



The Drink Tank 252
The Hugo Award for Best Novel
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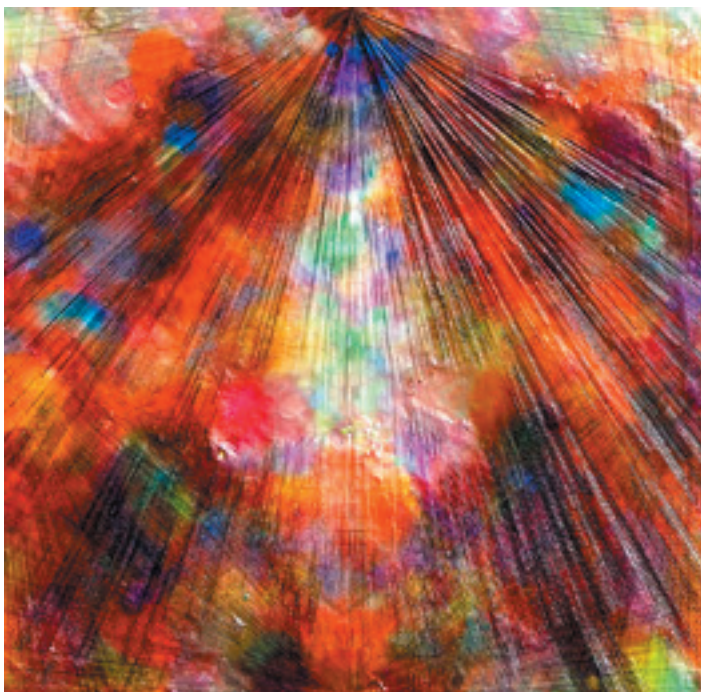
Rob Shields (<http://robshields.deviantart.com/>)

This is an issue that James thought of us doing and I have to say that I thought it was a great idea largely because I had such a good time with the Clarkes issue. The Hugo for Best Novel is what I've always called The Main Event. It's the one that people care about, though I always tend to look at Best Fanzine as the one I always hold closest to my heart. The Best Novel nominees tend to be where the biggest arguments happen, possibly because Novels are the ones that require the biggest donation of your time to experience. There's nothing worse than spending hours and hours reading a novel and then have it turn out to be pure crap. The flip-side is pretty awesome, when by just giving a bit of your time, you get an amazing story that moves you and brings you such amazing enjoyment.

To me, this is a year where the list is most varied since I started writing about the Hugos. There's some great SF, there's subtle fantasy, there's a Steampunk novel, some wonderful adventure. Like I said, a little bit of everything. And still, even with all of that, I think it's a two hour race between the two most lauded genre novels of the year: The City & The City and The Windup Girl.

It's easy to see why these two made their way to the top. Paolo is probably the most impressive prose-ist you'll find out there. China Mieville is a Thought Machine. He crafts amazing settings and concepts. To me, he's the biggest thinker we've got at the moment.

Which one will take home the rocket? I dunno. Looking at the other awards, it could go either way. All I know is, I'll be happy whichever takes it.



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The Best Novel Winners: The Good, The Bad & The Ugly **by Chris Garcia**

I hate to admit it, but I've not read all the winners of the Best Novel Hugo. I've tried and failed several times. There's just so many of them and so many of them that just hurt to read.

So, I figured I'd look at the ones I've managed to read and sort them into neat little piles- The Good winners, the Bad winners and the ones whose wins were just plain Ugly for reason or another.

1953: The Good – Alfred Bester's The Demolished Man

Probably the only Cyberpunk novel I've ever really loved. *What?* I hear you cry as I say that. It's straight-up Cyberpunk a full 30 years before Gibson and co.. Class warfare, neat techoweapons, a criminal underground and super-powerful corporate structures. Hell, there's even a bodyguard in leather, what more do you need to call it Cyberpunk? It's also a damn good, strangely constructed novel that would be criticized today as being too gimmicky (a condemnation I've heard from folks about *House of Leaves*, for example).

The *Demolished Man* is a very good novel and one of the most significant of the 1950s: a decade I have never felt too comfortably reading from due to the fact that everything I pick up to read seems to slowly melt away into a gummy paste of awful prose.

1961: The Good – Walter Miller's a Canticle for Leibowitz

This is a great novel. A really great novel. One of the most interesting, layered, approachable novels I've ever read. It's endlessly entertaining, and while reading (well, listening to) *Anthem*, I could see the lines of descendance holding it up. Miller's work has a ton of layer of both story and character, but overall, it's got a

sort of heart. I love the way he used artifacts and the reoccurring cycles to reinforce one another. It was just one of those great novels that keep you up reading after your bedtime.

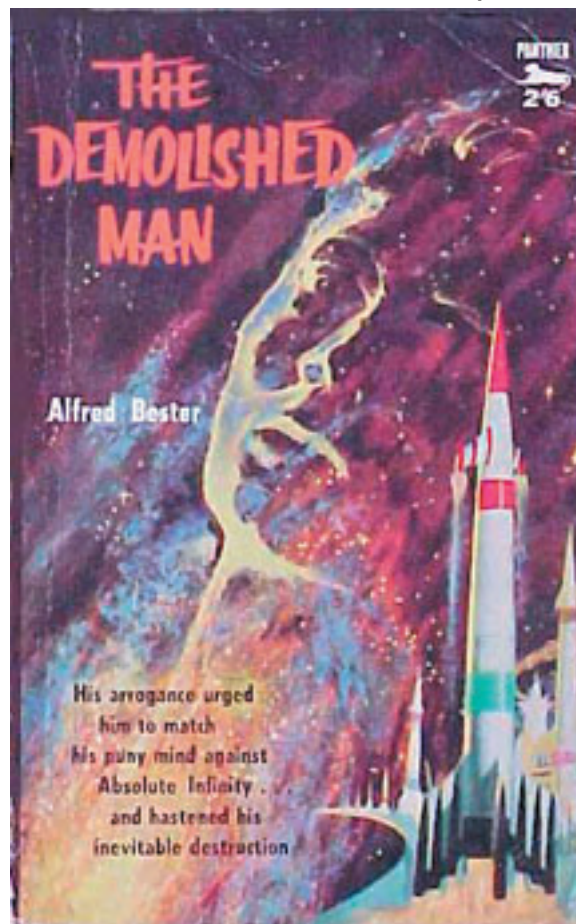
This almost got *The Ugly*, though. *Deathworld* and *Venus Plus-X* were both on the ballot that year and those are two novels as good or better than anything else that ever won this award. *Canticle* is a masterpiece, which is the only reason it wasn't branded. As such. The other two novels nominated, *Rogue Moon* and *The High Crusade* I've never managed to read.

1962: The Good – Heinlein's Stranger in a Strange Land

Yes, Heinlein gets a good for the only novel of his I've ever managed to finish in one try. It's a story which has roots all over the place and that spins in on the reader. Who would have thought that the greatest hard-liner in the history of SF would write the novel that pretty much kick-started the hippies?

The interesting thing is that Valentine Michael Smith is so utterly uninteresting. He's Jesus, I get it, and he's good and he sees what's what for what it is, but mostly, he's just there doin' stuff. Fun stuff, but stuff nonetheless.

Oddly, I've not read any of the other work that was nominated that year.



1963: The Good - The Man in the High Castle by Phillip K. Dick

This is one of the most impressive Alternate History works ever written, and I only read it recently. The odd fact that you can see the threads that it threw off in all directions helps. Dick was an amazing writer, and he was obviously well-appreciated in his day, but he failed in a few modes.

Man in the High Castle wins or loses for each individual reader based on how they get along with the I-Ching and what they make of the world that Dick postulates. I love the way he treats geography as the definition of freedom. He also presents one of the truly great novels within a

novel: *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy*. I know there are at least two fan-written versions of that book, though I've only managed to read one of them.

Of the rest of the nominees, I can't say much. H. Beam Piper's *Little Fuzzy* was a fun read, and I'm very intrigued by the fact that John Scalzi is apparently re-working the series to write another novel in the line. That's a good one!

1964: The Ugly- Here Gather the Stars by Clifford Simak

This is not a bad novel, but it's a terrible decision. *Witch World* was a far better novel, and one that has gone on to influence a generation of readers as Andre Norton was, in many ways, a gateway drug to the heroin that is science fiction and fantasy. *Dune World*, the serialized original version of Frank Herbert's *Dune*, was outstanding and a masterpiece. It was without question the most interesting thing that saw publication in the magazines of the 1960s.

But the real reason for the Ugly: *Cat's Cradle*. Without question the most important novel of the 1960s when it came to mainstream readership. Vonnegut introduced millions to science fiction, and it was even powerful enough a study into the anthropological and sociological world of the characters that it helped Vonnegut earn his PhD from University of Chicago. *Cat's Cradle* didn't win because fans of the day were too damned closed-minded to see what Vonnegut had done with the novel. It was a masterpiece, plain and simple, and because of Kurt's unhappy relationship with fandom, they passed him over. *Cat's Cradle* has remained a hugely popular, highly influential and mostly awesome novel for more than 40 years, years and years after most have forgotten there ever was a Cliff Simak.

1967: The Bad & The Ugly – The Moon is a Harsh Mistress by Heinlein

I hated Heinlein's second most well-known novel for about ½ of it, though I kinda enjoyed the first ½. The problem is simple: Heinlein's prose left me cold, but the aspects of the story like *HOLMES IV* and Mike are great, the best computer that I've read when it comes to being self-aware. Much of the story seems to tread on that line of being shocking and making social commentary of a fashion. Ultimately, it's only OK for the start and

then it goes downhill fast and hard. I mean really fast and really hard.

The Ugly here is the nominee *Flowers for Algernon*. No question that it's one of the most impressive books in the history of SF, though I could see the folks who voted it to win the Hugo for Best Short Story not wanting to give it another one. As someone who came to *Flowers* first as a Novel, I can say that it's an amazing book, though the short story version is probably stronger. Still, it's the kind of thing that you want to see win.

Same could be said for *Babel-17* by Samuel Delaney. He's a genius, sometimes to the point where none of his readers can keep up with him! I liked *Babel-17* when I read it back in the day (maybe ten years ago) and I certainly enjoyed it much better than *Moon*.

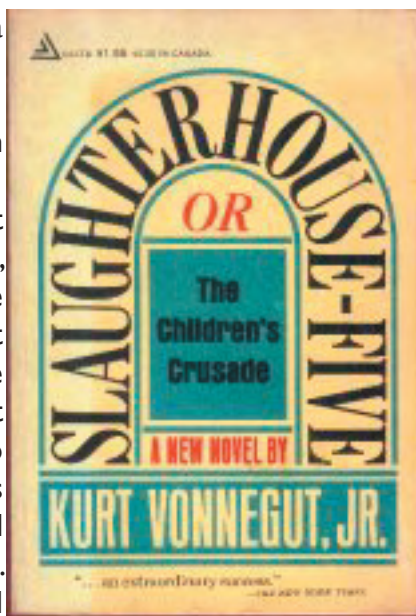
1970: The Good & The Ugly – The Left Hand of Darkness by Ursula K. LeGuin

Michael Chabon has said that LeGuin is the finest voice in all of American literature. I'm not sure I'd go that far, but she's a legend and a fine writer and *The Left Hand of Darkness* is an amazing novel. I'd say that it stands up with *Lathe of Heaven* as her finest work.

But...

Again, it should not have won, not by a long-shot. *Bug Jack Baron* is Norman Spinrad's best work (without question) and one that truly showed what America both was at the moment and would become more and more over the following years. It's amazing to read it now and see the view Spinrad had of his time and how close it is to today.

The other problem is *Slaughterhouse-5*.

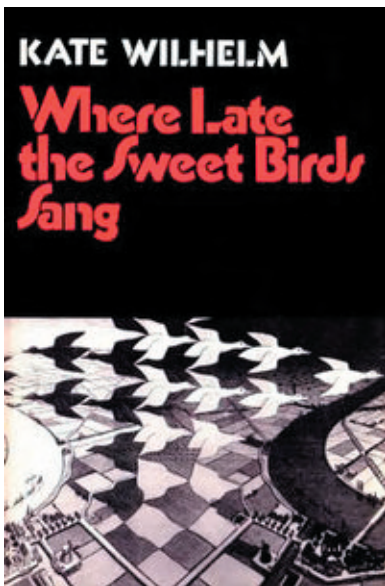


There is no novel that should have beaten Vonnegut on this one. *Slaughterhouse-5* was one of the best received books of the decade, has been continually in-print ever since and, oh year, was the best selling SF novel of 1969. It was a masterpiece and has continued to be so. While not as egregious as Simak's win, this is a bad one as there's no question that *Slaughterhouse-5* was the obvious best novel of 1969, and while LeGuin's piece has also stood the test of time, it will never be *Slaughterhouse-5*.

1972: The Good – To Your Scattered Bodies Go by Phillip Jose Farmer

Phillip Jose Farmer is one of my favorites, so it's no question that this gets a Good, but it was also his most interesting and accessible novel up to that point. He built a world that was truly magical, populated it with amazing characters, and had one of the best opening lines of the 1970s. The follow-ons suffered, for the most part, though I did enjoy *The Fabulous Riverboat*.

Sadly, *Lathe of Heaven*, another excellent LeGuin, was up against it, but it's not quite *To Your Scattered Bodies Go*. Timing is a damn shame on this one, as in any of the previous or following years, *Lathe* would have been better than the eventual winner.



1977: The Good – Where Late the Sweet Bird Sang by Kate Wilhelm

This is one of my favorite novels by one of my favorite authors. It is a story with powerful roots. You can never go wrong writing brilliantly about conformity, the dangers of technology and the role of Human Individuality in the Civilization process. It's an amazing and powerful

book, though one that I'm not sure reads as well today as it would have 30, or even 20 years ago. I think we've fundamentally changed our views on technology and Individual expression to the point where a novel like this no longer challenges us, but instead makes us question the mission of the author.

I still say it's a piece of genius.

I tried to read *Children of Dune* and failed. That's a shame.

1996: The Good – The Diamond Age by Neal Stephenson

Almost twenty years have passed since I read the winner of Best Novel, partly because there's a *McMaster-Bujold* book or two and the *Mars* series. On the other hand, this is also one of those novels that I came to pretty late, largely because of its largeness.

It's a brilliantly told tale of tribes and class-

structure and bizarre matter-manipulation and weird AI themes. There's also the whole Neo-Victorian thing, which is so very cool!

The main character is going through a coming-of-age story, which is usually a win for me. I really should try and re-read it soon.

On the ballot, the only other novel I've read was *The Time Ships*, which I read recently as a part of my 'All Baxter Are Go!' programme. It's a pretty darn spectacular novel and one of the best you'll ever read from Stephen.

I also read *The Terminal Experiment* and was unimpressed. Once again, Sawyer manages to catch me early but completely turn me off with an ending that doesn't really make any sense.

2001: The Good - Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire by JK Rowling

This one caused a stink when it won, but really, it's a great novel and one of the most fun things to win the Hugo. Say what you will about Harry Potter, but it's a great, highly readable, endlessly entertaining novel. It's also the best of the series, without question. The themes of the entire series, about what it means to be chosen, about how none of us really understand what we're capable of, about loss being what allows us to rise up, they're all the focus of the novel, and thus, that makes it more powerful than any of the others...with the possible exception of *Dumbledore's death*.

Robert Sawyer's *Calculating God* is another in a long line of Sawyer novels that started so strong and just fell off. It's a shame because I could see where I wanted it to go, how I wanted it to play out, and it did not even come close. It was a shame, but the first hundred and fifty pages are really something special.

2003: The Ugly - Hominids by Robert J Sawyer

That's a shame, that *Ugly* up there, because *Hominids* ain't a bad book at all. Slightly underwhelming, a great character in *Ponter Bonnit*, and there's a strong romantic story involved. There's also a certainly ugliness that I think is very off-putting to some of it, and the ending isn't great, though it's better than most of the ones that we've gotten from Sawyer.

On the other, there were two pretty amazing novels that were passed up. *The Years of Rice and Salt* by Kim Stanley Robinson was one I only read recently and I was blown away by the time I got to the end. Really, of all Robinson's stuff, this was the most approachable. In fact, it's the only one I've made it all

the way through on the first try. The other one that's up there is Mieville's *The Scar*. *Perdido* was a more important book, *The Scar* is possibly a better book. Either of them well-over-shadowed Sawyer's work, but what can we do; we were in Canada that year.

2005: The Good - Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell

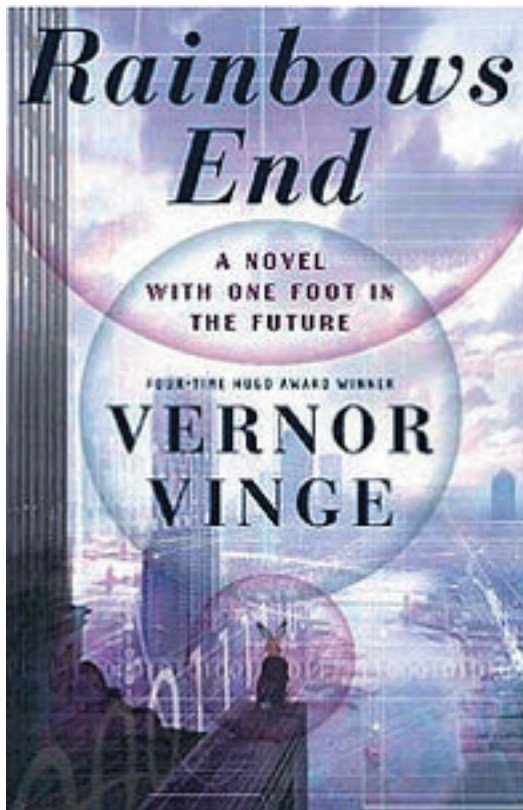
Funny thing is a lot of people didn't like this win, but I really think it was an awesome novel and though it took me several whiles to finish it, it was well-worth the effort. The presentation of the work, which alone was enough to keep me interested, played on that part of me that loves research and the footnotes only made the whole thing more interesting.

