ball; talk of willow and hickory shafts; of aluminum hollow irons; these all drop effortlessly into the conversation for the reader to pick up or not. The joy of the book is not in the detail, but in the pleasure which Greig takes in the details. This is true also when Greig talks of the people with whom he played and plays.

In *Preferred Lies* Greig takes us into a world where a compliment is to be shrugged off or disparaged, where the joy of the game is genuinely in the playing. We learn of sibling rivalries on the green, of different ways of playing and thinking about the game. We meet Zen golf, and golf as a challenge to the weather to do its worst. Golf becomes a metaphor for love, and it seems appropriate because this is such a loving book. *Preferred Lies* is not a book about golf, nor is it a journey through a golfing landscape. Rather it is a life told *with* golf, inscribing a relationship to both land and people.

Preferred Lies: A Journey to the Heart of Scottish Golf - Andrew Greig - Weidenfeld and Nicholson - hardcover

Out of Synch

By Cheryl Morgan

As far as I can see there's only one book being published in August that I have previously reviewed due to publication elsewhere. Ah, but what a book. After all the hard work that Jeff and Ann have been doing on promotion, *Shriek: An Afterword*, will finally be available in US stores. The book is due out the weekend of FinnCon, and will be accompanied by screenings of *Shriek: The Movie* at various venues around the world. More information can be found on the official movie blog: <http://shriekthemovie.blogspot.com/>.

No one I know works harder to promote his books than Jeff VanderMeer. This could easily get very tiresome, but everything that Jeff does is creative and fun. Rather than taking a Puritan line and turning my nose up at any promotional activities, I rather wish that the vanity press crowd would try to learn from Jeff's success. If I'm going to be bombarded with requests for reviews I would much rather that they be entertaining than embarrassing or offensive.

Of course knowing my usual attitude to movies, I'll probably hate Jeff's as well, but at least I enjoyed all of the hoo-ha that surrounded the making of it. And regardless of the promotional stuff, I still think the book is wonderful.

Miscellany

By Cheryl Morgan

Hugo Reminder

The deadline for Hugo voting is Midnight, Pacific Daylight Time, 31st July 2006. You don't have many days left. The online ballot can be found here: <http://www.laconiv.org/2006/hugos/ballot.htm>. You need a supporting or attending membership of L.A. Con IV in order to vote.

As usual I am hoping that as many people as possible vote. This is where I remind you that typically only around 20% of the people who are eligible to vote bother to participate. This is embarrassing. If the turnout for elections was that low people would be talking about a major loss of faith in the system. If you have a vote, please use it.

I note also that I'm up for an award again, as is *Emerald City*. I don't expect to win. Indeed, I very much hope that I don't. You only have to look at the competition. Dave Langford is a much better writer than I am, and *Locus* is a much better magazine than *Emerald City*. There would, I think, be a considerable upset if they didn't win.

I know people get sentimental about the Hugos. There is a lot of voting based on the idea that it someone's turn to win. But honestly, if you are voting on those lines the nominee that is most deserving is the *New York Review of Science Fiction*. I've been told I didn't deserve to win my Hugo so often now that I've started to believe it myself. Let's not go through all that nonsense again, huh? The rockets are supposed to go to the nominees that are the best. Let's keep it that way.

Locus Poll Thank You

Kevin has our copy of the July *Locus*, which contains the detailed breakdown of the *Locus* Poll results. I understand that *Emerald City* came 7th in Best Magazine, up from 8th last year. Wow! Thank you everyone who voted for us.

Campbell and Sturgeon

The John W. Campbell Memorial Award (a judged award for US-published novels) went to *Mindscan* by Robert J. Sawyer. While Paolo Bacigalupi's "The Calorie Man" is winner of the Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award for short fiction (I believe judged by the same people). I note in passing that the Sawyer book managed to beat three Hugo nominees (*Accelerando*, *Learning the World*, and *Spin*).

Aurora Winners

The Prix Aurora results were announced this month. The winner of the Best English Language Novel category was *Cagebird* by Karin Lowachee. Beaten nominees included Robert Sawyer's Campbell-winning *Mindscan* and Robert Charles Wilson's Hugo-nominated *Spin*. The Auroras are voted on by Canadian fans. A full list of the results can be found here: <http://www.sentex.net/~dmullin/aurora/>.

Editorial Matters

By Cheryl Morgan

Next issue could be a little challenging. In theory it should go online while I am in

Helsinki for Finncon. In practice it will probably do so shortly thereafter in the day or two I am in London before rushing off to Worldcon. Or it might have to wait until I get to LA and have a hotel room with a good Internet connection. All I can say is, watch the blog.

Topping my list of books to read for next month is *Matriarch*, the new Wess'har novel from Karen Traviss. Kevin has my copy of the new Glenda Larke. I'm hoping that novels from Paul Park and Jay Lake will turn up somewhere. And I have a biography of James Tiptree Jr.

Best wishes,

Cheryl

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For information about writing for, advertising with, or otherwise working with *Emerald City*, please contact Cheryl Morgan:

Email: cheryl@emcit.com

Skype: [cherylmorgan](#)