This did come near to an Ugly because of two very good novels, *The Algebraist* and *River of Gods*, and one that I think is somewhat impressive but very difficult for me to actually read (*Iron Council*). Clark's wonderful novel rose above those though, and I'm hoping to see something big and new and shiny from her soon.

2006: The Very, Very Ugly – Spin by Robert Charles Wilson

Here's the thing: even the novels I've not liked have at least had some merit to my eyes. To me *Spin* is pure, unfiltered, worse-possible-choice crap. The concept itself infuriated me from the very beginning, and reading it, I was disgusted by the lame, entirely-recycled plot and devices. It was almost as if he wanted to take a 1960s novel, dust it off, file off some of the standard characters and the way he tried to tell it annoyed my very soul. I hated this book, and to me there's been no book as undeserving of the Hugo for Best Novel. None. I'd take a thousands Simak's over Vonnegut than to have to admit that this thing won.

On the other hand, there was *Accelerando*. I normally don't buy into Singularity stuff (and I say this for all Mankind to hear: there will NEVER be a Singularity) but this was some of Charlie Stross' best stuff and it was so very deserving of the Hugo. Sadly, it lost out. *Old Man's War* was also a massive blow to



the genre, coming from John Scalzi, who would win the Campbell that year. It's a great book, one of Scalzi's absolute best. Sadly, I don't think he'll ever obtain that level again. He's written in this universe with diminishing returns each time out.

2007: The Good – Rainbow's End by Vernor Vinge

This was an interesting year. I wasn't a big fan of any of the novels listed. I didn't like *Blindsight* so much that I didn't finish it, and the Vinge, while good, lacked that extra something that would make it a truly spectacular winner. I rather enjoyed Naomi Novik's *Her Majesty's Dragon*, though the follow-ons weren't nearly as good.

We had a Stross, though not nearly as good a Stross as *Accelerando*, and we had a Flynn. It was an interesting year, and I'm told Vernor is very popular in Japan and that's why he won. I've heard the same thing said about Stross, though neither of them are David Brin, who is a big name writer out that way.

2008: The Good – The Yiddish Policeman's Union by Michael Chabon

This, to me, is the best novel of any kind released in 2007. An absolute masterpiece of fiction. Many complain that it's not actually SF/Fantasy enough to qualify, to which I say they're wrong. It's an amazing novel and more proof that Chabon is a Genre Writer who is not sold as such, but understands himself that he is one. The story is manaing, the world that Chabon structures is engaging, and the characters are full and rich and tough and true. It's an absolute winner without rival.

The other nominees were also very good. I loved Ian McDonald's *Brasyl*. I think it's the best SF novel of 2007. There's little argument that it was a great novel. I think McDonald might be the best writer of the International variety. I mean, the guy totally gets how to write for a century that's completely world-wide.

The others? Well, *The Last Colony* wasn't for me, and I wasn't that big a fan of *Rollback*, but it doesn't really matter much, because the best novel took home the rocket.

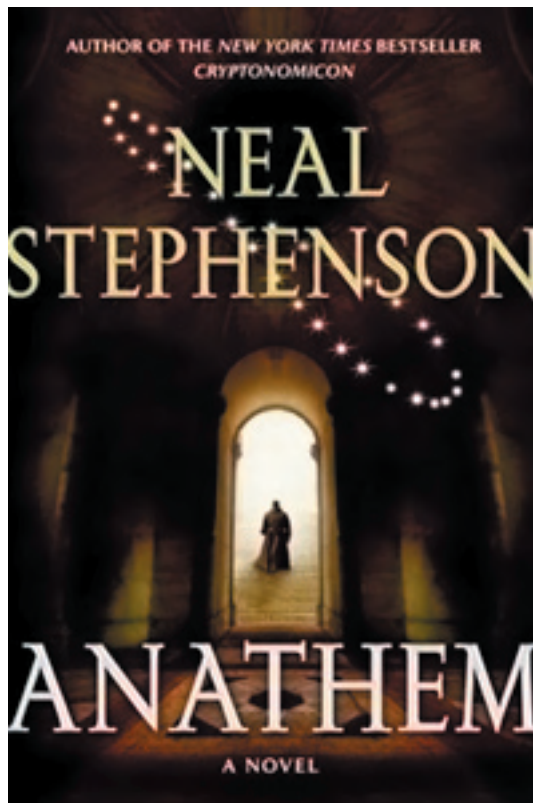
2009: The Ugly – The Graveyard Book by Neil Gaiman

Anthem. That's all I should have to say. It was not only the best novel of the bunch, but it was the best science fiction novel I'd read in years. OK, I didn't read it, I bought the audio book, but it was still fan-freakin'-omenal!

The winner was The Graveyard Book, a book that I really didn't much care for. I've never been a big Gaiman fan, but this was the weakest of his novels I've read. It just felt so derivative of so many other things I've read, and the writing was just plain dull.

The other books? I wasn't a fan of Zoe's Tale, the tone and general state of prose being unattractive to me. Little Brother was pretty darn good, and it's the second best Doctorow that I've read so far. Saturn's Children? Yeah, I liked it, though it lacked the impact of Accelerando.

The thing is, Anthem was 100 times the novel that The Graveyard Book was: both in quality and volume. It's a strong novel, a rewarding one and one that I'll likely listen to again!



A Quick Look Back by James Bacon

It ain't all bad, even with red lenses.

Jeez, I can remember the smell of cheap coffee, and damp, in Dandelion Books, as Rory L. explained to me the importance to him, a man who owned about ten thousand SF books and who had read many times more than that, of 'Hugo Winner'.

It was an early education, I would have been in a school uniform, having wandered up from Phantasia comic shop, and Rory worked the 5pm to 6.30pm shift, so Padraig could go for a pint. Ever seen Black Books. Rory has a beard, is very relaxed, not exactly a hippy, but a tweed-wearing super intelligent chilled out drug experienced chap.

So I decided to quickly look back, to 1960 and come forward and comment about the books, I really really liked and have read that have won, or were nominated. I won't go through each year, just where a novel excites me.

The winner in 1960, was Starship Troopers, a favourite of mine, I loved it, still love it, and as a nationalist, a republican in the Irish sense, feel that it's always viewed a little harshly, as it's just good fun. The Sirens of Titan, by Kurt Vonnegut is in a different league, but is as good.

1961, and its A Canticle for Leibowitz, what a great book. 1962 James White gets nominated for Second Ending, not my favourite White novels at all. But then all his books are damn fine. 1963 one of my favourites wins, The Man in the High Castle. I have read it many times. I adore it very much and feel it is Dick's best work. Can't believe Dune World was nominated in 1964 and then won, in a tie in 1966, once it was amalgamated with The Prophet of Dune, beating another favourite, The Moon is Harsh Mistress which then also got in again and won in 1967. What was going on in the sixties....

1970, Bug Jack Barron and Slaughterhouse Five both loose out, what a shame, and in 1971 Tau Zero by Poul Anderson also looses out, wow. A lot of books in these Hugos that I genuinely like, and am now finding it hard to pick favourites.

This is the thing with the Hugo's, it may be voted on by a ropey bunch of fans, but there is some good taste in the democracy of it all. We are obviously getting what we deserve.

No surprise in 1974, the year I was born, its Rendezvous with Rama. It's a damn fine book and a big smile when I see and remember that The Forever War was a winner in 1976, sixteen years after Starship

Troopers, representing the genre again in a militaristic fashion, but altogether differently. Not so sure about the late seventies and early eighties, books I have read, but not altogether favourites. I am noticing that many of the works by females of the era, are not favourites at all, I liked Anne McCaffery, as she would come to Irish conventions, but her books didn't grab me.

1984 and I liked Startide Rising, although not so sure about it these days, it may have aged badly or something maybe. 1986 is a good year for me, Enders Game, a great book, shame about the authors more recent opinions, The Postman, a great Post Apocolypse book, and Footfall. I need to read that again, but I liked it, a lot about eighteen years ago.

Christ, what went wrong in 1987, how can Shaw get stuffed again, shame on you, Hugo Voters, I genuinely expect better, as The Ragged Astronauts deserved that win. No Atwood in there.

1990 and Dan Simmons wins with Hyperion. A stunning novel. It did the rounds in Dublin, it was really rated well, and it was a very very good read. 1991 and Lois McMaster Bujoid storms in, stealing a run of nominations that Brin and Scott Card had in the late eighties. A woman I love, truly, in Miles she has created a character who I really admire, and have a lot of time for. The Vor Game is and was stunning. Although initially once finding her, I read a quantity of work, as I settled down, I subsequently fell into a pattern of loving every second book, with the in-betweeners being OK, although I also loved Barrayar, the winner in 1992.

Shame that in 1996 that Baxter's Timeships did not win, I really like that book. The Mars books are prominent here, but although I must accept they are good, as are many of the books I have not mentioned - real favourites. Not sure.

Forever Peace does it again for Joe Haldeman in 1998, and it's a very awesome book, and very different in many ways to his previous win, but shares a common factor, brilliance. Not sure about Rowlings nominations. It's interesting that HP and the Philosophers Stone, is not nominated, showing that even Hugo voters need a band wagon to clamber aboard occasionally. American Gods by Neil Gaiman beat Perdido Street Station in 2002, seems like a ropey call now, somewhat although both fine novels.

Gutted that River of Gods lost to Jonathon Strange and Mrs Norrell, a book I have never been interested in reading. Iron Council, is another favourite, for some reason in 2005. Noticeable that the list is very UK centric, but then, I was on that stage that evening

for something else, and it was in Glasgow. No denying that it's good to see a great selection. Disappointed that Naomi Novik didn't win in 2007, she captured my imagination, I picked up a sampler of Her Majesties Dragon, or Temerierei n 2006 at LA Con, and loved it.

2008 and its a year to be proud of, the winner, by Chabon is great, The Yiddish Policemans Union, but of course, would have loved Brasyl, to win, and The Last Colony is another favourite. A great year.

And now right bang up to date, its nice for Neil to win, but in deference to my mate The great Chris Garcia, I am happy to attest that, in the words of the masses:

Stephenson woz ROBBED!!!



The Forgotten: 2010: Books The Should Have Made It by Chris Garcia

There is no perfect Hugo ballot. I always find myself wondering what it takes to get a novel on the ballot, and there are some obvious things (visibility, author popularity, actually having a good novel) and there are some secrets that will probably never be discovered. This year's crop is good, but there are several other things that could have easily made it even stronger.

The first one, as I've said many time, is another Valente book. Her story *The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairyland in a Boat of Her Own Making* is one of the best books I read in 2009. It's a great novel and I much preferred it to *Palimpsest*. It was one of the top novels of the year (though by word count, it might have been a novella?). Valente is an amazing writer and I'd have loved to have seen her warmer novel get the nod over the one that was, as Niall Harrison put it, 'cold'. Still, *Palimpsest* is a very good novel, but there's something about *The Girl...* that just kicks into high gear. I'd have loved to have seen it make it, and it would have been great to have seen a novel released via an author's website.

Second is a novel that has a counterpart on the ballot in *Boneshaker*, and it's the second most talked-about Steampunk novel of the year. That novel is *Soulless* by Gail Carriger. *Soulless* was also the better, if much lighter, novel. You don't see novels with as much romance put onto the ballot, which is a shame as this would be the perfect first Steampunk novel to appear on the ballot. The world Gail created was strong, almost as strong as Priest's *Walled Seattle*, and her characters, while a bit flatter than those inhabiting *Boneshaker*, are at least more even and consistent. The plot and the ending are far more satisfying, though. That alone should have gotten Gail on the ballot, and did manage to get her onto the Campbell ballot. I'm predicting a win there for Gail, but a place on the Main Event ballot was also deserved.

Another that I've seen put up as deserving, and one which I completely agree with, is *The Unincorporated Man* by the Brothers Kolin. This was one of the most impressive novels of the year, with folks ranging from Joe Major to Kage Baker. It's an impressive debut, and one of the best pieces of SF about economics. I love Econ! Sadly, I had it on my ballot and it didn't turn up.

One of the bigger names in SF that has been on the ballot (and I believe has won a couple) is Kim



Stanley Robinson. I had *Gallileo's Dream* pegged as a for-sure, a great book from a great writer in a year when there weren't a lot huge names releasing huge titles, I figured for sure it'd be up. I was wrong, of course, which is odd. I still think that *Gallileo's Dream* will end up being one of the three books from 2009 that will be long-remembered.

Stephen Baxter might be the best Space Opera writer working today. He's massively awesome, but he's not had the success with Hugo nominations that he's had as a Clarke nominee. *Ark* was a damn fine novel, as was *Flood* before it. *Ark* tells a story as strong as any other I read last year, marred by only a light fascination with the idea that sacrifice is a necessary part of the process of discovery. That's always a problem for me as it always seems to take a bit much.

What Baxter manages is to make the individual members of the crew into well-formed problems of space and annoying habits mixed with weird sorts of physics stuff. There are characters that feed on every fear: fear of the hyper-intelligent, fear of religion (after a fashion), fear of wanting, fear of sex, so on and so on. It's a very good book, and even at 500+ pages, I breezed through it. I was blown away by it, hugely.

Yellow Blue Tibia was up for the Clarke and lost. It's a divisive book, so I guess I shouldn't have been shocked, but I'm fairly certain it'll turn out to be a top ten or twelve book when it comes to nominations. It reminded me of those second-string novels of the 1980s. You know, the ones your weird friends kept telling you were bubbling the surface while you were wallowing in the latest Cyberpunk. It's a great novel and I'd have loved in on the ballot.

There are always more great novel than there are spaces on the ballot. That's what happens, and I'm hoping that this is a problem we have for a great many years.

Lists and lists for 2009 by James Bacon

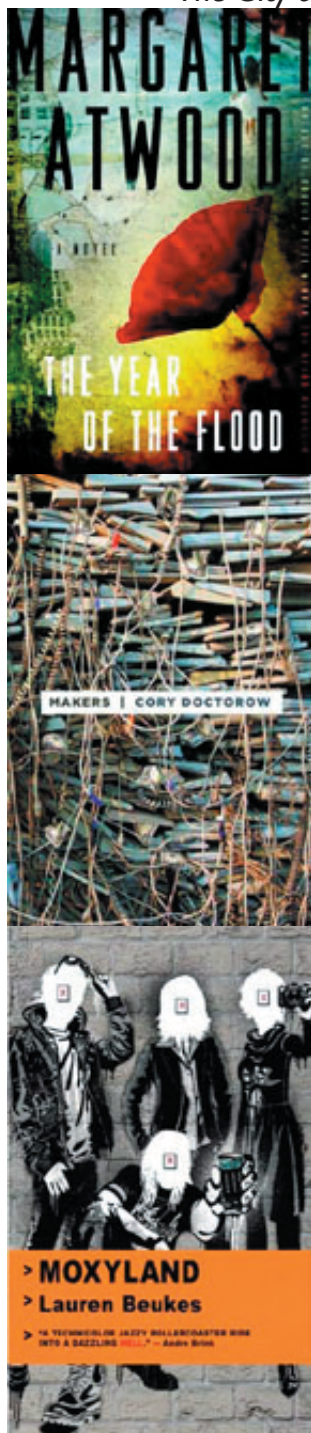
So the Hugo shortlist for novels is as follows:

- *Boneshaker*, Cherie Priest (Tor)
- *The City & The City*, China Miéville (Del Rey; Macmillan UK)
- *Julian Comstock: A Story of 22nd-Century America*, Robert Charles Wilson (Tor)
- *Palimpsest*, Catherynne M. Valente (Bantam Spectra)
- *Wake*, Robert J. Sawyer (Ace; Penguin; Gollancz; Analog)
- *The Windup Girl*, Paolo Bacigalupi (Night Shade)

First off we have the Arthur C. Clarke list of books that were submitted by publishers and considered by the judges.

Heart of Veridon by Tim Akers (Solaris)
 Shadow of the Scorpion by Neal Asher (Tor)
 Orbus by Neal Asher (Tor)
 The Year of the Flood by Margaret Atwood (Bloomsbury)
 Twisted Metal by Tony Ballantyne (Tor)
 Transition by Iain Banks (Little, Brown)
 Ark by Stephen Baxter (Gollancz)
 Moxyland by Lauren Beukes (Angry Robot)
 The Accord by Keith Brooke (Solaris)
 Xenopath by Eric Brown (Solaris)
 Seeds of Earth by Mike Cobley (Orbit)
 And Another Thing... by Eoin Colfer (Penguin)
 Makers by Cory Doctorow (Voyager)
 The Babylonian Trilogy by Sebastien Doubinsky (PS Publishing)
 The Wild Things by Dave Eggers (Hamish Hamilton)

Consorts of Heaven by Jaine Fenn (Gollancz)
 The Stranger by Max Frei (Gollancz)
 Concrete Operational by Richard Galbraith (Rawstone Media)
 Nova War by Gary Gibson (Tor)
 Winter Song by Colin Harvey (Angry Robot)
 The Rapture by Liz Jensen (Bloomsbury)
 Spirit by Gwyneth Jones (Gollancz) (N)
 Journey into Space by Toby Litt (Penguin)
 The Age of Ra by James Lovegrove (Solaris)
 Halfhead by Stuart B MacBride (HarperVoyager)
 Gardens of the Sun by Paul McAuley (Gollancz)
 The City & The City by China Mieville (Macmillan) (w)



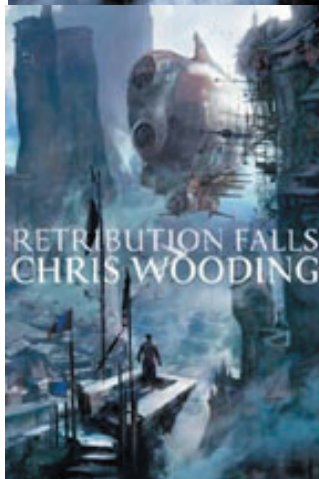
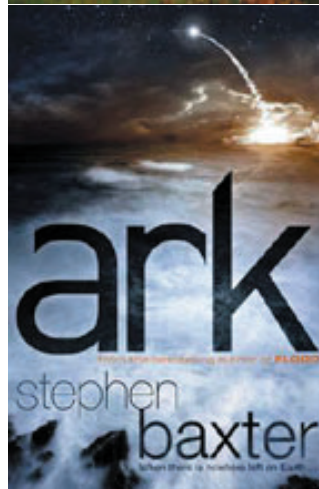
Red Claw by Philip Palmer (Orbit)
 Yellow Blue Tibia by Adam Roberts (Gollancz)
 Galileo's Dream by Kim Stanley Robinson (HarperVoyager) (N)
 Chasing the Dragon by Justina Robson (Gollancz)
 The City of Lists by Brigid Rose (Crocus)
 Flashforward by Robert J Sawyer (Gollancz)
 Wake by Robert J Sawyer (Gollancz)
 Zoe's Tale by John Scalzi (Tor)
 The Island at the End of the World by Sam Taylor (Faber & Faber)
 Far North by Marcel Theroux (Faber & Faber) (N)
 Before the Gods by KS Turner (Ruby Blaze)
 The Painting and the City by Robert Freeman Wexler (PS Publishing)
 This is Not a Game by Walter Jon Williams (Orbit)
 Retribution Falls by Chris Wooding (Gollancz) (N)

Of the 41 titles we have 2 out of the six Hugo Noms. Yet one of the Hugo Noms won.

Then there is the BSFA Long list. Like the Clarkes, The City and The City won.

Twisted Metal by Tony Ballantyne (Tor UK)
 Ark by Stephen Baxter (Gollancz)
 Transition by Iain Banks (Little, Brown)
 The Manual of Detection by Jedediah Berry (William Heinemann)

Moxyland by Lauren Beukes (Angry Robot)
 The Accord by Keith Brooke (Solaris)
 Xenopath by Eric Brown (Solaris)
 The Naming of the Beasts by Mike Carey (Orbit)
 Fire by Kristin Cashore (Gollancz)
 Generation A by Douglas Coupland (William Heinemann)
 Makers by Cory Doctorow (HarperCollins)
 The Other Lands by David Anthony Durham (Doubleday)
 Fragment by Warren Fahy (Harper)
 Nova War by Gary Gibson (Tor UK)
 The Magicians by Lev Grossman (William Heinemann)
 Avilion by Robert Holdstock (Gollancz)
 Spirit, or, The Princess of Bois Dormant by Gwyneth Jones (Gollancz) [[download pdf](#)]
 Tender Morsels by Margo Lanagan (David Fickling)
 Lavinia by Ursula K Le Guin (Gollancz)
 Journey into Space by Toby Litt (Penguin)
 The Age of Ra by James Lovegrove (Solaris)
 Patient Zero by Jonathan Maberry (Gollancz)
 Gardens of the Sun by Paul McAuley (Gollancz)
 The City & The City by China Mieville (Macmillan)
 The Ask & The Answer by Patrick Ness (Walker)
 White is for Witching by Helen Oyeyemi (Picador)
 Unseen Academicals by Terry Pratchett (Doubleday)
 Yellow Blue Tibia by Adam Roberts (Gollancz)
 Book of Secrets by Chris Roberson (Angry Robot)
 Galileo's Dream by Kim Stanley Robinson (Harper Voyager)
 The Forest of Hands and Teeth by Carrie Ryan (Gollancz)
 The Girl with Glass Feet by Ali Shaw (Atlantic)
 Droid by Dan Simmons (Quercus)
 Far North by Marcel Theroux (Faber &



Faber)
 Ultrameta by Douglas Thompson (Eibonvale)
 Sights by Kaaron Warren (Angry Robot)
 In Great Waters by Kit Whitfield (Jonathan Cape)
 One by Conrad Williams (Virgin)
 Peter and Max: a Fables Novel by Bill Willingham (Titan)
 Retribution Falls by Chris Wooding (Gollancz)

Also 41, as in the Clarkes but with only one book from the Hugo nominations in here, but yet again this went on to win the Award.

The Nebula award Nominees were:

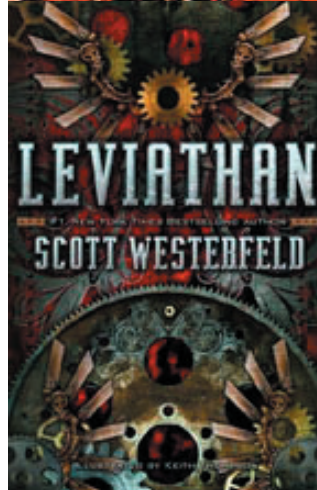
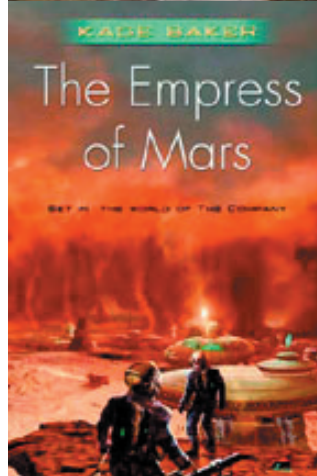
The Windup Girl, Paolo Bacigalupi (Night Shade)
 The Love We Share Without Knowing, Christopher Barzak (Bantam)
 Flesh and Fire, Laura Anne Gilman (Pocket)
 The City & The City, China Miéville (Del Rey; Macmillan UK)
 Boneshaker, Cherie Priest (Tor)
 Finch, Jeff VanderMeer (Underland)

With the win going to Paolo Bacigalupi. I am impressed that there is 50% commonality with the Hugo's.

But I went looking, and looking and looking. I found recommended lists from everyone from Locus to Jeff Vandemeer, many with titles that I would never have thought of, yet so far, in the above lists not included. It's a few.

Ash, Malinda Lo
 Audrey's Door, Sarah Langan (Harper)
 Best Served Cold, Joe Abercrombie
 Beyond The Wall Of Time, Book , Russell Kirkpatrick
 Bitter Angels, C.L. Anderson
 Blade Light, Michael Jordan
 Blood of Ambrose, James Enge
 Buffalito Destiny , Lawrence M. Schoen
 Buyout, Alexander C. Irvine
 By Heresies Distressed, David Weber
 By the Mountain Bound, Elizabeth Bear

Canticle, Ken Scholes
 Catching Fire, Suzanne Collins
 Chronic City, Jonathan Lethem
 City Without End, Kay Kenyon
 Cloud and Ashes, Greer Gilman
 Conspirator, C.J. Cherryh
 Corambis, Sarah Monette
 Coyote Horizon, Allen Steele
 Diving into the Wreck, Kristine Kathryn
 Rusch
 Dragon in Chains, Daniel Fox
 Druids, Barb Galler-Smith
 Elegy Beach, Steven Boyett
 Empress of Mars, Kage Baker
 Enchantment Emporium, Tanya Huff
 Escape From Hell, Larry Niven & Jerry
 Pournelle
 First Lord's Fury, Jim Butcher
 Turncoat, Jim Butcher
 Fledgling, Sharon Lee & Steve Miller
 Full Circle, Pamela Freeman
 Gamer's Quest, George Ivanoff
 Gears of the City, Felix
 Going Bovine, Libba Bray
 Green, Jay Lake
 Gwenhwyfar, Mercedes Lackey
 Harbinger, Jack Skillingstead
 Haze, L. E. Modesitt, Jr.
 Heart's Blood, Juliet Marillier
 House of Suns, Alastair Reynolds
 I Am Not a Serial Killer, Dan Wells
 Lamentation, Ken Scholes
 Last Days, Brian Evenson
 Leviathan, Scott Westerfeld
 Liar, Justine Larbalestier
 Lifelode, Jo Walton
 Lightbreaker, Mark Teppo
 Like Mayflies in a Stream, Shauna Roberts
 Living With Ghosts, Kari Sperring
 Madness of Flowers, Jay Lake
 Mirror Space, Marianne de Pierres
 Norse Code, Greg van Eekhout
 Overthrowing Heaven, Mark L. Van Name
 Prophets (Apotheosis: Book One), S.
 Andrew Swann
 Regenesi, C.J. Cherryh
 Rift in the Sky, Czerneda, Julie E
 Rosemary and Rue, Seanan McGuire
 Sandman Slim, Richard Kadrey
 Servant of a Dark God, John Brown



Shades of Grey, Jasper Fforde
 Shadow Pavilion, Liz Williams
 Song of Time, Ian R. MacLeod
 Soulless, Gail Carriger
 Spell Games, T.A. Pratt
 Spellbent, Lucy A. Snyder
 Steal Across the Sky, Nancy Kress
 Steel Whispers, Hayden Trenholm
 Storm from the Shadows, David Weber
 Subversive Activity, Dave Luckett
 Suicide Kings, George RR Martin et al
 Terra Insegura, Edward Willett
 The Adamantine Palace, Stephen Deas
 (Gollancz; Roc '10)
 The Caryatids, Bruce Sterling
 The Demon's Lexicon, Sarah Rees
 Brennan
 The Devil's Alphabet, Daryl Gregory
 The Drowning City, Amanda Downum
 The Gathering Storm, Robert Jordan,
 Brandon Sanderson
 The Girl who Circumnavigated Fairyland
 in a Ship of her own Making,
 Catherynne Valente
 The High City, Cecelia Holland
 The Grand Conjunction, Sean Williams
 The Last Stormlord, Glenda Larke
 The Magician's Apprentice, Trudi Canavan
 The Price of Spring, Daniel Abraham
 The Red Tree, Caitlin R. Kiernan
 The Sharing Knife: Horizon, Lois
 McMaster Bujold
 The Silver Mage, Katharine Kerr
 The Song and the Sorceress, Kim
 Vandervort
 The Sunless Countries, Karl Schroeder
 The Tuloriad, John Ringo, Tom Kratman
 The Unincorporated Man, Dani Kollin
 and Eytan Kollin
 The Walls of the Universe, Paul Melko
 The Whale's Tale, Edwina Harvey
 Time Travelers Never Die, Jack McDevitt
 To Climb a Flat Mountain, G. David
 Nordley
 Total Oblivion, More or Less, Alan
 DeNiro
 Turning The Grain, Barry B. Longyear
 Under the Dome, Stephen King
 Warbreaker, Brandon Sanderson
 When you Reach Me, Rebecca Stead

Another 101 titles, not yet included so far but then, I got a horrendous pointer. Over on the Internet Speculative Fiction Database one can do a check for Novels by year, so I did this, and it pulled up a total of 2139 titles.

Two Thousand One Hundred and Thirty Nine Novels. Including the likes of 501st by Karen Travis, War Of The Worlds a Ben 10 novel by Charlotte Fullerton Creatures of the Pool by Ramsey Campbell and Zombie Queen of Newbury High by Amanda Ashby.

Six books with the word Vampire in the Title,

and twenty eight starting with blood, not including Bloody Awful by Georgia Evans, and I stopped counting the titles with Dead or Demon in them. There is definitely a resurgence, not so much in Horror, but books that deal with themes stolen from Horror. Fourteen Dragons, apparently, which I reckon would make good steak. And who could forget Pride and Prejudice; Zombies, oh yeah me.

Crumbs, as we say in these parts, and we haven't even mentioned Retromancer by Robert Rankin.

Some of these novels appeared in the Locus Recommendations for 2009, in the February 2010 issue, Reprinted by permission of Locus Publications



Joe Major Rates the Shortlist

Joe Major, editor of the fine fanzine *Alexiad* and all-around brilliant guy (and a few Hugo nominations under his belt as well) wrote up the novels that were up in his latest issue. Joe very kindly agreed to share his thoughts on the list with us. As you can see, he had a very different take on the order of the nominees than either me or James!

6. *Palimpsest*

Valente writes beautiful, flowing prose, and the reader gets lost in the flow. After a while, it becomes clear that the beautiful flowing prose isn't about anything **fixed**. *Palimpsest* is a dream novel, and dreams have beautiful imagery, but their continuity is often less than sure.

5. *The City & The City*

Anyone who remembered Philip K. Dick's *Ubik* would remember how that book started off as an almost-trite War of the Mutants — and then, abruptly, surprisingly, turned into a discussion of the nature of reality. This starts off as a police procedural, but one in a different sort of community. Before long, it turns into an inquiry into the nature of the community itself — and while Miéville retains his power of plotting and prose, the basis of the plot and setting becomes more ramshackle as the story progresses.

4. *Julian Comstock*

I had the feeling that Wilson wanted to write a Huck Finn style novel, but needed to have things that weren't in the real world. He evokes that period well enough, though. The story he chooses to tell is less so; the traditional tale of the lost prince and the wicked usurping uncle. The twist is that the lost prince, once he wins, promptly proceeds to throw it all away. If the effort was pointless to begin with, why did he bother?

3. *Boneshaker*

Unlike a lot of people, I am less than enthralled with most steampunk works. The characters in particular are so discordant with the background. Not here, and Wilson has avoided other clichés of the genre in this tale of realization amid disaster. And it was compellingly told; it wasn't until after it was all over that I considered the strains in the background.

2. *The Windup Girl*

Low lives in a declining world are a popular theme. Bacigalupi has them manage to survive, even prevail a little. You feel for his people, even though their lives are so marginal. And his portrayal of a neo-scarce society is interesting.

1. *Wake*

Here we have a story about technology enabling people to live better; in this case, making the blind see. But what the blind see turns out to be another side-effect; there's a surprise in this effort. Just as Sawyer reminds us that there is a world out there.



The 2010 Best Novel Shortlist

I am always thrown by the level of respect that the Hugo's command. Here a simple fan organised award, can effect thousands of people. I recall the importance of the Hugo among Dublin fans, the extra worth a novel that was a winner or a nominee would garner, especially if a new dustjacket appeared on the novel affirming to the browser that her indeed was a book worth reading.

The Hugo's themselves are a tremendous affair. It's mind boggling at just how awesome they are. Is it two thousand people into an auditorium for the event. What actually compares to this? And its all voted for, arranged by, managed, administered and pulled off with considerable finesse by fans.

I was lucky to accept a Hugo once on behalf of James White and it was and is an experience to treasure. Phenomenal.

It's hard to know, what to say, when one really considers the Hugo's. First off, should I have an opinion at all. I have not gotten round to reading them all. I apologise, but I haven't been procrastinating, just busy doing zines and cons and when I have been reading, focused on what I want to read.

I let it out there. I am not sure I wanted to read all the nominees this year. A review of 'Palimpsest' by Niall Harrison didn't enthuse me at all, and I just haven't gotten around to 'Wake' yet.

One of the problems, and this of course will reflect my human failings, is that while I have not read two of the novels, I have read 'The City and the City' 3 times. I am not prepared to deny myself a vote because I have not read all the novels. The question of voter motivation is one that could fill another fanzine, but people vote for their own reasons - right or wrong - and that is democracy.

Unfortunately The City and the City has left me reeling with satisfaction and unanswered questions.

I have herded zombified children across two Worldcon stages, run a convention on zombies and have flown model airships. I love Luthar Arkwright and appreciate the works of Herr Doktor. Yet no matter how much I like and enjoyed Boneshaker, it was always on the podium but not in pole position.

The Windup Girl is a pretty awesome novel. Despite a tricky start for me, I got into it and reckon that it's a stunningly good book.

Julian Comstick didn't strike me initially and

the style of writing is not exactly to my liking, but it's ok so far. Better than I expected.

A very varied bunch of books, and I must complement the voters, I have no doubt that there were dozens of books that were valid and may have even got one vote, yet fighting through the melée charges a book full of wonder,

a book that creates a maelstrom for the mind.

The City and the City.

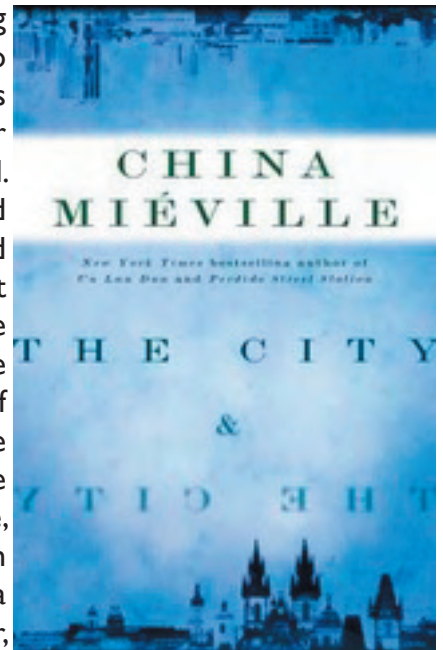
It's the goddamn concept, the idea of 2 cities occupying the same geographical space yet not actually, due to some mystery the answer to which remains infuriatingly illusive. I live the total distinctiveness of the two cities, which made me reflect on the Balkans, where cultures can be vastly different and yet at one stage, as Yugoslavia was one greater whole. Each city is totally distinct, their own history, society, race, language, their own trains - perhaps their own flight paths.

Into this story, as we follow a likeable and strong character we (sorry that's wrong) I discovered some sort of metaphysical separation that means they are on separate planes - separate worlds perhaps but both there and not there, to outsiders.

Well that was my perception. Initially I felt it was two parallel Earths apparent in one city, where one, was slipping in through a failing of some parallel universe system, where at a border point the two cities are connected.

It's a great police procedural and I liked the two histories, alternate even, that have been created by Mieville.

I am still completely intrigued by the two societies - their inspiration and what the influences were on them. The fascinating history shared but also so very different. I wondered if there was a Christian and Muslim undertone to both cities. I wondered about the war between the cities and the world wars. The countries - where they set or based on - Austria - Hungary - somewhere within the Austro-Hungarian empire or maybe further east, Romania,



or where two empires once met. I feel that it is the Balkans, perhaps which the boom brings to mind, but that is based on my limited knowledge and travel.

Understanding the cities did not come easily and I may understand them not as intended or not as others perceive them, I had expected an SFnal explanation.

A failed single quantum event, where full separation did not occur, or it failed. Maybe Mieville is a scholar of Hugh Everetts or maybe it's a spontaneous symmetry braking in line with chaotic inflation theory, or a place where the 'Multiverse's collide'.

I had hoped for an answer along these lines, some parallel world shift, some quantum chaos physics explanation, and big time bomb experiment, an extra terrestrial event around the time of the cleave, but none was forth coming, and figuring out the structure and existence of the two cities is still with me and still fun.

Upsetting in a delightful way is how many different theories seem to have been put forward. For a long time I felt rather alone with my parallel world idea, as the idea of a mental enforced separation with the only effected aspect being the minds of the people did not sit well with me.

I prefer to ponder - what be these cities. Is this a metaphysical construct, is it an extrapolation of the 'manyworlds' interpretation of quantum mechanics, or is it a good old Parallel world concept, or as simple as a between the worlds fantasy idea. Breach does somewhat seem like a between the worlds place and then very real and not at all metaphysical. Yet, the cities occupy places that are actually there and between the 2 cities there is something else. It's a little wonderful really.

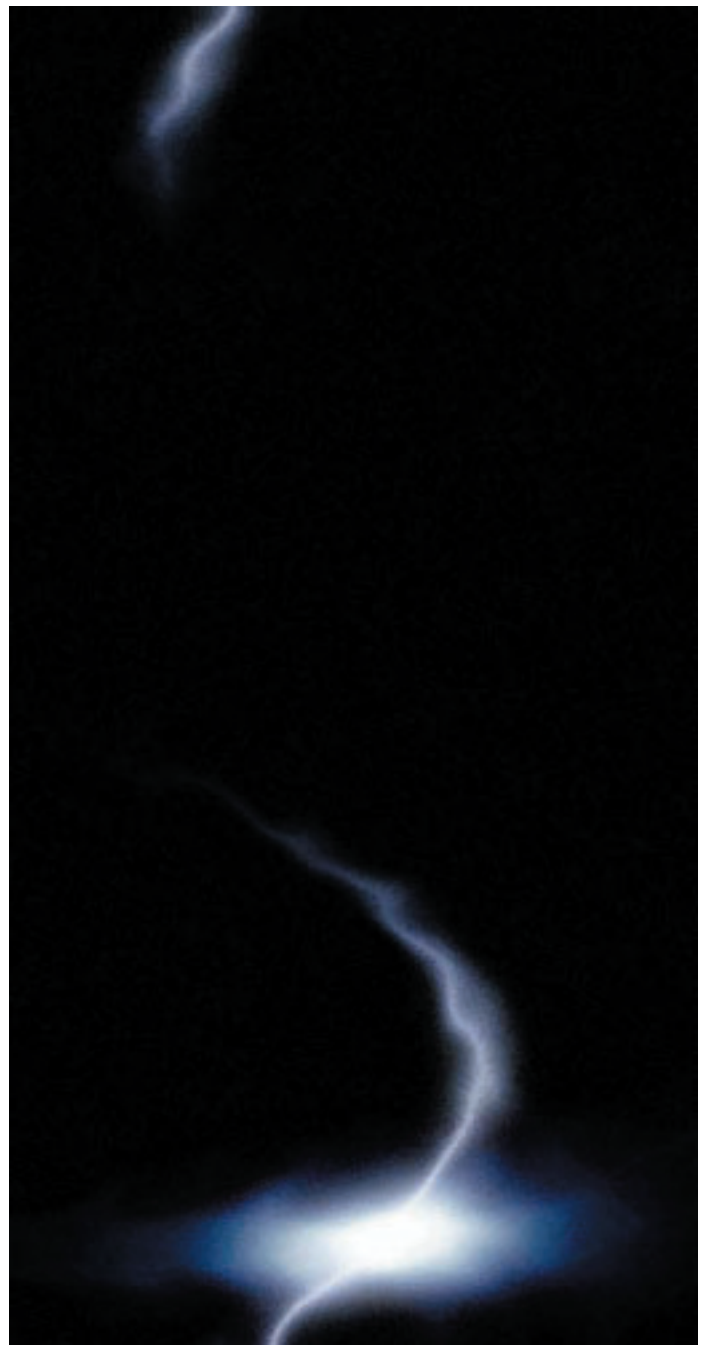
I had hoped to seek out what China has to say on the novel, as the author, viewpoint could be decisive. Then Dave Mansfield piped up regarding China's response to being asked about the book:

I saw China asked this question at the SFXweekender. His answer was along the lines of "I'm sorry to disappoint, but I put everything I wanted you to know in the text. I have my own ideas about how this worked, but I'm not going to say them, as an author's word has an unfair weight. However you think it works, is how it works for you".

That is such an awesome response from China, annoyingly brilliant and only adds to the whole question of how it works and what he had in mind. He is absolutely right, of course, an author can upset a person's visualisation of a scenario, with their opinion or detailed and explained explanation of vision. I still would have liked it.

I am still fascinated and interested in the construction of these cities, what allows them to be in the same place but on two planes, and how these planes then break down or weaken at points of cross hatch or shared spaces. I want a map of the world around these cities and a history.

And so you may see my problem. I have enjoyed The City and the City too much. I would like it to win now, there is no objectivity in my personal opinion anymore and I may even be blinkered, hopefully the opinions of integrity included here, will balance that out.





Wake by Robert J. Sawyer

Blogging the Hugos: Wake

April 17, 2010 by Paul Kincaid

By chance, I happen to have all but one of the novels shortlisted for this year's Hugo Award (the one I'm missing is *Palimpsest* by Catherynne M. Valente), and I've not been asked to review a single one of them, a rare combination. So it seems like an ideal opportunity to blog about the novels as I read them over the next few weeks and months.

I'll begin with *Wake* by Robert J. Sawyer (many places list this as *W.W.W. Wake* – it is the first part of the WWW trilogy – but nowhere on the copy of the book I possess is the title presented that way). I begin with this novel because it allows me to consider one simple but fundamental question: why on earth has Robert J. Sawyer won so many awards? Let's face it, the characterization is trite, the plotting is sentimental, the writing is simplistic, the politics is even more so, and the book is littered with plot lines that are raised and then simply forgotten.

The novel might be briefly characterized as the story of Helen Keller rewritten as science fiction. Indeed the book is crammed with so many references to Helen Keller, including some extensive quotes from her work, that such an interpretation isn't much forced on the reader as stuffed down their throat. Caitlin, a beautiful white rich girl who also happens to be a maths genius is blind, but she's offered the chance to try an experimental new device, an implant that takes the visual signals she sees and converts them into a form that her brain can interpret. At first, the implant doesn't seem to work, then she starts to experience weird visual images, shooting lines and hubs glowing in vivid colours, and eventually realizes that she is seeing the web. More than that, as she starts to apprehend the real world, she also realizes that there is an independent intelligence within the web, and decides to take on the role of Anne Sullivan to the web beings Helen Keller.

Against this story there are other plot lines developed, though you could not say that they interact. The most prominent concerns an ape that learns to paint representational art. It is easy to see how this echoes the main story line (Sawyer is nothing if not obvious in his deployment of themes and motifs) but apart from a passing mention when Caitlin sees a news report about the ape on the web, these two strands of story never come together. Another plot line concerns an outbreak of a new type of bird flu in China; this mutates into a piece about the inhumanity of the Chinese government, which in turn mutates into a story about a Chinese blogger who is shot and, presumably, killed, less than a third of the way into the novel, and this whole narrative strand then ends abruptly. Now this is the first volume in a trilogy, it is perfectly possible, indeed likely, that these strands will be developed and come together in later volumes, but in the one we have before us, the one, remember, that has actually been shortlisted for the award, there is no attempt to bring these strands together into a coherent whole. And most of the time they are simply forgotten, by the author as much as by the reader.

What makes this the sort of work that attracts votes in a popular award? I think it is a combination of things. To start with it is, as I say, a very sentimental work. The poor little rich girl, the blind girl who learns to see, the victim who becomes a teacher, goodness wins, it is all designed to manipulate our feelings. We end with a feeling of: 'Ahh, wasn't that sweet'. It is feel-good writing. It is also very simple writing. Apart from a few technical terms, most of which are very familiar

and all of which are carefully explained, Sawyer uses very few long words. Simple sentences, a relatively limited vocabulary, even the layout of the book, large type widely spaced, make this a quick and easy read. You really don't feel taxed reading it, but you do feel satisfied because of the sentimental resolution.

It is also flattering. I have noticed before that sf books that reference the genre, books that suggest the cool people, the people who really know how the world works, are familiar with science fiction, tend to go down very well with science fiction fans (fans are slans!). And this novel has lashings of references to other science fictions; the implications are obvious: if you know science fiction, you're in on the secrets of the universe.

That's part of the appeal of science fiction, of course, that you're learning by reading the stuff. A lot of sf likes to impart technical knowledge along the way, even if it slows down the story, and this is no exception. Of course, the most technical stuff we learn is about the way the web works, which most of the readers probably know better than the author, but that's beside the point. What's important is that sense of sharing knowledge, that what marks science fiction (and hence the science fiction reader) out from the common run of fictions is that it is more than just story. And Sawyer manages that very well, there's a steady drip-drip of information all the way through, and its accessible because it is communicated in short words, simple sentences.

Sawyer also makes his points very clearly, excessively so, no-one can have any excuse for missing what he wants to say. You can barely turn a page without encountering yet another iteration of the point. Caitlin's blindness, her genius physicist father who is autistic so he can't look people in the eye, her best friend Bashira who is Muslim and finds her social life restricted as a result, the ape who can paint but not when people are watching, the Chinese blogger who is cut off by his country's control of the internet, and so it goes. Analogies for blindness and sight, analogies using blindness and sight, come thick and fast throughout the book.

And when he gets on to politics, what he has to say is hardly sophisticated. Chinese communist rule is authoritarian, inhuman, evil, and haunted by the spectre of Tiananmen Square; the NSA is big, powerful and something you want to be wary of; Canada is generally pretty good but a bit bland and rather overawed by its southern neighbour. None of this is exactly searing

political analysis, but it is uncontentious and generally populist, you can imagine his readers nodding their heads and thinking, yeah, that's pretty much how I feel.

So what if the characterization is flat and uninteresting, the pacing hardly varies, the narrative structure is clumsy, the writing is dull, and there is no genuine novelty in the book. This is popular entertainment that flatters the readers, does a basically competent if unexciting job, and doesn't outstay its welcome. It's easy on the mind, so it's easy to see how it gets enough votes to make the shortlist.

Just so long as it doesn't win.

Wake Russ Allbery

Caitlin is a fifteen-year-old math whiz, the children of scientists who have just moved from Texas to Waterloo. She's also blind, but unusually for her condition the section of her brain that would interpret visual signals is well-developed. It just doesn't seem to be able to understand the signals that it receives from her eyes. This makes her an ideal candidate for the research of a Japanese scientist who believes he can create translation hardware that will interpret visual signals and supply them to her brain in a way that it can interpret as sight.

Meanwhile, scattered through chapter openings (in tedious and awkward language), a consciousness is slowly emerging on the Internet. When the Chinese government temporarily closes down the country's Internet connectivity to keep a news story under control, the vast partition creates the concept of self and other and gives that evolving consciousness a jump start, enough to let it look around and start to understand the nature of the world in which it's embedded. This leads it to a testing data stream for Caitlin's implant, which echoed the topology of the web, and Caitlin becomes the window through which it grows further.

There's also a third subplot about a chimpanzee/bonobo cross who seems to be developing the ability to paint representationally, but I have to assume this plot is setup for one of the sequels since it never connects meaningfully to the rest of the book. In *Wake*, it's an annoying intrusion, interrupting the main story for an apparently pointless side-story that never goes anywhere.

This is an immensely frustrating book. It was nominated for the 2010 Hugo, which is why I read it, but since Sawyer isn't one of my favorite authors, I was expecting to dislike it. However, unlike several

of Sawyer's previous books, he does a wonderful job with the character of Caitlin, drawing me straight into the story and into her world and making me care very much about what happens to her. That makes the deep flaws in this book more aggravating. If only Sawyer had done a half-way decent job with the technology and cleaned up some of his stylistic flaws, this could have been an excellent book.

Starting with the first chapter, which opens with Caitlin making a LiveJournal entry and talking on IM with a friend, she's a delight. Telling a story from the perspective of a blind character is a significant risk, and at least for this (sighted) reader Sawyer does a great job. I have no idea how accurate Sawyer's depiction of Caitlin's experiences is (more on that in a moment), but he successfully created the impression of accuracy. And, more importantly, she's just a fun and very likable character, with family challenges, loads of self-confidence, and a curious and exploratory attitude towards the world that fills the book with a delighted excitement.

Sawyer also does good work with family dynamics. Caitlin's mother and father are somewhat off-stage, since this is her story, but they're not simply supportive background. The tensions of raising a blind child are present but overcome, and Caitlin's strained relationship with her father goes interesting places that I wasn't expecting. (Although I do have to say all of this with one major caveat: much of this book is about disability of various kinds, disability that I personally do not have. If Sawyer gets any of it badly wrong, I wouldn't have noticed.) It's only when we get outside of Caitlin's family and her circle of direct friends that the problems begin.

First, the emerging network consciousness is obviously a major star of this book and the reason for the title. It would have been nice if it were as strong of a character as Caitlin. For most of the book, however, it's perspective is told in short segments of painfully bad writing, full of strained attempts at portraying emerging consciousness that read like bad *Star Trek* dialogue. Opening the book at random to one of those segments:

"No. Force it back! Concentrate harder. Observe reality, be aware of its parts.

But the details are minute, hard to make out. Easier just to ignore them, to relax, to... fade... and...

No, no. Don't slip away. Hold on to the details! Concentrate."

It goes on like this at scattered intervals for

most of the book, and I got extremely tired of it. Sawyer does, at the very end of the book, break out of this forced stream-of-consciousness mode into something much more appealing and readable, but it takes a long time to get there.

The worst, though, are the attempted technical explanations of this emergent life, which happen at the point when Caitlin first becomes aware that something might be out there (and hence at a point in the book that's carrying a lot of dramatic weight). I'm used to a certain degree of handwaving magic in any SF book about computer networks, going back to Gibson's *Neuromancer*. But rather than just handwaving through the impossible bits, Sawyer explains them in detail without apparently realizing they're impossible, resulting in some of the most painfully bad technological description that I've ever read in an SF book. I nearly threw this book against a wall; only the strength of Caitlin as a character made me grit my teeth, yell at the book, and force my way through it.

The technology fails at every level, from small points of irritation like assuming Unicode is always UCS-2 to large key concepts that are simply ludicrous. The characters' theory about the building blocks of the emergent consciousness is the worst: ghost packets. These are packets who could never reach their destination for some reason, and therefore continue roaming on through the Internet. The characters even correctly points out that there's a TTL (time-to-live) on packets that causes routers to stop sending them even in loops after a certain number of hops, and then theorize a "mutated" packet where the TTL constantly changes but never reaches zero. These mutated packets, apparently capable of infinite big-number arithmetic in a tiny header field, continue wandering the Internet forever. Their numbers grow as they're thrown off in rare cases by normal operations, and eventually they reach a critical mass and start forming cellular automata. (This still arguably makes more sense than an alternative theory involving constructive interference in copper wires between adjacent packets, which makes one wonder if Sawyer even understands the basic differences between digital and analog.)

One of the key requirements of a successful science fiction novel is some ability to maintain the reader's suspension of disbelief, which is one of the reasons why it can be best to avoid SF novels written in one's field of expertise. For anyone who knows computer networking (or the legalities of data disclosure; the means by which Caitlin gets to "see" a

map of web traffic also had me yelling at the book), it's exceptionally difficult to maintain that suspension of disbelief through the center portion of *Wake*. It doesn't help that Sawyer writes about technology with a painfully eager and trivia-filled style that reminds me of bad *Wired* articles or Usenet posters who are trying way too hard to be cool. Perhaps Sawyer does understand more than it seems and knows he's handwaving, but the impression *Wake* gives is of an author with a very shallow understanding of technology who builds worlds by recombining neat-sounding buzzwords. It's the Dan Brown of Internet-based SF, without Brown's grasp of pacing.

This degree of failure of research also brings into question the rest of the book. If Sawyer is this bad at understanding computer law and networks, are his portrayals of blindness and assistive technology any better? I can't judge those, and he does a good job with verisimilitude, but when he fails so miserably in my area of expertise, I have to wonder how bad the other bits are as well. It wouldn't surprise me if there's a review by a blind reader saying that the computer bits seemed okay but ranting about the direness of Caitlin's portrayal. It makes me leery of the whole book, particularly since a writer portraying disabilities inaccurately and poorly can inadvertently be quite offensive. Hopefully, the bad parts happen to be confined to the areas that I can recognize as bad, and my enjoyment of the rest of the book is on a firm foundation.

Thankfully, Sawyer doesn't belabor the worst parts of the book. There's a stretch of about twenty pages that I struggled to get through, but then the book became more interesting and more enjoyable. I was pleasantly surprised by the ending: the plot direction was predictable, but the emotional impact was stronger than I recall ever getting from a Sawyer novel before. The story is best read as fantasy once the emergent intelligence starts becoming really intelligent, but this is familiar and relatively comfortable fantasy in SF. Like FTL travel, emergent AIs are something SF readers are used to suspending disbelief about, and Sawyer's is somewhat better than others I've read.

If I could somehow extract Caitlin from the bad novel she was surrounded with and let someone read about her without the baggage, I would highly recommend that experience. Given the pain that one has to go through to appreciate a nice bit of character construction, I don't think it's worth it. Sawyer is, at best, a pedestrian writer at the sentence-by-sentence level, and there are large segments here where he's not at his

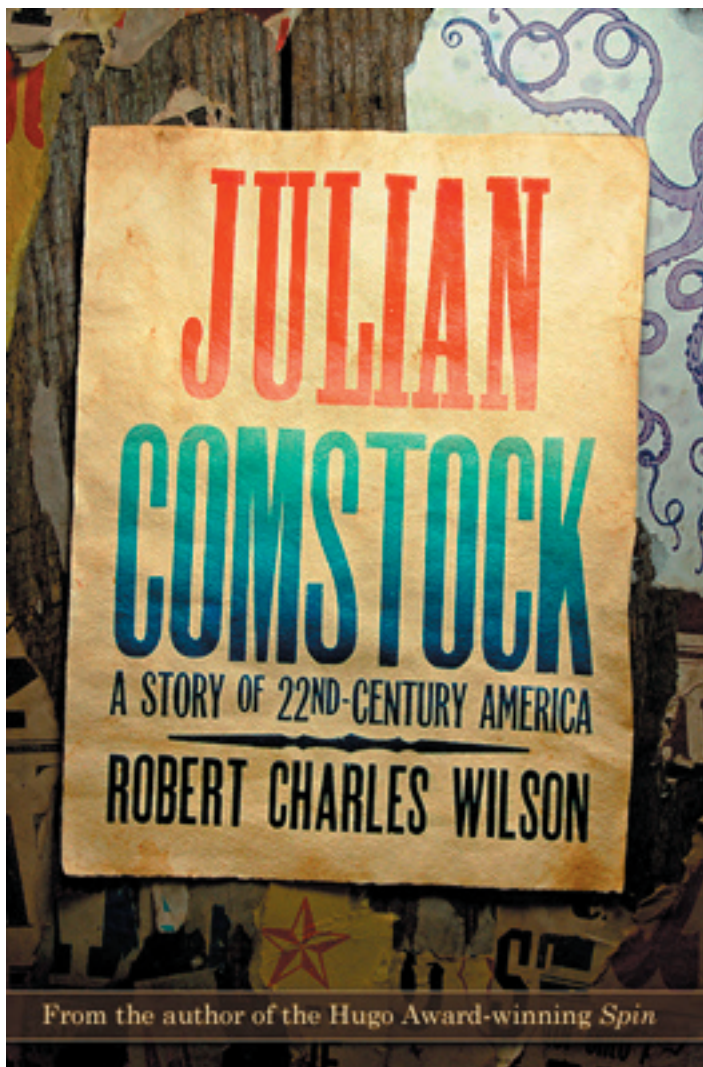
best. He also likes to fill books with fandom references, shout-outs to other books, and similar in-jokes, which didn't help given that I was having suspension of disbelief problems already. He kept pulling me into the book with Caitlin, and then knocking me out again with one of the other (much less interesting) subplots or some bad bit of writing, bad pun, or gosh-wow inaccurate technology description. Frustrating is the best way I can sum up the book.

That said, while this shouldn't be a Hugo winner, it does contain a spark of the best writing I've read from Sawyer yet. The best parts of this book could be the anchor of a truly excellent novel. I hope he'll eventually write something like it.

Followed by *Watch*.

Russ Allbery tries to write reviews for each book he reads, all of which are available on his web site at <http://www.eyrie.org/~eagle/reviews/>





Julian Comstock: A Story of 22nd Century America by Robert Charles Wilson.

Matthew Cheney on Julian Comstock

*They say the sky's the limit
But the sky's about to fall
Down come all them record books cradle and all
They say before he bit it
That the boxer felt no pain
But somewhere there's a gamblin' man
With a ticket in the rain...*

—The Low Anthem, “Ticket Taker”

I've been intending to read something by Robert Charles Wilson for a while now, especially after Lydia Millet told me she was a fan. I've got a great talent for intending to read things, but my follow-through isn't always great, and so Wilson's new novel, [Julian Comstock: A Story of 22nd-Century America](#),

is the first of his books I've read.

What ultimately got me reading *Julian Comstock* was Brian Slattery's 3-part interview with Wilson at Tor.com. I adore Slattery's work, and trust his judgment, particularly when it comes to novels about the collapse of America as we know it. I was intrigued, too, that the cover for Wilson's novel echoed the cover of Slattery's *Liberation*, though I've heard this was, in fact, an accident. Nonetheless, the books are similar in their portrayal of a world in which climate change and the end of cheap oil have had cataclysmic effects on society as we know it, and both books are adventure stories. Their differences lie especially in the ways they are told -- the narrative voice in *Liberation* is baroque and musical, the points of view slip fluidly from character to character, while *Julian Comstock* is narrated entirely by Julian's companion, Adam Hazzard, whose enthusiasm for neo-Victorian adventure novels has influenced his idea of what “good writing” should be and do.

I hate writing plot summaries, so I'm going to be lazy and steal Brian Slattery's description of the novel, which I can't much improve upon:

In *Julian Comstock*, with the demise of oil, America has returned to preindustrial levels of technology. The nation's calamitous fall—involving a thorough depletion of the population and the collapse of the political system as we know it—is a hazy historical memory, replaced by a larger-feeling country, more sparsely populated and more difficult to control. The much-weakened government vies for authority with the Dominion, a huge religious organization with theocratic aims, while waging a war with a European power for possession of a recently opened Northwest Passage.

Into the political, military, and religious tumult steps Julian Comstock, the nephew of the current president, Deklan Conqueror, and—inconveniently for Deklan—also the son of Deklan's brother Bryce, the former president whom Deklan had executed in his ascent to power. Julian's own artistic and political ambitions carry him and his best friend, Adam Hazzard, from the Midwest to Labrador to New York City, from homesteads to army barracks to the halls of power. The novel, narrated by Hazzard, is funny and sad, accessible and thought-provoking; a story of the future written in the style of the past; a light romance and a war saga; a novel of power plays and intimate friendship, where the personal is political and the political is personal.

Wilson developed Adam Hazzard's narrative voice after reading novels by [Oliver Optic](#) (William

Taylor Adams) and finding the naive and good-natured perspective a useful one to set against the often-gastly events -- like a milder, less absurd *Candide*. It's an effective choice, not just because it makes the book fun to read (and it does that), but because it gives us, the readers, something to do -- it's easy enough to pick up the clues very early on that Adam's perspective is a naive one, and from that moment on we understand the book through the surface of Adam's narrative and the deeper structure of our speculations about what is "really" going on. (One of my favorite instances of this is the information we receive about Julian's sexual orientation. The clues are relatively subtle, but they add up to a scene at the end that is deeply moving -- as much because of what Adam doesn't say as for what he does.)

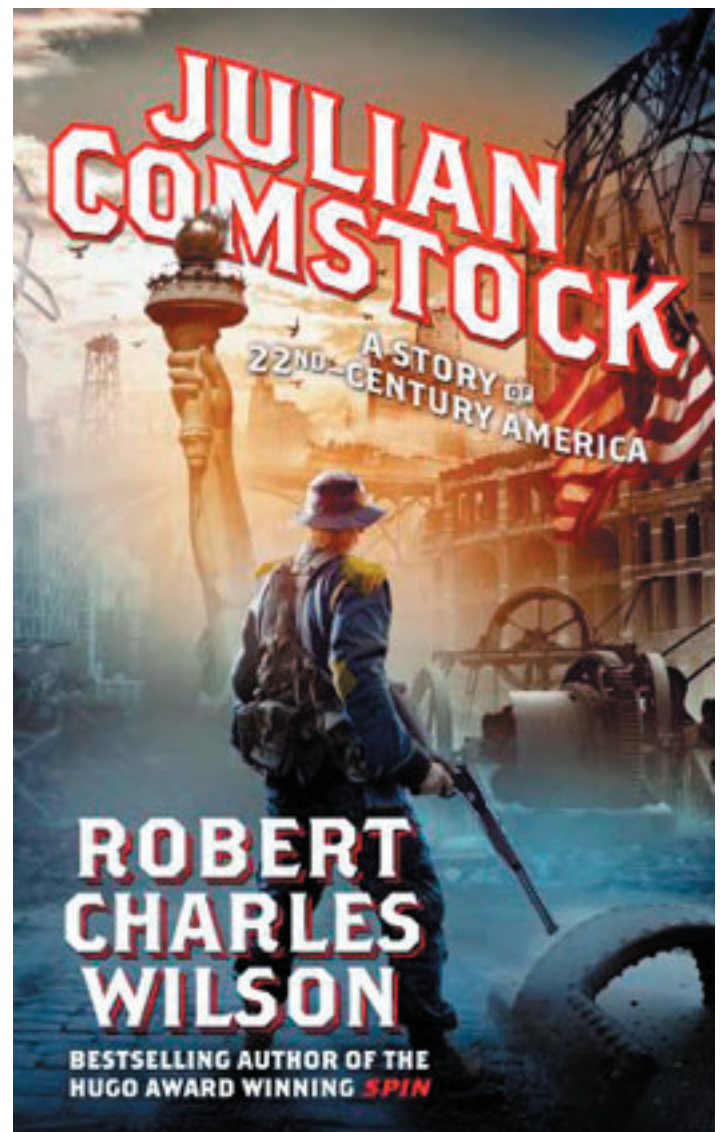
Aside from being amusing and sometimes giving us something to do, Adam's narration is also an accessible way into the world of 22nd-century America as Wilson has conceived it, because Adam has spent most of his life in a small town far from the country's governmental and religious centers, so when he travels, his observations are those of a wide-eyed neophyte, someone who needs lots of things explained to him. The effect can also be evocative, as in this paragraph wherein Adam tries to describe his first sight of New York City:

Manhattan in a spring dawn! I would have been in awe, if not for the dangers overhanging us. I won't test the reader's patience by dwelling on all the wonders that passed my eye that morning; but there were brick buildings four and five stories tall, painted gaudy colors -- amazing in their height but dwarfed by the skeletal steel towers for which the city is famed, some of which leaned like tipsy giants where their foundations had been undercut by water. There were wide canals on which freight barges and trash scows were drawn by reams of muscular canal-side horses. There were splendid avenues where wealthy Aristos and ragged wage workers crowded together on wooden sidewalks, next to fetid alleys strewn with waste and the occasional dead animal. There were the combined pungencies of frying food, decaying fish, and open sewers; and all of it was clad in a haze of coal smoke, made roseate by the rising sun.

This is a paragraph that could have appeared -- at least in terms of what it describes -- in a 19th century novel. Indeed, scenes from [Gangs of New York](#) popped into my mind occasionally. Artifacts from the days of the "Secular Ancients" are prized, but by the time the novel begins, most of the useful ones have

been found, and many of them have been locked away by the Dominion, which seems to consider ignorance a vital ingredient for religious faith.

This distance from our own time and technology is another difference with *Liberation*, where most of the adults remember the old days of cheap oil and polar ice caps. In some ways, the lack of much hybridity from the previous era was a disappointment to me, but I wouldn't say this is a failure on Wilson's part so much as a weakness in my own expectations -- I'm a sucker for stories of mixed and reconfigured technologies. Wilson's presentation of the world Julian and Adam inhabit is mostly plausible and convincing, though, and also captures some of unpredictable elements of future history: in this future, for instance, the Dutch are a major foe of the American powers as everyone scrambles to control a Northwest Passage through Labrador (such a passage being much easier to navigate as the arctic seas thaw...)



That the world of the novel is, indeed, so like pre-20th century America is a statement in and of itself about history and power -- the social/political structures that return include slavery and feudalism, both of which seem to be an outgrowth of numerous forces, but which flourish because of how useful they are to the twin powers within the less-centralized United States (those powers being the Dominion and the basically monarchic-aristocratic government). The danger for the entrenched powers within such a society is that they will be undermined if that society begins to change -- this, indeed, is Julian Comstock's own hope, and there are hints that his hope is not misguided.

One of the pleasures of *Julian Comstock* is the complexity of its political vision. Wilson does not present a monolithic, omniscient totalitarian government or some other sort of simple dystopia. The rivalry between the Dominion and the government is convincingly developed, and the country itself is also shown to have complex variations of culture, society, and politics in its various regions. There is also religious complexity -- the Dominion, which is a sort of amalgamation of various fundamentalist tendencies, is not the only religion in the land. Julian's mentor and guardian, Sam Godwin, is a Jew, though so little knowledge of Judaism has survived that he struggles to create a viable sense of faith and tradition for himself. Adam's parents are members of a barely-supported sect with a peculiar devotion to snakes. Groups of "unaffiliated" (basically illegal) churches are essential to the plot and character development in the later sections of the novel. Wilson's ability to present the political, economic, and religious complexities of his imagined world so effectively and entertainingly is among the most impressive accomplishments of the book -- there are only a few sections where the pacing falters and the story slumps, and these are easily forgivable. The narration is so buoyant that I sometimes let the light touch of the telling fool me into thinking the book was shallow or superficial, but then, whenever I stopped reading, I realized just how vivid the world and the story were, just how much I knew about this imagined place, and I began to admire what Wilson had done the way I admire any difficult feat achieved with the gusto and flair that make it all seem effortless.

I must say something, too, about the songs. Wilson nearly has Thomas Pynchon's talent for

inserting song lyrics into his story -- traditional songs, religious songs, protest songs, and finally, and most amusingly, songs about Darwin and natural selection. Julian's dream is to create a movie, an art form that has nearly disappeared completely in this world, where most old films have been lost and where the technology for creating movies barely exists. The films that people get to see are silent, and to accommodate this they are a mix of film and live theatre. And they usually include songs. Thus, when Julian begins work on a movie about Charles Darwin, he needs some songs, and Adam's wife Calyxa helps him come up with them. They aren't just songs about natural selection, though, because Julian needed to create a movie that would be popular, and so he got help from Adam's favorite writer, Mr. Charles Curtis Easton, who offers some excellent advice that Adam relates to Julian:

"He agreed that the story lacked some essential ingredients."

"Such as?"

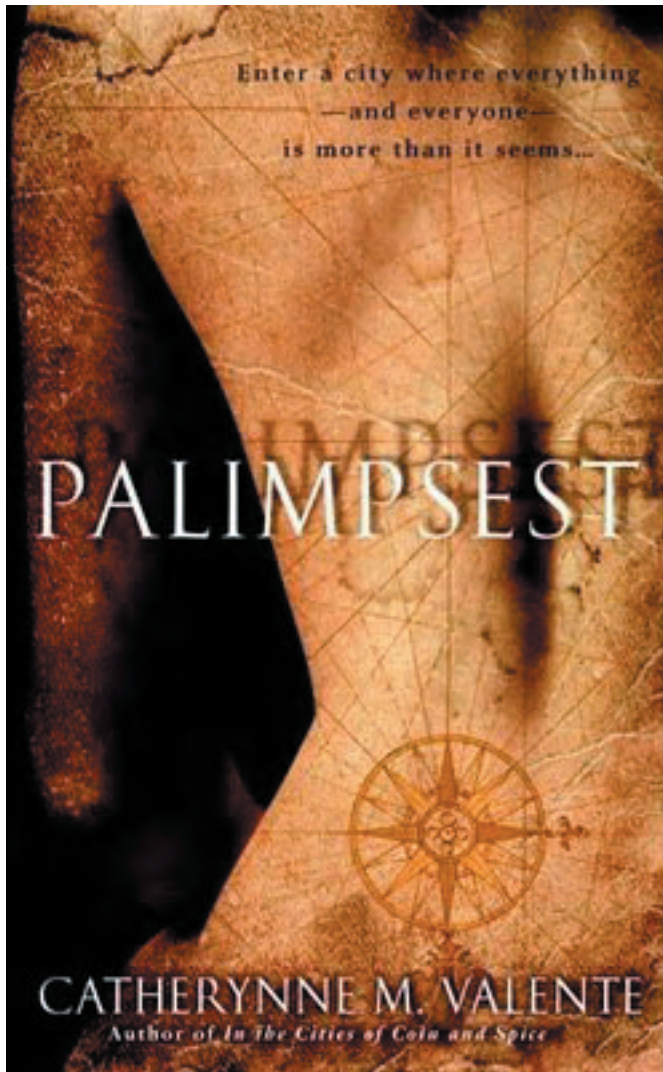
I cleared my throat. "Three acts -- memorable songs -- attractive women -- pirates -- a battle at sea -- a despicable villain -- a duel of honor--"

Julian eventually recognizes the value of these elements, and so adds them to the story of Charles Darwin, leading to pages where I chortled continuously as I read.

Speaking of music, while reading *Julian Comstock*, I discovered a perfect soundtrack for it -- a gorgeous album by The Low Anthem called *Oh My God Charlie Darwin* (parts of which can be heard on [the band's MySpace page](#)). I listened to the album repeatedly throughout my reading of the second half of the book. In particular, the first song, "Charlie Darwin" (available via the YouTube [here](#)), which, when listened to late at night while reading the last chapter before the epilogue, will make you cry.

A fine synergy -- lovely, evocative music and an amusing, thought-provoking novel. Really, what more do you want from life?





Palimpsest by Catherynne M Valente

Palimpsest by Catherynne M Valente Reviewed by Niall Harrison

Oh, this is a cold book. Its main characters, our four guides who contract the passport to the fantastical city of Palimpsest, are broken individuals all; there is almost no warmth in the very frequent sex they all engage in; and the closer they get to achieving their dream of permanently moving to Palimpsest, the clearer it becomes that for all its wonders, it is like everywhere else a place to live, not an answer. Reviews rightly talk about how penetrating the novel is on the relationship between the real and the fantastic. Matt Denault, in his exploration of the book for *Strange Horizons*, rightly notes that it shares with M. John Harrison's icy *The Course of the Heart* "the sense that nothing can be more real than reality." I'm a little surprised that words like *possessiveness* and *selfishness* don't crop up more often with reference to this book; they seem to me necessary to capture

the full desolation of the desire that the Palimpsest virus induces, an addictive need to make a place *ours*, to make it *us*, to fill ourselves up with it: a need familiar to readers of fantasy that the novel at first mocks, with its absurdly imaginative glimpses of a city that refuse to become a whole, and then, towards the close, seems to concede. The great weakness of *Palimpsest*, as Dan Hartland is most forceful in articulating, is that "Narratively and psychologically, [it] is without movement." Its characters can feel a little thin, not to mention hapless (perhaps particularly the two men; the two women felt more sharply defined to me throughout). All four are victims of the story, not shapers of it — a feeling reinforced by the highly structured, highly stylised nature of the book, which clinically cycles between the quartet, forcing more direction onto them than their individual lives ever seem to contain. But perhaps this is a final chill irony: an unresolvable struggle between the irresistible artifices of stories and something more fluid, less satisfying, that we have to try to recognise as life.

Notes

- Review of *Palimpsest* by Catherynne M. Valente by Matt Denault. *Strange Horizons*, 20 April 2009. <http://www.strangehorizons.com/reviews/2009/04/palimpsest_by_c-comments.shtml>
- "Things that are Unsightly": Catherynne Valente's *Palimpsest*", by Dan Hartland @Number71, 31 July 2009. <<http://thestoryandthetruth.wordpress.com/2009/07/31/things-that-are-unsightly-catherynne-valentes-palimpsest/>>

Palimpsest - My wrist hurts. That's a good sign. M Crasdan on Palimpsest

Annalee Newitz on Palimpsest

If you want a hot, brooding novel for the sticky summer months, then you need Catherynne M. Valente's *Palimpsest*. It's the story of a lovely, haunting city you only visit by having sex with people who have visited it.

Published a few months ago, *Palimpsest* is urban fantasy at its most literal: Valente has created a city that is like an erotic fantasy, if only such fantasies always meant something else. In this smart, melancholy story, all sex has a subtext. The four main characters each wake up after a night of passionate sex (or a day, or an afternoon) to discover that they suddenly have strange new tattoos somewhere on their bodies. Their tattoos look strangely like pieces of a map, which in fact they

turn out to be. Gradually they realized that the people they've been having sex with are gateways to the city of Palimpsest. Though only for one night at a time. After dreaming of the wondrous city, tourists always awaken back in our world.

The word palimpsest refers to a piece of parchment where something is written, then scratched off, then written upon again. It is a story that is erased and rewritten thousands of times, the same way many lives in a city begin and then wink out in the same places over time.

Bound together by one of the strange magic spells of the city, our four protagonists visit Palimpsest in dreams where they sense each other's presences. Each of them has a very strange sexual fetish: one is aroused by bookbinding, another by trains, another is infatuated with bees, and still another is a locksmith who falls in love with locks. Of course they love people too, impossible people who can exist only in Palimpsest. The more they adore the city's inhabitants, the more they must seek out other people back in their earthly cities with the strange tattoos. Only by having sex with those people can they return to Palimpsest.

Valente has written a novel where the clotted-cream style of the prose reflects the baroque landscapes she evokes in her imaginary city, and in the collapsing psychologies of her main characters. In many ways this is a book about transcendence, about finding a spiritual realm even in the most ordinary and debased activities. But it is also a novel quite simply about debasement. All of the characters, for various reasons, are leading shattered, degraded lives — half mad, filled with loss, dogged by loneliness.

Although Palimpsest seems like salvation to them, we are never quite sure why. The city is filled with horrors and dark visions, creatures who promise them love by literally torturing them. I think one of the flaws of the novel is that we never quite understand why these characters want to trade the ugliness of life on earth for the ugliness of life in Palimpsest. The bee lover called November, for example, meets a powerful woman in Palimpsest who proves to her that the city is not a dream by cutting off two of her fingers and then covering her body in bee stings. Unless she can figure out a way to immigrate to Palimpsest permanently — something nobody seems to know how to do — she is condemned to walk through life covered in thick scars.

It would seem that getting to Palimpsest isn't just a matter of getting laid. It's also about suffering.

Valente's point, which is as much spiritual as it is sexual, is that love is always twinned with suffering. The beautiful city of Palimpsest therefore must contain a heaping measure of pain.

Despite this, or perhaps because of it, visiting Palimpsest and seeing it through the eyes of Valente's characters is a bittersweet pleasure. Slowly we begin to learn that the history of this city is similar to many countries on earth, where the citizens battle over who shall be allowed to immigrate. As our protagonists learn more about what it will take to become permanent residents, we are drawn into the mystery of Palimpsest's war veterans, whose lost heads and limbs have been replaced with those of animals.

This novel manages to be the oddest of things: a confection that hurts. You may be spellbound by the city's mystery, and intrigued by the strange characters — but you won't get away from this book without feeling like it has drawn a little blood.

Any book that can make maps seem sexy is doing something very right.

M Crasdan on Palimpsest

Palimpsest reviewed by Russ Allbery

Palimpsest opens with a description of a factory with flashing green spires sending off loops of white flame. The workers enter wearing nothing but scales, hugging every line of their body, dancing through shift changes as they tend the machines that stamp out the vermin of the city. Lizards are poured, spiders are separated in a centrifuge, and every created creature knows that Casimira loves them and holds them close. Near Casimira's factory, four newcomers enter the city for the first time in a fortune-teller's shop, dipping their feet in ink, bound together with red yarn in to a Quarto that will be linked in sensation and experience until the ink wears off their feet.

One is warned immediately that this is a book rich in description, strange and dream-like construction, and symbolism whose purpose can be difficult to untangle.

Palimpsest follows the four people who form the Quarto of the introductory passage in both that world and in ours: a blue-haired Japanese girl utterly obsessed with trains, a beekeeper named November who makes lists, an immigrant locksmith who listens to locks and keys and the ghost of his drowned sister, and a book-binder married to an expert on ink. All four of them achieve entry to the fantastic city of Palimpsest, but fleetingly and in dreams. They become part of an

underground who each have fragments of Palimpsest's map tattooed mysteriously on their skin and who seek each other out, desperate to return to the city that seems more real and more rich than the waking world.

The entry to Palimpsest is through sex, which if you've heard of this book before is probably what you heard about it. Sex with someone who has been there will take you to the city and, the first time, leave you marked with a map fragment of your own. Once you've been there, sex is how you return for that night's dreaming. And where you end up in the city is determined by the map of the person with whom you have sex. As you might expect, over the course of this book there's quite a lot of sex.

That's not, however, the focus, or rather it's only the focus insofar as Valente uses it as a deeply personal transit, but also one that is invasive and often tawdry. The characters are obsessed with getting back to a city full of wonders and dream-like constructions, where every stone and insect is full of unimagined wonders, and then more deeply with finding something that only that city can give them: a train, a sister, a wife, a purpose. There are flashes of passion, but also flashes of sex as a drug. Sometimes it's a sacrament, and sometimes it's a mechanical necessity. It's present as a lurking backdrop that surfaces only in flashes and moments, and in the psychological effects and aftermath.

This book is a dark fairy tale: it's about choices, high prices paid, and about obsession, about how far people will go to obtain what matters most to them in life. It lives and dies in its characters, and there Valente does an excellent job. All four are radically different in both their wishes and in their reactions to Palimpsest, and all four are far in the margins of normal human psychology (Palimpsest seems to attract obsessives of one type or another), but I felt like I understood all four of them through the book and cared what happened to them. That hook is vitally important in this sort of book, since otherwise the reader ends up cast adrift in the sheer overwhelming strangeness of the dream-like setting. Even with strong characters, Valente occasionally lost me. But it mostly works, and there's a more coherent and cohesive plot lurking in the story than one might expect from the start.

Whether I liked the book is a more complicated question. *Palimpsest* has a lot in common with poetry, and as with poetry that's rich in images, I think one's enjoyment will depend heavily on whether those images strike a chord. Valente works hard throughout

at using a few lines to create a startling or memorable image, and sometimes those images are exceptional:

Ludo opened his eyes to a room flooded with sunlight, all the brighter for her sparse belongings. The sunlight seemed to be unsure of what to do in the absence of a couch to fade or curtains to shine through, and so had gone helplessly nova in the center of Nerezza's living room.

But there's a lot of this, and most of it isn't as good as that passage. I've seen other reviews complaining that Valente can't write a sentence without a metaphor or simile, and indeed, this is that sort of book. If you want rich and imagistic language that's constantly trying to construct word pictures, *Palimpsest* is often very rewarding. If you're looking for an easily comprehensible story and fast-moving plot, skip this book until you're in a different mood.

I understood the characters but had difficulty liking them. They are, in many ways, very much like drug addicts: they give up everything in order to obtain what they're obsessed with. What they're obsessed with changes somewhat over the course of the story, but they're all deeply self-focused in a way that can be hard to swallow. But the ways in which they're self-focused are fascinatingly strange. Sei's total obsession with trains made her my early favorite, and I liked her throughout the book, but the character I enjoyed the most was November with her lists.

The keeping of lists was for November an exercise kin to the repeating of a rosary. She considered it neither obsessive nor compulsive, but a ritual, an essential ordering of the world into tall, thin jars containing perfect nouns. Enough nouns connected one to the other create a verb, and verbs had created everything, had skittered across the face of the void like pebbles across a frozen pond. She had not yet created a verb herself, but the cherry-wood cabinet in the hall contained book after book, jar after jar, vessel upon vessel, all brown as branches, and she had faith.

I suspect I would need to read this book several times to get the full impact, and I didn't like it quite well enough to do that. It missed making an emotional connection with me; the city is a bit too capricious, too mischievous and immature, and the characters a bit too self-centered and selfish. But it is, at times, strikingly beautiful and I'm happy I read it. I don't think it has any chance of winning a Hugo, but it deserved its nomination.

Rating: 7 out of 10

Reviewed: 2010-05-2



Boneshaker by Cheri Priest

Boneshaker: A Novel of Trouble, right here in the Emerald City
By Chris Garcia

Some novels are statements. Others are questions. Some end with an abrupt exclamation point and some end with a set of ellipses. Rarely does a novel start with an exclamation point and end with a period. It feels like a let-down, like the reader was lied to with the first segment and then let down, often quite hard with the latter. Cheri Priest's *Boneshaker* could be said to fall into that pattern, but that would only recognise the period as the power-player when that exclamation

Zeke is curious and perhaps a bit impetuous. He is trying to figure out the truth about his father and his Grandfather and what it means to him. He makes his way into the now walled-up city of Seattle and Briar goes in herself to find her son.

Yes, it's a Steampunk-Horror retelling of any number of Lifetime Original Movies.

That's not entirely fair, of course, but much like

those, the ending is almost assured because Mama can never fail. That's one of the biggest problems with the story. At point is much bigger than you'd think.

Boneshaker is the story of Briar Wilkes and her son, Ezekiel. The two of them live in Seattle in a world where the Civil War's been going on for more than two decades. The world Priest creates with her language is remarkable, and she manages to infuse the War, taking place thousands of miles away, into her story.

The real story may, in fact, have happened sixteen years before our action begins. Briar's former husband, Leviticus Blue, built a machine for the Russians that could be used as a mining device. He tests it early, leading to a portion of the city collapsing and a mysterious gas called Blight seeping out of the ground. Blight turns humans into a form of zombie that are not necessarily the shambling horde, but more like late period Romero running zombies. Briar's family also included her father, a figure who orchestrated a prison break to save people from the Blight. He is referred to by some, and this gives us the lead into the story. Things slow, you're sorta riding a wave.

The other thing is that after a bit, we're introduced to the Rotters: the zombies created by the Blight. At first, we're shown these monsters and they're pretty freaky. We see that they're monstrous, flesh-eating killing machines, but after the first couple of attacks, the confrontations seem to be less dangerous, more of an inconvenience than a threat. The last moment when they seem like something dangerous is an escape across most points, there was no question that Briar was going to succeed in finding her boy. More on that in a bit.

The opening portion of the book is rusty, fast and engulfing. The moment that Briar comes home and finds Zeke gone sets off the best 100 pages of novel I've read so far this year. It's breathless stuff that draws the reader in and doesn't let go. This portion of the book was the big exclamation point. It moved me to keep reading, and even when it started to slow, I was moved to keep reading. The initial power of the novel is pretty much spectacular as they're exploring options in the city, but after that, the Rotters only seem like a nuanced attack from the Mad Man Dr. Minnericht. He's the villain who controls much of what happens in the walled portions of Seattle, and he's an inventor, but mostly, he's a pain at a distance. Perhaps she went to the well once too often.

Airships, which are an important part of the story as well, also have the same problem. The first

time we encounter them, it feels like the kind of magic that you feel the first time the Black Pearl appears in *Pirates of the Caribbean*. The second time, it's still got some of that power, and by the fourth time, it's just ho-hum. Still, Priest treats the airships far more seriously than a lot of writers who seem to try to ride the mere thought of them.

That first rush wears off right around the time we finally meet Dr. Minnericht face-to-face. From that point forward, everything starts to feel too easy. The Rotters are no longer a real threat, they're simply a stumbling block. Zeke gets his end tied up very quickly, and we're presented with a serious twist at the end that I saw telegraphed from the very start of Briar's adventures. The book zigs exactly when you expect it to zig. Sadly, when the twist is revealed to Zeke, his reaction is one of the big problems as it moves him no further along despite it being the crux of the story.

I should also make a nod to the design of the book itself. It's gorgeous with a sepia tone tinte ink and

a gorgeous cover. It's a lovely piece of work.

All in all, there's a lot to like in *Bonshaker*. The good is really good. The bad isn't terrible, but it does dial the entire book down. Much like *Mainspring* from Jay Lake, there seems to be a point in the middle where the entire process hits a wall, and sadly in both cases that phrase is a pun. Is *Bonshaker* worth reading? Absolutely. Priest's prose is crisp, her setting intelligent and her characters are pretty fully realised, but sadly, it seems like she's not a closer.

Russ Allbery on *Bonshaker*

In an alternate 1860 in which the Klondike gold rush began fifty years earlier than it did in our reality, the Russians ran a contest, looking for a machine capable of drilling through ice to get at a newly discovered rich vein of gold. They were on the verge of giving up three years later when a man named Leviticus Blue invented the *Bonshaker*, or rather Dr. Blue's Incredible Bone-Shaking Drill Engine. The reasons for subsequent events are unclear, but all agree that

Blue drove the finished *Bonshaker* underneath the central downtown of a much more populous Seattle than in our universe, destroying the financial district and opening the vaults of nearly every bank. In the subsequent turmoil, something far worse came in its wake: a noxious gas rising from the tunnel, spreading out over the city, killing those who breathed it, and then raising them again as zombies (or, as this book calls them, rotters). Downtown was evacuated in a panic as makeshift walls were put in place to try to keep the gas from spreading.

It's now sixteen years later, and the downtown core is surrounded by a hundred-foot wall and abandoned to the gas and the rotters. The remaining denizens huddle near the walls in a grey world scarred by the acidity of what blight gas blows out of the city, while the US Civil War drags on and on in the east. Briar Wilkes, Blue's former wife, works long hours in the water purification plant that removes the blight from the city's water, despite constant harassment by her coworkers, to support a marginal existence for herself and her son Zeke. She never talks about what happened, leaving Zeke to develop his own theories and ideas. Those ideas eventually harden into a determination to prove his father innocent and reclaim his family name, sending him through drainage tunnels under the wall into the old city. Briar follows by airship after an earthquake, and so begins a pulp adventure story in the rotter-infested, blight-filled, crumbling streets of an alternate



an alternate Seattle.

Zombies have been the rage in dark fantasy for the past ten years or so, turning up everywhere from the multiplex to retellings of classic novels. Steampunk — elaborate 19th century technology of brass and gears — has been a growing subgenre since around 1990. I don't believe Priest was the first one to cross the streams, but she does so with gusto and may be the most memorable. Everything an aficionado of either genre could hope for is here: desperate running gun battles with the mindless slaving horde, grotesque turnings of humans to zombies, airships and airship battles, ingenious inventions, lavish Victorian hideouts, clockwork hands, aviator goggles, and the book's most enduring symbol: the ever-present gas mask that the characters struggle with, hate, and need to survive the blight gas.

I hate the kid. He's a snot-nosed prick who thinks he's wise. Fuck him.

M Crasdan on Zeke in Boneshaker

Zeke and Briar enter the city in entirely different places and through different methods, and most of the book is devoted to Zeke's search for a way to his father's old home and Briar's search for Zeke. They both meet different cross-sections of the desperate and determined people who remain in the city (in part because addictive drugs can be distilled from blight gas), letting the reader piece together some of the political structure and alliances of the city before either of the characters. The rotters are thankfully more threatened than seen; they're there for the climax, of course, but otherwise Priest is sparing about showing them directly. The constant struggle for survival is more against the gas than the zombies, which makes for a more psychological (and, frankly, less silly) sort of suspense than constant zombie battles would have.

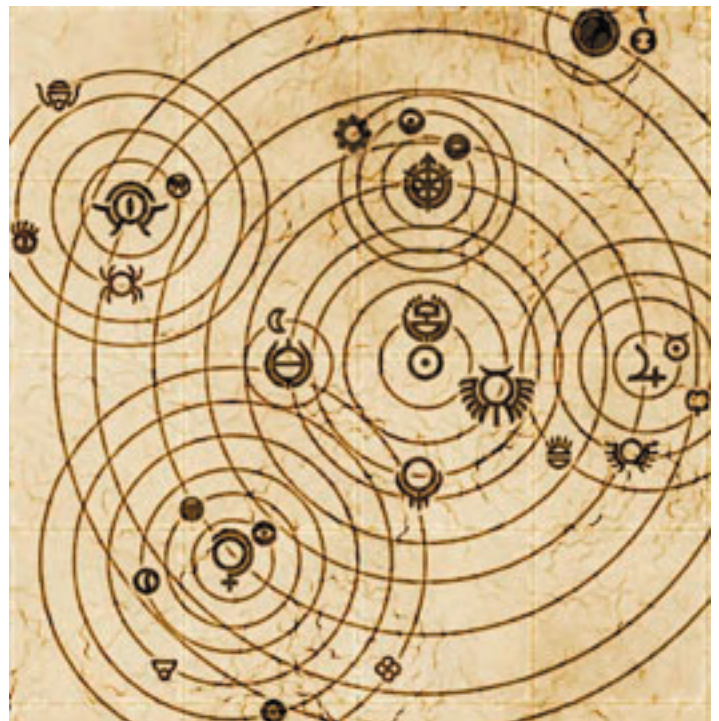
Boneshaker has no qualms about being sheer pulp adventure, down to a monomaniacal villain, an evilly effective lieutenant, and a variety of helpful allies or useful cannon fodder. But what surprised me is the depth of the characterization. As well as being pulp adventure, it's also a story about the relationship between a single mother and her son, about poverty and the cruelty of communities, and about loyalty and love in a way that doesn't involve long speeches or lots of words. Both Briar and Zeke have messed up their relationship, but both of them are trying hard, and the book is refreshingly without either angstful emotional

collapses or tearful revelatory morals. Everything isn't suddenly all better, but even if they struggle to talk to each other, the bond between them is stronger than anything in the book. The conclusion was far less maudlin than it could have been, and far more satisfying and true to the characters.

It's that characterization and relationship that for me elevated this book above a straight retro-pulp adventure and left it feeling like far more than a confluence of two commercial trends in the SF world. Neither zombie apocalypse nor steampunk are genres that hold much interest for me, but I liked Briar, wanted to root for her, and was drawn through the story by her determination. Life doesn't come easy to her, but she makes the best of bad situations and does what she can, in a way that made her one of the more admirable protagonists I've read about in some time. That's a lot more depth than one usually gets in a pulp heroine.

If you like steampunk or zombie fiction, and particularly if you like both, this is a great book. If you don't, and even if you can't stand horror at all, you may still want to give it a try. The horror aspect is more claustrophobic than terrifying; at least for me, it's not the sort of book that could give one nightmares. And despite the pulp background and larger-than-life supporting cast, the characterization of the protagonists is spot-on and a joy to read. I liked it rather more than I thought I was going to.

Rating: 8 out of 10



The City & The City by China Mieville

The City and The City

Reviewed by Michael Moorcock

The Spaces In Between

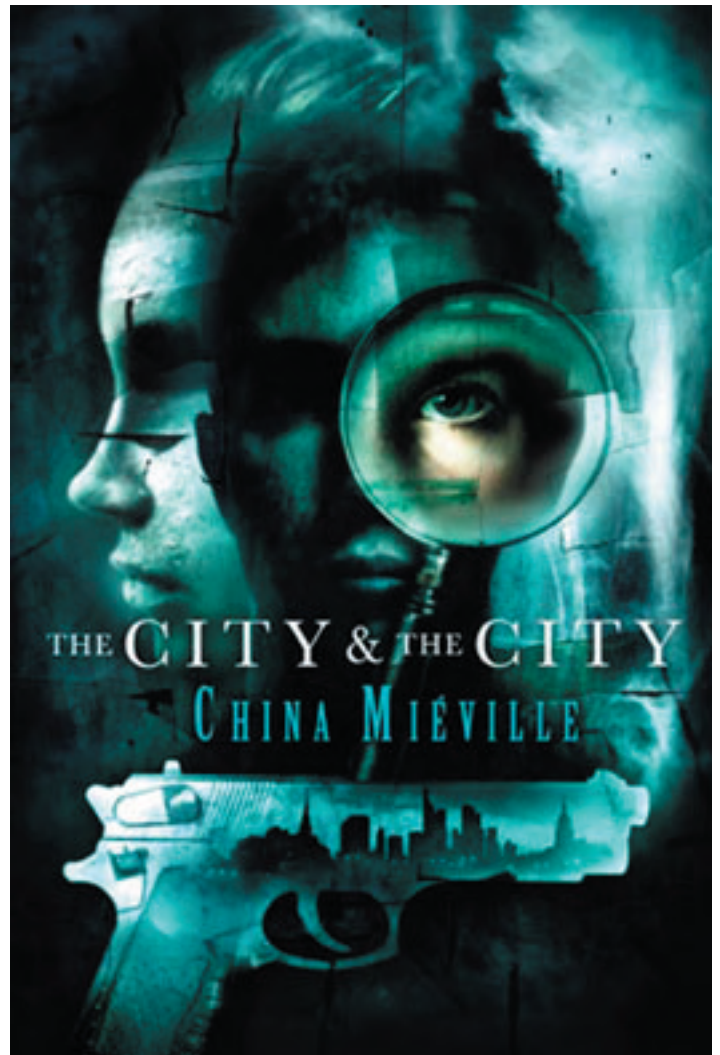
Michael Moorcock is transported by China Miéville's extraordinary cityscape

China Miéville is perhaps the current generation's finest writer of science fantasy, that beguiling genre for which JG Ballard and M John Harrison have produced so much of their fiction. Miéville's first novel, *King Rat*, was a grim urban horror story about contemporary London. His later work is primarily set in the alternative world of Bas-Lag - ambitious novels such as *Perdido Street Station* and *Iron Council*, packed with grotesque characters, gorgeous imagery, amazing monsters, political parables and intricate plotting.

The City and the City is very different. It takes place in our familiar world, a post-Soviet locale which draws on string theory for its ideas and conventional experience for its story. Apart from one exceptional detail, this book could be a clever mystery story told from the point of view of a Balkan policeman struggling to cope with the problems of a society burdened by traditions and attitudes from its recent authoritarian past. Featureless concrete, rattling trams and antiquated office equipment invoke Greene's *The Third Man* and Vienna's zones of occupation. You can almost hear a zither twanging somewhere in an echoing sewer.

Playing off the current theoretical physicists' notion that more than one object can occupy the same physical space, Miéville demonstrates a disciplined intelligence reminiscent of the late Barrington Bayley (who specialised brilliantly in scientific implausibilities), helping us to hang on to the idea that the city of Beszel exists in the same space as the city of Ul Qoma. Citizens of each city can dimly make out the other, but are forbidden on pain of severe penalties (administered by a supreme authority known simply as Breach) to notice it. They have learned by habit to "unsee". The cities have different airports, international dialling codes, internet links. Cars navigate instinctively around one another; police officers cooperate but are not allowed to stop or investigate crimes committed in the other city.

Subtly, almost casually, Miéville constructs a metaphor for modern life in which our habits of "unseeing" allow us to ignore that which does not directly affect our familiar lives. Yet he doesn't encourage us to understand his novel as a parable,



rather as a police mystery dealing with extraordinary circumstances. The book is a fine, page-turning murder investigation in the tradition of Philip K Dick, gradually opening up to become something bigger and more significant than we originally suspected.

Though Kafka is predictably invoked by the publisher, this is in no way an absurdist or surrealist narrative. All mysteries and events are either explained or open to explanation; the protagonist, Inspector Borlú of the Beszian Extreme Crime Squad, is a dogged discoverer of the truth, frustrated by but accepting Breach's rules, which we see early on demonstrated in all their stern inflexibility.

A young woman's body is found on a rundown housing estate and Borlú is assigned to the case. Pretty much from the beginning he realises there's something unusual about the murder; he's convinced that it involved illegal passage between the two cities and is thus a matter for Breach. Someone with power, maybe a politician, is keeping it as an ordinary police case. But why? Soon Borlú's investigations lead him to request official permission to follow up inquiries in co-existent

Ul Qoma; after considerable bureaucratic rigmarole, he meets his rather condescending opposite number, who escorts him across the border from one reality to the other.

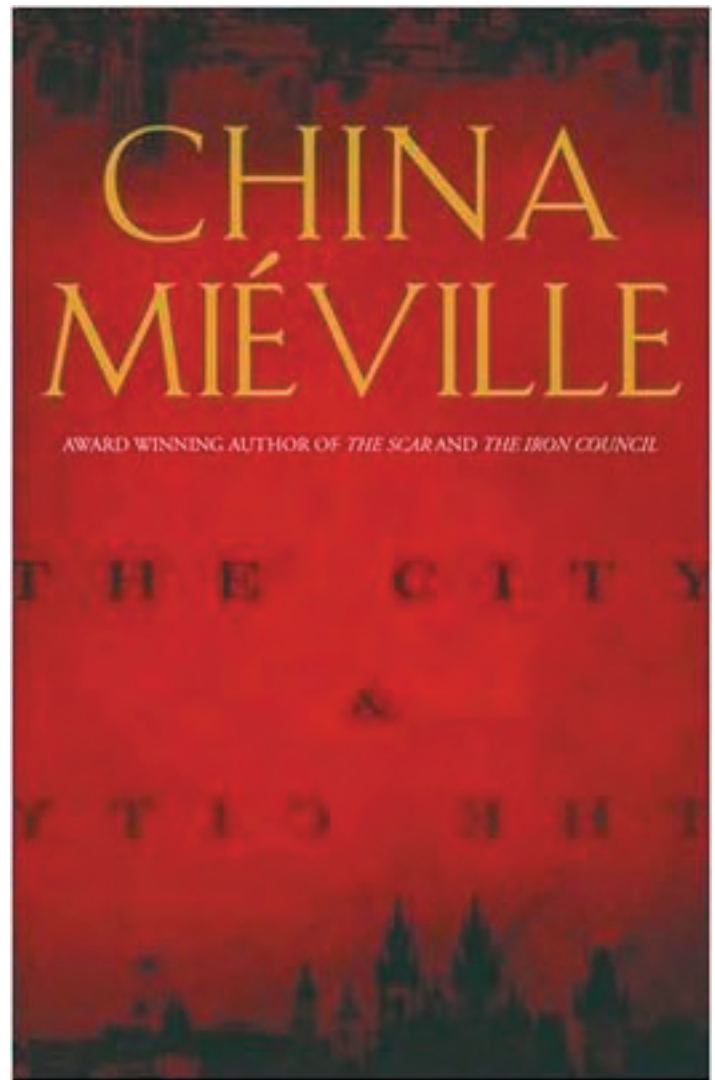
The wealthier city has succeeded in getting better foreign investment. North American archeologists have been discovering mysterious remains there for some years. The murdered girl had been participating in a dig which clearly plays a crucial part in the mystery. Under the influence of her team's senior archeologist (who now strenuously denies any such belief) she became convinced that a third city, Orciny, exists in the interstices between one city and another, unseen by occupants of both and guarding its secret by means of cynical violence, perhaps in direct opposition to Breach or even identical to it.

Steadily, Miéville thickens his plot with exceptional mastery. Next, evidently terrified of something, the senior archeologist disappears, maybe taken by those mysterious Orcinians whose artefacts he's helped to uncover. A friend of the murder victim is next to vanish. Against their wills, Borlú and his partner begin to believe in Orciny, and ultimately events force Borlú into contemplating an act of Breach. But Breach severely punishes all transgressions, no matter what their motives or status. Those who defy Breach usually disappear for good. Even those who commit Breach accidentally are found with their memories wiped. Why does it have to be so unforgiving?

Despite the violent deaths of those he seeks to help or interrogate, and a growing fear for his own life, Inspector Borlú slogs on in pursuit of the truth as the book moves remorselessly towards its extraordinary denouement. As in no previous novel, the author celebrates and enhances the genre he loves and has never rejected. On many levels this novel is a testament to his admirable integrity. Keeping his grip firmly on an idea which would quickly slip from the hands of a less skilled writer, Miéville again proves himself as intelligent as he is original.

THE CITY & THE CITY By China Miéville
(MacMillan, £17.99)
Reviewed by Peter Weston

That reiteration of 'The City' should, correctly, be printed upside down except that I can't easily do it on my computer. Its significance is that the novel takes place in two cities which inter-penetrate; that is, the run-down and vaguely Eastern-European Beszel



co-exists with the booming and slightly Oriental Ul Qoma. Two separate cultures, different languages even, occupying the same physical space, the inhabitants of one habitually 'unseeing' the citizens of the other, even with two lots of traffic obeying different rules on the same streets (except that they aren't the 'same', not when a Besz only acknowledges his 'own' set of pedestrians, buildings and street-signs).

I've been a bit suspicious of tackling Miéville's previous books (perhaps it's the ear-ring that does it) and to be honest, this didn't look the sort of thing I'd enjoy, yet I slipped into it easily and found it a clever, fast-paced and fascinating murder mystery set in a bizarre and surreal landscape. But at the end of the day it's another one of those SF books which, as the Austrian critic Franz Rottensteiner once said, "offers silly answers to stupid questions." The twin cities could only last as long as their inhabitants were prepared to observe the ridiculously restrictive rules which govern their daily lives. And they wouldn't stand for it, not for five minutes never mind five centuries! So it's all nonsense, though very entertaining nonsense!

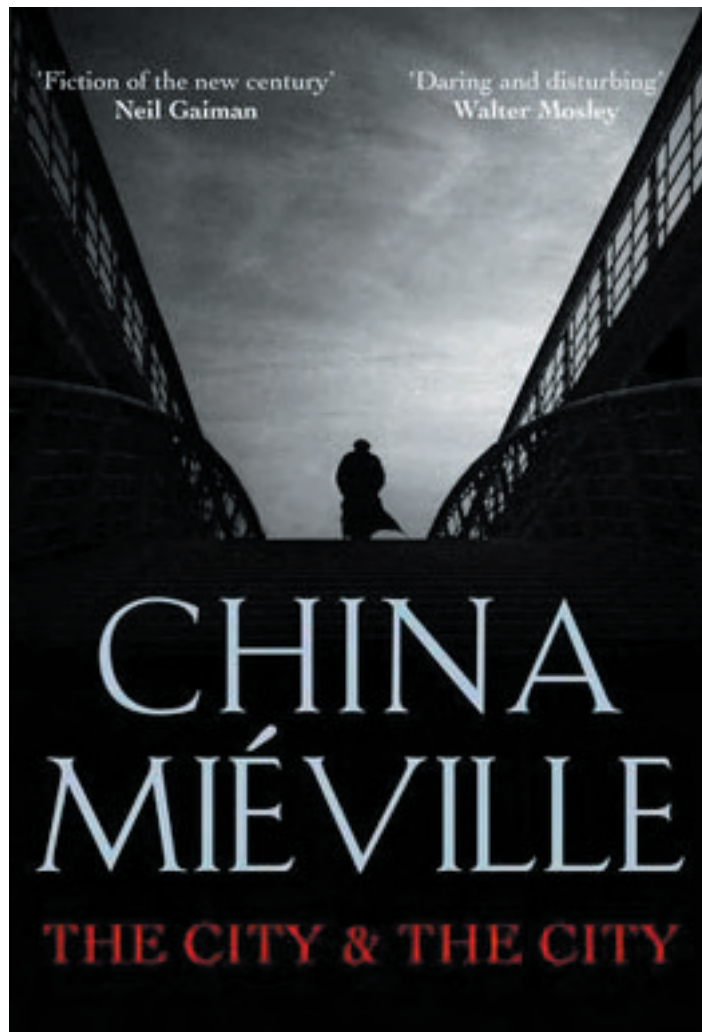
The City & The City: Seeing, Unseeing and the Illusion of Control

by Christopher J Garcia

Warning: There be spoilers here!

China Mieville's a genius. That's the only way to put it. He's also the kind of thinker that really sends those looking from the outside into a tizzy. You can see the grandeur of his thought patterns and the cold calculation of much of his dense philosophy. Starting with *King Rat*, China has truly established himself as the most important voice in genre fiction today.

And there's an amazing experiment called *The City & The City*, in which China presents us two worlds, each invisible to the other through Century-old policies and practices. It's an amazing thought experiment, inspired by quantum physics, and quite possibly a story about a pair of cities that are a quantumly enmeshed, occupying the same physical space, though that's not how I read it. Though it's a detective novel that isn't great. The theory, the challenges it brings to mind and the way in which it attacks the problem of seeing and unseeing is more than enough to make up for any lack of perfection in the mystery.



Interestingly, which almost every analysis I've seen of the novel focuses on the matter of unseeing, a direct tie-in to the modern world where we, the dwellers of the Citys, unsee the ragged, the downtrodden, the foreign, the pained, the oppressed as a matter of course. We dismiss those who are not directly related to what we are about. If we can manage to completely shut out several classes of humans, why not an entire intertwined city, where there are cross-overs, 'cross-hatched' areas as they're referred to? That makes sense, but there's a part of the novel that goes far beyond that idea into the realm of policy and protection.

Control, Mr. Mieville seems to be saying, is an illusion.

Ul Qoma is one city, the ascending power it would seem, Muslim and beginning to gleam. Beszel is the descending, the slow eroding glory. It is presented as a Jewish settlement. Both still exist, wholly separate, and governed by a, Oversight Committee, which protects the division. The muscle, it seems, is called Breach. The story, in a way, revolves around the creation myth, the story of a third city called Orciny. Orciny, it is claimed, exists in the cracks, where each City believes that those passing through it are located in the other City. Officially, it is a dream, a concoction of some mind a thousand years prior designed to scare or fascinate or befuddle the people of the day; perhaps to justify the strict adherence to the lines of the Citys.

"...When the old commune split, it didn't split into two, it split into three. Orciny's the secret city. It runs things."

That's an amazing concept within a concept which is hard enough to fathom. If you can believe that there are two Citys which live enmeshed, why can't there be a third, living between the two? If you can believe that you can drive across an intersection where the traffic coming parallel may be on a completely different pattern of stoplights, then why can there be a third where the signals that are taught on either side do not apply? The implausibility is huge, but it's so interesting in the way that we believe the human brain can compensate and make it work.

But that's where the other identity comes in: Breach.

Breach is the Sight Police, if you will. It controls how the residents of the two sides interact, or more accurately, do not. Breach is a concept, a physical force and a show-stopper of a villain. But breach is not a villain in this story, despite the protagonists constantly

seeming to regard it as such. Breach is the kind of force that exists outside of plot. It is the kind of force that creates plot, but moreso, it is the kind of force that moulds characters. Breach is tough, big, scary. It is the not the thread hold the sword of Damacles, it is the piton that may or may not be fully installed that it's tied to.

Breach becomes real. Breach is a physical force, as I've said, and we learn that Breach is more than just the Sight Police. Breach is the control function, the third entity, not really physically, but ideologically. Breach is everything Orciny is claimed to be, but it is also more. Breach does not require others to unsee it: Breach can dance upon daylight, but once Breach is seen, well, the seer is in trouble even before that happens.

The more we see of Breach, the more we realise that Breach is where Orciny is supposed to be, but really isn't. We're told that there's an Oversight Committee, made up of individuals of both Cities, but Breach is beyond them save for reporting. The Oversight Committee exerts just enough power, but it seems to leave Breach to do the work. They are that segment that make decisions, Breach is the truncheon that has to crack the heads.

Breach has to tell its tales, but Breach has nearly unlimited power. This is a direct analog to our own world's information gathering cabals like the CIA or various arms of the Mossad. They report, they tell their tales, but they do as they please for the most part. They keep the peace, play on both sides of every situation, which is ultimately what dealing with the Citys is like. Breach must control their populations and only the unseeing, the direct denial of what is presented to the senses, can achieve that.

But what is the reality of that control?

Detective Borlu points out that his seeing of an Ul Qoma woman isn't enough to justify Breach, but it's the kind of thing that can get you in trouble. But it IS breaching just seeing the woman across the street who is in the other city, and Breach can do nothing about it. It's very similar to the guy who sees the woman cooking naked in her apartment as he pulls in: it's against the law, but it's next to impossible to prove. There's so much that can't be controlled by the authorities. Breach can control the big stuff, but that's not the dangerous part of what they have to patrol. They MUST contain the thinking of their populations above all. All the contraband in the world can slip through the cross-hatched areas of the Citys, but if a rash of residents of either city started unseeing, then

things fall apart, the illusion can not hold. The most dangerous things, sight and thought, are the only things that Breach can not truly control.

And there in lies a major point that I missed on my first reading of the book. The physical is so much easier than the mental, and the emotional is even less bordered. Every individual in either City suffers the separation, and emotionally, each feels slighted by the other. The Unifs, Unificationalists, want to bring them together, some to subsume Beszel into Ul Qoma, others vice-versa, and some a third thing. That's ultimately dangerous thinking and is very public, so it is visible to Breach, but they know that bombarding them, taking them out completely is not an option because it will almost certainly bring everything else down around them.

The end of the novel shows what happens In Breach, but it also outlines how Breach is formed, how their population accrues. It is not a planned association, but an accumulation, a trash-collection. This is the ultimate sign of its loss of control. Breach must take from those who are, at least once, In Breach. The greatest adherents to the code are unacceptable to occupy Breach. Breach is created from the trash. Breach can not control who it brings in, which is perhaps the perfect example of why Breach is uncontrolled.

The odd thing is that Orciny plays perfectly into this in a fashion. If Breach allows Orciny to be believed in, then what form of control can they maintain? If a fiction was allowed to exist for a thousand years, then what other lies have been told? Orciny would be able to breach anytime they wanted. They'd be able to mix with either side, and neither side, and both at once. That is the danger of Orciny. They'd be assumed to be The Other until the moment they became The This. That idea, that a single act of change, a quantum event, means that the control of Breach is not universal, that there could be some power beyond it, and that single notion would so weaken it as to make it unnecessary. Breach is a form of Orciny, I think that Breach understands that, but Breach must remain something of a monster under the bed, so Orciny can not exist in the minds of the Citys' citizens. Breach must remain beyond, and so must Orciny. Breach is known, and feared, but that fear can only be rode so far. Orciny is hidden, spoken of in whispers because of the fear of the organisation that actually behaves like Orciny.

My personal theory is that Breach evolved out of Orciny. That there was a third, possibly 'open' city and that it slowly devolved into what Breach has

become by being the enforcers of the two Citys and living half-openly. Orciny died the moment Breach was created. That would only make sense.

The greatest danger is that the game they're all playing in the Citys is only skin deep. What if the average person is only going through the motions, spending time making believe, avoiding cars they clearly see coming, noticing the buildings no matter what city they're in. The ultimate radicalism isn't the ones who call for reunification, but those who would not unsee, those that will not break the boundries openly, but simply act regularly but see differently. If people follow that course, all it takes is one moment of breach and a flood-gate is opened. There is no way to fight that, much the same way there's no way to fight radical thought of any form in our world. If you pay your taxes, go to work, buy only small amounts of explosive components, drive an American car, wear western clothing, try to lose your accent, and not stand up and scream Anti-Americanisms, you're not likely to have the FBI knocking at our door telling you you're a threat to the American way of life. If you play by the outward rules, you're free to think what you like, to plan what you will, and there's almost nothing that can stop the thought. Action requires exposure, but to

what level is that prosecutable? None, really. Inciting a riot is a crime, but thinking that you should riot is not, or maybe it is. Breach, and its real world companions, can only truly act on action. The illusion is that they can see into your soul, can tell you what card you pulled out of the deck.

There is a book within The City & The City, called Between The City & The City, that tells the supposed story of what happened before the 'Cleavage' and why there must have been an Orciny. This is what I want to be able to read more than anything, because this pair of Citys is so rich that only a volume dedicated to the thoughts surrounding their most dangerous myth can truly make us appreciate the tenuous nature of their existence and would make us realise exactly what sort of game Breach is playing.



The Windup Girl by Paolo Bacigalupi

Cory Doctorow on Windup Girl

[The Windup Girl](#), Paolo Bacigalupi's debut novel, is causing quite a stir in science fiction circles, with whispers of a Hugo nomination and critical praise from all sides (including me: I just nominated it for the Locus prize for best first novel).

Bacigalupi is already well known for his amazing short stories, such as the Hugo-nominated "The Calorie Man," which is set in the same world that *The Windup Girl* takes place in. He has a deserved reputation as a prose-stylist whose facility with language borders on the poetic, and as someone whose visionary ideas benefit from this poetic presentation.

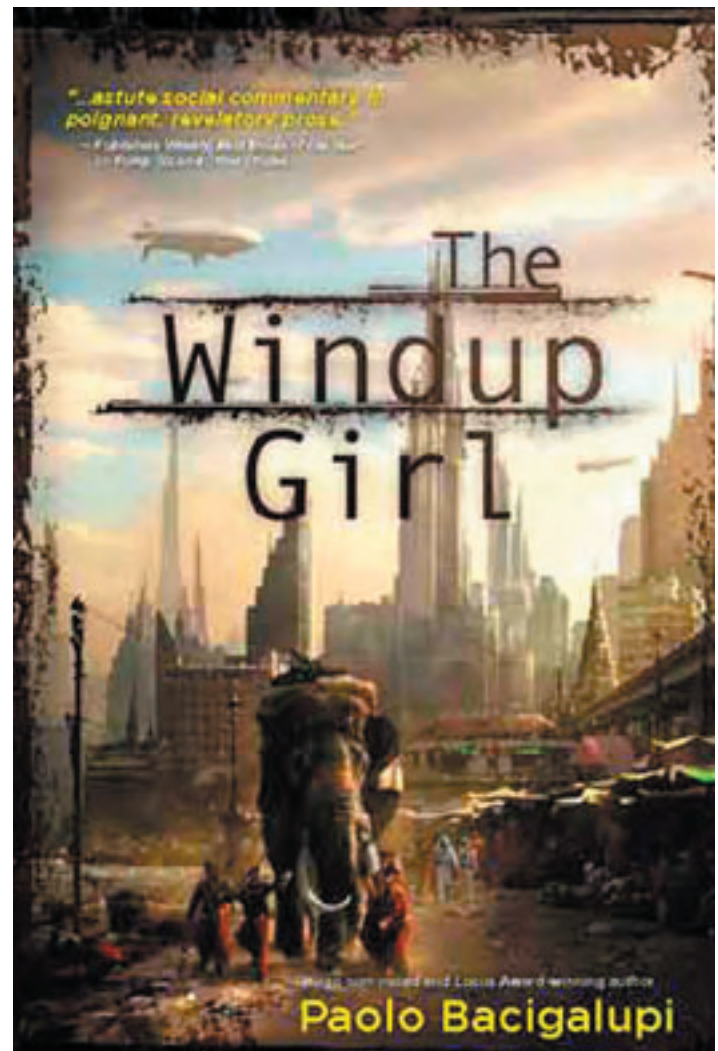
In *The Windup Girl*, we are plunged into a fraught and difficult world: energy collapse and environmental disasters have changed the shape of the planet, swamping its coastal cities and destroying our capacity to travel or move freight at high speeds. Add to this a series of genetic-engineering screwups that lay waste to the world's crops and trigger wave after wave of punishing plagues, and the rise of midwestern American genetic engineering cartels that control the world's supply of plague-resistant GM crops.

Anderson Lake is one such Calorie Man, working undercover in Thailand, a rogue state where generippers reverse-engineer the food cartels' sterile crops and combine them with carefully hoarded genetic material from the Thai seedbank. Anderson lives in Bangkok, undercover, running a factory nominally involved in the manufacture of experimental windup springs that can compactly and efficiently store the energy pushed into them by GM elephants. He is the hub around which many stories spin: that of Hock Seng, a former wealthy Malay Chinese who has fled an ethnic purge and now runs Anderson's factory; that of Jaidee, the Tiger of Bangkok, a hard-fighting, uncorruptable shock-trooper in the Thai environment ministry; and Emiko, a "new person" manufactured in a Japanese vat to be a perfect servile helper, abandoned by her owner to the brothels of Thailand, where she is cruelly mistreated.

The Windup Girl is a story about colonialism, independence, mysticism and ethics, sex and loyalty, and the opposing forces of greed and empathy. Filled with complex and flawed characters who must struggle to overcome their failings, *The Windup Girl* has no easy or pat answers, but rather charges the reader to summon empathy for imperfect humans who fail as often as they succeed.

But *The Windup Girl* is also an exciting story about industrial espionage, civil war, and political struggle, filled with heart-thudding action sequences, sordid sex, and enough technical speculation for two lesser novels.

Bacigalupi shows every sign of becoming one of sf's major talents, if he isn't already. In addition to being a magnificent and passionate writer, he is a smart and genuinely nice guy, a truly winning combination. Kudos to him for this wonderful debut, and to the independent publisher Night Shade Books for bringing it to us.



Mike Perschon on The Windup Girl

While I can't guarantee this one is steampunk, I'm including here at the blog because I suspect it is a close relative, and it was hands down the best piece of speculative fiction I read in 2010. There were others that were more entertaining, but for sheer quality and relevance, Paolo Bacigalupi wins. My memory fails me for how this became one of my research reads, but I seem to recall a recommendation from Gail Carriger. While the cover includes airships, they are not a key feature of the narrative--the technology of interest in *The Windup*

Girl is genetically enhancement of both people and food.

Since I don't know enough about nineteenth century Asia to state this definitively, I remain guarded about judging *The Windup Girl* as utilizing the steampunk aesthetic. My suspicion is that it does, and because most North American readers have no idea what nineteenth century Asia was like, will not make the connection to steampunk. I'm hoping I'm right about this, because if I am, it's the answer to fellow steampunk scholar Jha Goh's search for steampunk that doesn't privilege WASP protagonists. It takes place in a future that seems to echo an Asia right before the Boxer rebellion, right down to the White Shirts, a group of militant police lead by the charismatic Jaidee, the "Tiger of Bangkok", once a famous muay thai fighter. The world has regressed in some areas of technology: you need a special license to use gasoline, air travel is limited to airships, and people generate electricity through kinetic energy, either self-made by pedaling, through the harnessed megadonts (genetically altered elephants), or held in high-tension crank-generators. In other ways, it has advanced: food is genetically altered to withstand the environmental plagues of the future, and artificial animals and humans can be manufactured. One of the more interesting ideas Bacigalupi explores is how in a future of nutritional scarcity, Calories become currency: one scene involving blood draining into the sewers is reflected upon as lost calories.

Even if I'm wrong about the setting having a steampunk aesthetic to it, the nature of the eponymous heroine, Emiko the Windup Girl echoes a number of other steampunk narratives concerned with artificial life. The automatons and golems of steampunk are simply retroactive versions of twentieth century SF's robots, androids, cyborgs, replicants and cylons. I don't necessarily think steampunk brings anything new to speculative fiction in terms of themes, but I do think that it deals with those themes in a fresh way, by clothing them in new/old skins. Emiko looks exactly like a human, like the replicants of *Blade Runner* and Cylons of the reimagined *Galactica*, but betrays her artificial genesis in her stutter-stop motion like other clockwork girls from Kleist's *The Sandman* to Finn von Claret's dance performance during Abney Park's "Herr Drosselmeyer's Doll", a built-in flaw that keeps Windups from becoming superior (and ultimately replacing) humans. Her journey of identity and self-actualization mirrors that of the clockwork girl Mattie in Ekaterina Sedia's *The Alchemy of Stone*, addressing the familiar SF ground of what constitutes "human".

Consider the following conversation between Jaidee and one of his men concerning genetically altered Cheshire cats, which have effectively replaced regular cats due to their artificially enhanced camouflaging ability. The Cheshires are so successful as a species that they literally cannot be eliminated, despite the White Shirts' attempts to do so:

"I sometimes wonder if my family's cibiscosis was karmic retribution for all those cheshires."

"It couldn't be. They're not natural."

Somchai shrugs. "They breed. They eat. They live. They breathe." He smiles slightly. "If you pet them, they will purr."

Jaidee makes a face of disgust.

"It's true. I have touched them. They are real. As much as you or I."

"They're just empty vessels. No soul fills them."

Somchai shrugs. "Maybe even the worst monstrosities of the Japanese live in some way. I worry that Noi and Chart and Malee and Prem have been reborn in windup bodies. Not all of us are good enough to become Contraction phii. Maybe some of us become windups, in Japanese factories, working working working, you know? We're so few in comparison to the past, where did all the sould go? Maybe to the Japanese? Maybe into windups." (173-74)

As I've said, the artificial human is a trope of SF, not steampunk per se. But in reading *The Windup Girl*, Ted Chiang's "72 Letters" and Sedia's *The Alchemy of Stone*, I'm suspicious that steampunk deals with the artificial human in a way that is somewhat different from other types of SF. Not a conclusive statement by any stretch, and I welcome any thoughts on the matter.

Emiko, like all of Bacigalupi's characters, is a round and dynamic--while *The Windup Girl* contains an engaging plot, it is a novel of characters and ideas, and succeeds on both those levels beyond expectation. Maybe that's one of the reasons I want it to have steampunk elements, so that I can include it in my research. After reading numerous high adventures without much to say about the human condition, the environment, or the ethics of genetic science, it was a pleasure to read a work that not only addresses the issues, but does so in a satisfying manner. While Bacigalupi's future is a dystopia, he never abandons hope in the way many dystopic writers do. This future may not be so bright you have to wear shades (or goggles), but it's not the darkness of despair either.

Highly recommended.

Our Contributors!

Russ Allbery

Russ Allbery tries to write reviews for each book he reads, all of which are available on his web site at <http://www.eyrie.org/~eagle/reviews/>

James Bacon

James lives in Croydon, UK, and is co-editor of Journey Planet along with Claire Brialey and Chris Garcia, is London Bureau Chief for Exhibition Hall and is the co-editor of this issue. He's also just about everything else there is to be in fandom. He also has three adorable dogs who are insane.

Matthew Cheney

Matthew Cheney's work has been published by English Journal, One Story, Web Conjunctions, Strange Horizons, Failbetter.com, Ideomancer, Pindeldyboz, Rain Taxi, Locus, The Internet Review of Science Fiction and SF Site, among other places, and he is the former series editor for Best American Fantasy. He teaches English and Women's Studies at Plymouth State University. You can read his blog at <http://mumpsimus.blogspot.com/>

M Cradan

M splits her time between Finland and Santa Barbara. Her writing has appeared in various zines and her first novel, *The Girl and The Other Boy*, is set to appear in the second quarter of 2011. She is a mother of two and for some reason named one of her kids after Chris Garcia.

Cory Doctorow

Cory Doctorow is one of the most important authors of the last decade. His novels have won him accolades including both the John W. Campbell Awards, the Prometheus, The Sunburst, The Locus Poll Award for Best First Novel, the EFF's Pioneer Award and several Hugo Nominations. His personal website is <http://craphound.com/> and he is a co-editor of BoingBoing.com, probably the most important Geek-site in the Universe.

Niall Harrison

Niall Harrison is one of the leading voices in Science Fiction criticism. His writing appears in areas such as the New York Review of Science Fiction,

Strange Horizons, Interzone, Journey Planet, Vector, and his own blog at <http://coalescent.livejournal.com/>. He's also a really nice guy and exceptionally tall for a human.

Paul Kincaid

Paul Kincaid is a SF fan and critic and a damn swell guy. His book *What It Is We Do When We Read Science Fiction* was nominated for the Hugo for Best Related Book. His reviews have appeared all over the place. His webhome is <http://www.paulkincaid.co.uk/> and his reviews also appear as a part of Big Other at <http://bigother.com/>

Joe Major

If you're not reading Joe's zine *Alexiad*, you're seriously missing out. He's been on the Hugo ballot a couple of times himself.

Michael Moorcock

Michael Moorcock has been publishing amazing fiction since 1957 and is one of the most important figures in science fiction over the last 50 years. His time as editor of *New Worlds* was a turning point in the history of SF. He's also written a number of books that are absolute musts if you think you know SF. He's a Texan now...

Annalee Newitz

Annalee is the editor of io9.com, the Big Damn SF Blog that everyone should be reading. She's written for everything from *Wired* to *Popular Science*, was a Guest of Honor at *Trepidation*, had the fantastic weekly column *Techsploitation* and once called Chris Garcia 'winsome', which is the only time that's ever happened. Her review of *Palimpsest* first appeared on io9.com.

Mike Perschon

Mike Perschon is also known as the Steampunk Scholar. His academic pursuit of the truth behind Steampunk is without parallel. He's had articles in *Journey Planet* and *Exhibition Hall*. He's also a member in *Good Standing of Our Canadian Cousins*.

His review of *The Windup Girl* appeared at <http://steampunkscholar.blogspot.com/>

Peter Weston

Peter Weston is a Fannish legend, former WorldCon Chair and Guest of Honor, TAFF winner and Doc Weir recipient. He's also a helluva guy! Read his fanzine *Relapse* on eFanzines.com